

**Images of Salvation:  
A Study in Theology, Poetry and Rhetoric**

by  
Gregory Brian Smith  
M.Ed., M.RE., M.A. (Theology), MACE

A thesis is submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

to the

School of Theology,  
Faculty of Arts and Sciences,  
Australian Catholic University Ltd.,  
Office of Research,  
PO Box 456,  
Virginia QLD 4014.

25<sup>th</sup> March, 2007

### Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

While primary sources are always preferred and sought, internet websites do appear here as primary sources, being identified and dated with date of visits.

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Gregory B. Smith  
25<sup>th</sup> March, 2007

## Abstract

Humankind yearns for reconciliation, fulfilment and salvation, and the human heart has always sought deliverance from negative forces. In particular, this yearning for salvation is most apparent when poets envisage such yearning in living situations and in recognisable life circumstances. Reading them shows how the quest for salvation is being achieved in daily steps that incarnate movements of hope and a contesting of despair.

This dissertation captures some significant images of salvation expressed in selected Australian poetry. It argues that what is classically called final salvation is imaged in the trope of transcendence in poetry. Because the concept of salvation both indicates the right path and promises a way of liberation and fulfilment, gaining salvation is not an escape from the world, but rather an engagement with it, through just and humane actions. The study's poetic selections image salvation as redressing wrongs, regenerating the land, seeking new life, and envisaging better states of affairs.

This dissertation functions at the interface of theology and poetry. It shows how a reader in the Christian community may identify some key images in public poetry as foreshadowing religious salvation. This is possible because, like the poet engaging in an aesthetic experience, the believer brings a remarkable openness to reality in the exercise of the religious imagination. This analogical imagination identifies images in poetry that do touch the human spirit in deeply spiritual ways.

The study employs the competence of methodical hermeneutic interpretation. It proceeds as an aesthetic-theological reading employing critical-analytical scholarship. Rather than attempt a formal explication of authorial intent, the hermeneutic reads in a careful excavation of the poems for those significant "scraps of experience" that coax the imagination towards hope in the mystery of salvation. The dissertation approaches the poetic texts using "Christian literary theory" as its hermeneutical framework.

The dissertation presents readings of selected poetry and prose of three celebrated Australian voices, Judith Wright, Les A. Murray and David Malouf. The study's primary data are their poetic images recognising and affirming the dream of transcendence embodied in human happiness, moments of rescue and relief, events of forgiveness and transformation, and insights for a better life for humans and the planet. The study shows how poetical insights image partial fulfilments in transcendent perceptions, transformed personal destinies and envisaged social reforms.

This exercise in contextual theology searches for depth and perennial resonances that sustain Australians in their culture. The discussion is especially concerned with the poetic use of the trope of hope and its effects, and especially with the power of metaphor for accessing the sublime. The study distils ten virtues for salvation from the readings of the selected poems as pathways for implementing salvation in the world. The study presents poetic images of promise, rescue and transformation that refresh discourses regarding salvation.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Gerard V. Hall, S.M., my principal supervisor at Australian Catholic University, McAuley at Banyo, for the initial invitation, his ready encouragement, resource assistance and sound advice at every stage. For Gerard's ready confidence and high expectations, I am grateful indeed.

I thank my co-supervisor, Professor Tony Kelly, CSsR, for his considerable supervising skills. Despite his other professional burdens, Tony read every version of the manuscript and offered very practical advice, support and encouragement especially in shaping its theological orientation.

I thank Associate Professor Dr Michael Griffiths, ACU St Mary's Sydney, for his ready encouragement of the project. I thank Dr Lindsay Farrell and Dr Maurice Ryan, ACU Brisbane, for their support throughout, and Dr. Simon Ryan for comments upon a preliminary pilot project. I thank Dr Gerard Hall and Terry Veling and Sub-Faculty of Philosophy and Theology at the McAuley at Banyo campus of Australian Catholic University for providing some tutoring work along the way. I thank the Office of Research for financial assistance to present a paper at the Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion and Culture, in Sydney in October 2004.

I thank three Brisbane friends in particular, Chris Campbell, Leslie Longworth and Tony Ewing who have encouraged me in various ways. I thank my dear friends in separate Australian States, Gerald Pain and Anna Boots, for their continuing support especially through illness along the way, and of course I thank my immediate family, Margie and Bill, Liam and Erin, and my brothers for their inspiration, Ian on the environment and Terry on refugees. I write in memory of our mother, Audrey Evelyn Smith.

I thank the sacred ministers of the liturgy at St. Stephen's Cathedral Brisbane for their homilies over several recent years. I thank my fellow choristers in the Cathedral Choir for their regular support and encouragement.

Finally, I thank the staff of the ACU Library McAuley at Banyo, particularly Robin Turnley and Justin Royes, who are always cheery, ever helpful with every request, and unfailingly reliable in their service.

## Conventions Used

The dissertation employs the style guide approved by The Sub-Faculty of Philosophy and Theology in 2000, the modified Oxford system as found in Turabian, K. L., *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, 6th ed., rev. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Every attempt has been made to use inclusive language in line with University policy. There are instances to the contrary in the quotations in particular which, because of their era of origin, do not show that same sensitivity to inclusive language that we now display.

The standard spelling of terms is adopted but where the English and American clash, the guidance of Australian English dictionaries in Microsoft Word has been accepted, especially in the use of -ise, and -ize verb endings.

Scriptural references are taken from the *The Holy Bible* NRSV (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989) unless otherwise indicated for special purposes. Some psalm quotations come from the Gelineau translation where the wording helps.

Direct quotations are shown in double quotations marks, while common or widely recognised technical terms are shown in italics. Italics are used for foreign words, for emphasis and to quote a technical term from an identified source.

Square brackets [ ] indicate interpolations necessary for grammatical purposes, while round brackets ( ) show my commentary. On-line resources are shown as [on-line] with the site address and the date of visit shown thus [date shown here].

The typing font used is *Times New Roman*. The dissertation is printed on Mac OS X 10.2.6 using Microsoft Word X for Mac, Service Release 1 1983-2001.

In accordance with modern practice, minor words in text titles, articles and websites appear in lower case. The ampersand has been replaced except where explicit and in website addresses.

Text length: 81.856 words without footnotes.

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## Illustrations

The three Australian voices in this study:

		
<p><b>Judith Wright</b></p> <p>Source: National Library of Australia. Canberra, ACT</p>	<p><b>Les A. Murray</b></p> <p>Source: Mike Crowl  <a href="http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Form/4657/poetry/memory/memdex.html">www.geocities.com/Athens/Form/4657/poetry/memory/memdex.html</a></p>	<p><b>David Malouf</b></p> <p>Source: <a href="http://www.middlemiss.org">www.middlemiss.org</a></p>

## For inspiration

“I have not kept the news of salvation to myself.” Ps 40:10

“Only completed art /  
free of obedience to its time can pirouette you /  
through and athwart the larger poems you are in.”  
Les Murray “The Instrument” (1998)

“The imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp  
and comprehend it.”  
Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 1995.

“These recoveries, as of a motif  
scattered and reformed out of itself,  
are the old life re-invented.”  
David Malouf “Ode” (1980)

“Now that truth strips us naked to the winter blow  
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Judith Wright “Song for Winter.” (1953)

“A god has chosen to be shaped in flesh.  
He has put on the garment of the world.  
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Judith Wright “Transformations” (1953)

“Yet now I’m strangely tender towards them  
As though in death you took me by the hand  
And turned me to a larger, calmer world  
Where everything is loved for what it is.”  
Kevin Hart “Winter Rain” (1990)

“Their laughter in the game rose high as any flame  
consuming every woe, beyond all praise and blame.”  
Bruce Beaver “The Long Game” (2005)

“Poetry is speech to which the instrument counts as well as the meaning – poetry is speech for  
its own sake and for its own sweetness.” George Santayana

“Well you see,” said Frank Harland, “whatever the realities – of what we see around us I mean –  
the cruelties, the horrors – I think we were meant to be happy.”  
David Malouf, *Harland’s Half Acre*

Et revelabitur quasi aqua iudicium et iustitia quasi torrens fortis.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Humanity's ache for salvation is perennial, and the arts help believers to transcend that anguish by considering artistic images of redemption. In every age, the arts supply fresh expressions of faith. The earliest Christians in the catacombs expressed their faith through the visual arts. Postmodernism<sup>1</sup> and deconstruction present theological readers with new opportunities and literary tools for re-expressing the intensities of faith. Christian readers of literature now have a publicly identifiable reading hermeneutic to excite faith with images from poetry. This study applies that interpretative hermeneutic to read some poetical literature within the Australian cultural inheritance the better to access the mystery that is salvation. Reading selected poetic images through the lens of faith, this hermeneutic interpretation illustrates winning salvation.

This chapter builds a theoretical platform upon which the readings to follow can be erected. It outlines the dissertation's aims, identifies its particular standpoint, distinguishes its key notions (salvation and poetry), discourses on the rhetoric of tropes, imagery and metaphor, outlines its methodology, elaborates its theological framework, lists its data sources in the selected poets, outlines the research problem addressed, recognises an objection, shapes the discussion towards a thesis, and outlines the thesis and its progress. Chapter 5, the discussion, will elaborate substantial, interpretative and theoretical issues more fully.

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<sup>1</sup> As Les Murray writes, "A greater freedom of poetics [is] open to us now that the struggles of modernism are well and truly over" in "The Narrow-Columned Middle Ground" in *A Working Forest: Les Murray Selected Prose* (Pott's Point, NSW: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 306. Ursula King writes: "Postmodernism can . . . be seen positively as a challenging task, an opportunity, even a gift for religion in the modern world." Ursula King, "Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age" (1998) quoted in Phillipa Berry, "Postmodernism and post-religion" in Steven Connor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 169.

## i. Aims

As a study in theology, poetry and rhetoric, the dissertation pursues three aims: to elucidate how chosen poetic images make salvation topical; to demonstrate how familiar imagery can supply fresh rhetoric about salvation; and to show that poetic images enhance theological understandings upon salvation. This poetic imagery provides readers with new ways of recognising salvation being won in the world.

First, the study aims to show how salvation is topical. The current context favours my purpose. The postmodern situation offers an incredible flexibility in its new respect for subjectivity and mystery.<sup>2</sup> The new interpretative turn marks a turning point, validating the process of accessing wider sources for inspiration about the divine. Postmodernism clears away modernism's pretensions and delusions, opens poetry to popular culture and everyday speech, resists forced closure, expects poetry to deal with the real world, and permits some creativity in play between object and viewer.<sup>3</sup> Now in the age of terrorism with its inevitable crises, salvation supplies the necessary balm to anneal and displace the pain of prevalent evils with a surer destiny. Salvation as victory over sin and evil supplies the appropriate concept to address the overwhelming and fiendish evils that beset the new century despite amazing technological progress. That warfare emerges in poems such as Murray's "An Immortal" and "The Powerline Incarnation" (Appendix 2).

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<sup>2</sup> "On the basis of revelation, does not Christianity have a much better story to tell than postmodernism, indeed a true one, especially in announcing the good news of the existence of God, the sacramental nature and meaning of the cosmos, the dignity of human persons as *imago Dei*, and the hope of a comprehensive redemption in the work of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit?" David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of the Concept* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 186.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Gelpi, "The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry" *The Southern Review* Summer, 1990, 520 [on-line] available: [www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/gelpi.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/gelpi.html) [2006 July 13].

Topically too, today's renewed interest in spirit and religion drives a re-consideration of salvation. The words of our poets find new relevancies in postmodern plurality. Their intimations upon redress, rescue, identity and plenitude provide some contiguities with the divine presence in the faith tradition. At a new century's start, I compose a mural of poetic images to address Edvard Munch's depressing images of grief and rejected love as representative of human life. In his 1902 Secessionist exhibition in Berlin, *The Frieze of Life* series presented desire, appetite, jealousy, anxiety, loneliness, transitoriness and his signature work, "The Scream,"<sup>4</sup> as representative of the dance of life. Rather at his century's end, this proffered theological mural of selected poetic images suggests more balance in that eternal struggle for life, hope and transcendence that is the struggle to win salvation. These selected images have a symphonic effect, the better to show hope overcoming despair towards "that happy day" of the spirituals.

Second, the study aims to show how poetry supplies fresh rhetoric to re-imagine rescue and salvation in our age. Some poetry enculturates theological motifs in recognisable cultural images, and these selected poetic images show how experiences of salvation are pertinent, concrete, real, close, memorable and possible.<sup>5</sup> For poetry's intensities supply refreshment to redress pain, anxiety, the success of evil, and dreary hopelessness.. Advantageously, poetry's images and symbols uniquely transform such primary experiences. In Dame Mary Gilmore's words, poetic images bring a "fresher, cooler draught."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Clive Gregory, gen. ed. "Edvard Munch 1863-1944" *The Great Artists* Part 74, Vol. 4 (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1986), 2353.

<sup>5</sup> Theology's binaries: heaven and hell, redemption and salvation, etc. too often hide the processes of salvation. The poetic imagery from nature of growth, rejuvenation and transformation for instance better show that salvation is constantly offered and immediately available and is being gained in pursuing the Christian virtues.

<sup>6</sup> Dame Mary Gilmore, "The Harvesters" line 7, quoted in Les Murray, "The Narrow-Columned Middle Ground" *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (1997). 307, and *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* chosen by Les A. Murray (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), 68.

To refresh the rhetoric about salvation, this exercise in contextual theology dialogues with twentieth century literature. It has a wonderful precedent. As the archpoet of his cause,<sup>7</sup> Jesus was the preeminent storyteller who interpreted himself to his contemporaries in familiar literary forms. His references from his society's daily life such as the fig tree, the mustard seed, the leaven and the father of the prodigal son image the kingdom of God. They speak of decisive change. Jesus' stories "confront the usual and tease us with new insight."<sup>8</sup> His teaching emphasises the second chance, the new start, and the cleaned slate. Similarly, Australian poetic images like the bud, the warm rain, "voice of the world's desire,"<sup>9</sup> fresh-minted hills and wedding vows coax the imagination towards seeing salvation as restoration and renewal. In its decisive transformation, salvation challenges ugly realities and promises a decisive, fresh outcome. Such change lies in the hands of humans, as Judith Wright put it: "I can be your tree / if you consent to be flower, seed and fruit."<sup>10</sup> This extended theological reflection on some contemporary poetry locates images of that final desideratum. Salvation is after all about choosing to win the kingdom of justice, love and peace.<sup>11</sup>

Third, the study aims for enhancing the choice for faith, because salvation is everyone's right and destiny. Malouf avers: "We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it."<sup>12</sup> Talk of it refreshes faith. Keith Ward adroitly observes that imaging salvation can repair the evils we bring upon ourselves:

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<sup>7</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *The Poet as Mirror: Human nature, God and Jesus in twentieth-century literature* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 340.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sellick, "Goodbye to Heaven?" [on-line] available: [users.bigpond.net.au/sellick/GoodbyetoHeaven.htm](http://users.bigpond.net.au/sellick/GoodbyetoHeaven.htm) [2004 March 22].

<sup>9</sup> Judith Wright, "Flame-tree in a Quarry" line 10, *Five Senses* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963, 1974), 48.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Wright, "Flesh –The Body" lines 2-4, *Five Senses* 112-3.

<sup>11</sup> Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, *Saint Andrew Bible Missal* (Bruges, Belgium: Biblica 1965), 1481.

<sup>12</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (Woollahra, NSW: Picador, 1980), 67.

The divine mind can . . . save humans from the worst consequences of their often absurd choices, and encourage them to live happier and more fulfilled lives.<sup>13</sup>

Enhanced theological perceptions better validate the choice for embodied transcendence, “in time of aching drought / when the black plain cannot believe in roots or leaves or rain.”<sup>14</sup> The dissertation shows how poetic images dramatise the theological concept of salvation in the particulars of human consciousness. The dissertation applies a hermeneutic to some Australian literature, by re-reading existing works in new contexts. Its purpose is enrichment, the goal is enhanced faith, and the process is an appropriate contextualising of the longed-for desideratum of salvation.

To maintain its theological focus, the discussion generates a three-way conversation between reader, texts and context. My reflections are tested against the religious community's traditions. The dissertation reads selected poets for this theme from within the mainstream Christian community. This mutually critical conversation dialogues between: 1) The contemporary situation including this author's Australian and Catholic experience (including ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions, and assumptions) and the questions raised in regard to the experience and articulation of the sacred in postmodern times; between 2) three Australian literary voices who in quite diverse ways span both Australian and Catholic experience and articulate aspects of religious experience focusing on salvation in their poems; and between: 3) the Christian Church / Catholic faith tradition / experience of grace, and how salvation is interpreted through the tradition using biblical and post-biblical texts as well as contemporary theological voices, such as Schillebeeckx and Rahner. Hearing their sometimes conflicting voices,

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<sup>13</sup> Keith Ward, *Pascal's Fire: Scientific faith and religious understanding* (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 2006), 213.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Wright, “The Harp and the King” lines 22-23, *Five Senses*, 123.



the reader perceives how the selected images flesh out the concept<sup>15</sup> of salvation.

To meet these aims, the dissertation constructs a public space generated from poetry. In its exercise of the religious imagination, it is engaged in a mediation<sup>16</sup> of sorts, moving between the literary and theological worlds in a genuine attempt to conserve meaning and associations in a faithful exchange between the poetic and the theological, making many crossings and recrossings over the gulf that separates the two disciplines. The discussion attempts to construct new relevancies to serve faith through sympathetic readings of the source poems and fictions. It does not defer the critical task of exposition of its theme. It does not “roam over the fresh green fields of sentiment and the blue waters of romance,”<sup>17</sup> but claims your attention with “a trained sense of the value of words and phrases, their delicacies and fitnesses.”<sup>18</sup> This is an interdisciplinary work for the public domain.

My religious context and stated purpose guides the hermeneutic. My reading of the poetic selections follows a middle way, with an ear for receptive reading and an eye to scholarship, received readings and criticism. In its mediation between faith and aesthetics, the present work balances critical breath with spiritual depth of faith. Its data are the images derived from hermeneutical readings. It tracks poetic traces and mental meanderings in aesthetic states. It seeks to echo them in memory, sensibility and the

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<sup>15</sup> Culler’s phrase is pertinent: “Dissociation is a condition of our post-lapsarian state. . . . Poetry is the best example of an empty but circumscribed space that can be filled in various ways with a positive determinations [of meaning].” Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, linguistics, and the study of literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 19.

<sup>16</sup> A mediation but not a translation out of poetic language into theological discourses. “A good translator makes a seamless thing, a form in which there’s no visibility of translator. . . . A book has to read true, ring true, in its new form – as if written in its new language.” Ali Smith, “Brilliance in any language” *The Times Books* 13, June 10, 2006. Differently, you read with this scribe who foregrounds his purpose and context.

<sup>17</sup> T. G. Tucker, *The Judgment and Appreciation of Literature* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1925), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Tucker, *The Judgment and Appreciation of Literature*, 22.

community experiences of faith in Jesus. The readings push for depth of perception to bridge Christian tradition and contemporary secular experience.

Having presented the three aims of this investigation and indicated how the practice of reading poetry can enhance understandings about the dream of embodied transcendence or salvation, the focus now moves to describe more precisely the particular standpoint from which this investigation proceeds.

## ii. A particular standpoint

Hermeneutics accepts that knowledge is finite, limited, and subject to ongoing revision, that there are no perspective-independent facts. It assumes that “every act of perception and cognition is contingent, mediated, situated, contextual, theory-soaked.”<sup>19</sup> Further, all persons and groups have agendas, and identifiable groups make truth-claims.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, any text’s reader context must be known to be read at all. Readers interpret texts and texts identify readerships,<sup>21</sup> so how readers interpret poems reveals identities and locations in culture and time. Readers read within cultures and communities, and their readings situate them. The readers’ historical location and cultural perspective identify and guide their critical readings, for human knowledge is radically interpretative. Clearly, the writer must identify his theological perspective in order to identify the hermeneutic being used.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 418.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Wright, “Communicating a biblical view” Latimer Fellowship: William Orange Memorial Lecture 1991 [on-line] available: [latimer.godzone.net.nz/orange\\_lecture/orangelecture99.asp](http://latimer.godzone.net.nz/orange_lecture/orangelecture99.asp) [2006 February 21].

<sup>21</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 159.

Furthermore, defining this hermeneutic is needed because poetry offers no single meaning guaranteed by the poet or its context. Because poetic meaning is uniquely unstable, being neither internally consistent nor obvious, there is little or no reliable authorial or structural source controlling the flow of meanings between poetic texts and readers.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, authorial intentionality is a debunked concept.

Because there is also the risk of aesthetic distortion, one's reading purpose and context need to be explicated. Because poems invite multiple readings, they give the broadest possible interpretative space.<sup>23</sup> In knowing my cultural location, what I am doing and how I am doing it, the reader may more readily accept the readings as fair and reasonable. To be clear, the aches that drive such readings<sup>24</sup> (echoing the biblical cry for justice, redress, forgiveness, resolution and conservation) identify the agendas that motivate Christian readers seeking images of salvation.

This is the hermeneutic of a professional layman with a solid clerical training. Since life's journey is "characterized by a conversation between past narratives and our narratives,"<sup>25</sup> this scribe now articulates his stance and viewpoint within a life journey. As one individual, I cannot claim to represent every possible social agendum or to present my view as the single Christian reading, when clearly Christianity today has

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<sup>22</sup> Niall Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 17.

<sup>23</sup> "Each interpretation we put upon the poem will wear out in time and come to seem inadequate, but the standing event of the poem will remain, exhausting our attempts to contain or defuse it." Les Murray, "Embodiment and Incarnation" in *A Working Forest: Les Murray Selected Prose* (Pott's Point, NSW: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 317.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Hart's lines resonate: "I have no idea where to go / . . . / Not knowing what I am waiting for / Yet aching for it just the same." *Wicked Heat* (North Ryde, NSW: Fine Arts Press, 1999), 44. I refer to the praxis between vision and reality, faith and life when Walt Whitman opines: "my old delicious burdens / I carry them wherever I go" "Song of the Open Road" 1 [on-line] available: [www.bartleby.com/142/82.html](http://www.bartleby.com/142/82.html) [2006 May 22]. Judith Wright's phrase "the world's thirst" has similar power. "Seven Songs from a Journey IV The Prospector" line 16, *C.P.*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Sellick, "Goodbye to Heaven?" page 1 [on-line] available: [users.bigpond.net.au/sellick/GoodbyetoHeaven.htm](http://users.bigpond.net.au/sellick/GoodbyetoHeaven.htm) [2004 March 22].

multiple voices and various conservative and liberal views and approaches. As well, the Catholic faith tradition necessarily encompasses a wide spectrum of diverse views around some core beliefs. As well, the script of salvation is still being written in various ways.

Cultural identity defines the man. This scribe is a white man, a fourth generation Australian, derived from Irish Catholic origins, speaking to a multi-lingual and multicultural Australia. Schooled by the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers and tertiary trained by the Jesuit Fathers, I have maintained an unbroken contact with the Roman Catholic Church. I grew up in a Jesuit parish, played in the Queensland Catholic tennis association, and hiked in the Catholic parish scout troop. I was awarded Queen's Scout insignia at Government House. Our uncle is one of the celebrated Rats of Torbruk; our mother sang for audiences on public occasions. It was a traditional Australian Catholic household coalescing cultural and religious values and outlooks.

Through four decades of religious and literary training and experience, with insight from the periods of social change and religious experimentation in the late twentieth century, I teach, write and study from within Catholic cultures, having taught in several prominent Catholic schools and within the national Catholic university. Living in the nation through changes like the introduction of television, conscription, decimal currency, universal health care, and the vernacular in the liturgy, this voice presents an overall sensibility as an enculturated Catholic worldview.

Dealing with crises, making decisions and pursuing choices are intensely formative. As a continuous member of the Catholic tradition in Roman Catholic families on both sides with Catholic grandparents, I read within the reference group of the mainstream Roman

Catholic tradition. As a lad, I served at the altar as parish Master of Ceremonies in the old liturgy. I lived through the arrival and implementation of Second Vatican Council changes within the portals of a religious order where we felt the tensions, uncertainty and promise of its changes. Those changes and its aftermath are life experiences that shape beliefs and practice. In asceticism, I have had the wonderful opportunities of undertaking two thirty-day retreats in the *Spiritual Exercises*. This dissertation's outcome in original ten virtues for salvation represents the spirit of its practical spirituality. This life journey then has earned me credentials to offer some insights upon personal and community faith and doubt, intensive enough to share some experiences born from that mediating balance of the *sensus fidelium*.<sup>26</sup> Such formal, public and engaging experiences are very formative to the current purpose for refining perceptions and faith priorities. From within this active, continuous involvement, I can fairly claim to read from within the social perspective of the church.

This viewpoint expresses a developed religious aesthetic. As a continuous Roman Catholic and church chorister, I sing the choral liturgy on forty Sundays in the year. On two tours as a tenor in St. Francis' Catholic choir, Melbourne, we sang the works of Catholic composers like Haydn, Bruckner and Byrd in the great European cathedrals of Westminster, Cologne, Salzburg, Paris and Rome. I have cousins in the clergy and in religious life. I am infused with sufficient inherited and living Catholic faith to recognise salvation's echoes in these poems. Furthermore, I hold that literature's unique inspiration lies in generating transcendent images of desire to better human society, in hopeful states of mind, and in more harmonious relationships. As a Catholic teacher of literature in religious schools, I teach the culture and I strive to live that communal faith.

The subtle and inspirational power of literature offers redemptive themes.

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<sup>26</sup> "The faithful, as a whole, have an instinct or 'sense' about when a teaching is—or is not—in harmony with the true faith." Youth Update Glossary *St. Anthony Messenger Press* 2002 [on-line] [www.disciplesnow.com/catholic/article.cfm?id=224](http://www.disciplesnow.com/catholic/article.cfm?id=224) [2006 October 18].

This hermeneutic grows out of an aesthetic formed in the literary tradition. My school education included reading selections from Cicero and Ovid, Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth, Hopkins and Eliot. At university, I studied some classics (Herodotus, Thucydides and ancient lyric poetry) in the ancient Greek language, and pursued the humanities reading both English classics and Australian contemporaries. After the normal two year Jesuit novitiate, I began priestly formation with courses in logic, epistemology, rational psychology, the history of philosophy, ethics and theodicy. Subsequent theological studies included a chosen project on “Hope in Aquinas II-II qq 17, 18.” My culminating thesis (1969) presented a person-centred ethic drawing on existential personalism. This scholasticate licentiate course proved foundational and formative for scholarly consideration of perennial and topical issues, and honed the critical apparatus of academic criticism. These philosophical studies have shaped and defined this voice.

My education projects included building an epistemology of religious truth. I pursued some key questions anticipating this current project, defining the interrelationships of facts, fictions, poetry and truth; the status of poetic truth and belief statements; whether the truth of a work of art lies in emotion and allegory; and whether there is more truth in aesthetics than in logic. Answering these questions grounds this study for valuing poetic truth. These literary and cultural studies enculturate the philosophical and theological foundation. So my formation, positioning and professional pursuits focus on the transfer of theory into practice, at the interface of thought and experience, theory and practice, vision and reality. I claim to have some proficiency then in the dynamics of faithfully identifying, interpreting, and applying a construct such as salvation.

Yet I am no Dante colonizing distinctions between theological and literary categories.<sup>27</sup> I find that images like Malouf's "eternal E-flat weather"<sup>28</sup> suggest the sublime, and Murray's "fresh-minted hills"<sup>29</sup> and "the teapot of calm"<sup>30</sup> crystallise moments of refreshment that resolve human crises and sufferings with health, replenishment and fulfilment. In Wright's poetry, the wattle images spring, and celebrates "the nation's undoubted qualities of good humour, fairness, generosity, informality and democracy."<sup>31</sup> Salvation begins in virtues like these. They lead to the wider parabolas of bliss.

These abiding concerns animate the whole canvas of this work. As a student of theology pursuing images of salvation, I seek the righting of wrongs in poetic images of abundance and completion, and an orientation to love, forgiveness and hope. In short, these readings from a Christian perspective seek intimations of the ever-vernal theme of final glory offered to all, as the fruit of the sure hope of salvation being pursued in this life. Having stated its aims and elaborated the viewpoint of the writer, the discussion now moves to elaborate its key terms.

### iii. Key notions: salvation and poetry

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<sup>27</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead, 1994), 73, 75, especially 77, 78. Murray's observation is apposite too: "Classical allusion did not interfere with Dante's deeply Boeotian purpose of creating a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters." "On sitting back and thinking about Porter's Boeotia" (1978) in *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (London: Minerva, 1992), 60.

<sup>28</sup> David Malouf writes: "a note at the very end, a high E-flat is an exit of quite extraordinary promise . . . an absolute avenue [with] the clear certainty of an impending lightness, the possibility of flight . . . breathing, for as long as the note lasts, eternal E-flat weather, the atmosphere of another planet." In "A poor man's guide to Southern Tuscany" *First Things Last* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 49.

<sup>29</sup> Les Murray, "Spring Hail" line 9, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Murray, "Towards the Imminent Days" line 72, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Rod Panter, "Australia's Wattle Day," *Current Issues Brief 1 1995-96* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library, 19 August 1997), 2.

This dissertation works within two key terms that are broad and problematical. The key notions of (a) salvation and (b) poetry will be considered separately and in turn. The discussion proceeds to elaborate on salvation in fifteen points.

#### (a) Salvation

First, in the New Testament, salvation is presented as timely rescue in crisis. Jesus rescues Peter who dared to walk to him over the stormy waters (Mt 14:28-33), and Paul is rescued from shipwreck at the discretion of the centurion (Acts 27:44). The angel rescuing Peter from prison is a remarkable and enduring image of personal salvation: “The Lord sent his angel and he rescued me from Herod’s power” (Acts 12:7). Jesus’ miracles are images of our salvation. As Paul preached it, salvation is always near at hand (Rom 13:11-12). In the Christian scriptures then, salvation is imminent and life-changing, a transformative experience for individuals, and the fulfilment of the promise of the resurrection. Fresh images of salvation can be similarly transformative in our times of spiritual confusion.

Second, the metaphor of salvation describes the imagined intersection of divine justice and human suffering as the resolution of polarities in present realities. It describes the arrival of the apparently endlessly postponed denouement of suffering. Salvation is like “an expansive consciousness that collects what is scattered”<sup>32</sup> from the life narratives captured in these poetic images. The term’s long Judaeo-Christian background supplies various understandings, such as definitive event, victory, reparation, redemption, illumination and authenticity.<sup>33</sup> Rather than devise a new term like Ganzevoort’s

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<sup>32</sup> Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing landscape in modern American poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Maasdorp, “A plain guide to salvation” St. Anthony’s Priory *Radical Faith* [on-line] available: [homepages.which.net/~radical.faiht/guide/salvation.htm](http://homepages.which.net/~radical.faiht/guide/salvation.htm) [2006 October 13].



“shalom”<sup>34</sup> or Crotty’s “mediation,”<sup>35</sup> however, the term’s traditional elasticity encompasses its secular and religious applications for justice. For my purposes, poetic images present salvation in new heights of ethical awareness, in improved self-esteem, heightened meaning, and critical insight about reconciliation, wholeness, reconciliation, purification and recoveries in health.

Third, the theme of salvation supplies an enriching coherence for reading selected Australian poetry. Because it sees design in anarchic flux, salvation is the triumph of the imagination over fate. It comes in no mere dice roll of events. The incarnational theology of salvation is interested in the shape of history. By finding salvation imaged in cultural rhetoric, the Christian reader of poetry actually shapes the drama that is salvation, and does not merely praise its radiant facts.<sup>36</sup> Finding hints of God and images of salvation, Christian readers situating salvation’s intensities and effects in poetry overcome the current feeling of being stranded regarding the progress of good over evil. Poetic images coax the imagination away from unrealistic utopianism and contemporary disillusionment and *The Scream*’s despair. Overcoming all dissonance, salvation unifies, harmonises and makes things cohere, as Wright puts it:

pin with one irremediable stroke –  
 - the escaping wavering wandering light,  
 the blur, the brilliance; forming into one chord  
 what’s separate and distracted.<sup>37</sup>

Poetic images can supply the intensities, excitement and variety to communicate

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<sup>34</sup> R. Ruud Ganzevoort, *Weal and Woe: Practical-theological explorations of salvation and evil in biography* (Münster: LIT, 2004), 10, 15, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Robert B. Crotty, “Towards classifying religious phenomena” *Australian Religious Studies Review* 8.1 (Autumn, 1995), 37.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), 64.

<sup>37</sup> Judith Wright, “For Precision” lines 11-14, *Five Senses*, 97. See also Appendix 1.

salvation's coherences<sup>38</sup> across different cultural and temporal mindscapes. Poetic images permit various glimpses of that epic totality of the world's desire from different and unusual angles. Since humans ache for transcendence and the imagination craves completion, poetry offers many images of humanity's ache for completion.

Fourth, salvation denotes the unassuaged thirst of the world.<sup>39</sup> In this metaphor, salvation is a trope of faith, and the *logos* (expression) of faith's discourse. In its exercise of the analogical imagination, salvation telescopes the oppositional terms, entropy and chaos in a priority of teleological hope over despair. For salvation is an alternative discourse, interfering with human plans and foretelling what exceeds the capacities of any empirical, technological model of the future. As such, salvation is the performative discourse of faith, for on its mandate, believers act to infuse reality with the hidden destiny spoken of in Colossians 1:26. That discourse for satisfying thirst is wrought in some arresting poetic images like Wright's waiting and Murray's teapot of calm.

Fifth, expressing the commitment of faith, salvation comes with living within the story of Jesus mandating service. In a trinitarian understanding, salvation is a work in progress through the action of the Spirit. After creation by the Father and redemption through the life and death of Jesus, the Spirit continues its incarnational thrust through the actions of faithful humans across the centuries. Because it brings his revealed value system to bear, salvation is a dialectical<sup>40</sup> discourse, and so contests violence and despair. Because metaphor replaces the conventional with the imagined optimum, these

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<sup>38</sup> Poetry cues in salvation's logic, thrust, dynamism, and directionality.

<sup>39</sup> Wright's phrase "the world's thirst" from "Seven Songs from a Journey IV The Prospector" line 16, *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 2002) hereafter *C.P.*, 137.

<sup>40</sup> Discourses test because "discourse is dialectical." Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 11.

scraps of poetic experience image replacements from that contest. Salvation answers the question “What are believers struggling for?” It rewards discipleship with its message of comfort and resolution. Embodied salvation then glimpses opportunities for, and attitudinal shifts in transcending suffering, negativity, apathy, greed and violence. The poetic metaphors substitute ugly realities with plenitude and redress.

When salvation is incarnated in Christian service, believers share in Jesus’ story to bring about God’s design for the world through human actions inspired by grace. Mediating salvation in human action is a moderate realism between high transcendentalism and the total reliance on human actions for the completion of history. In this view, salvation is worked out and achieved in this world. Quite truly then, as local theologian Damien Casey notes, in it “we are not saved from the world, but within and with the world.”<sup>41</sup> This is the thrust of Rahner’s *incarnational* theology. Thus, within the overlapping excesses of meaning in the images and metaphors found in these selected Australian poems, hope in salvation promises and catalyses decisive change for betterment through restoration, resolution, fulfilment, plenitude, happiness and harmony. Because this study outlines this gradualist / incarnational view in a poetics of salvation, every gain in human dignity is a promising move towards it.

Sixth, salvation shifts life’s frame of reference to a metaphoric or symbolic plane. For salvation expresses the excess of God’s intentions for the world. The mystery of salvation expands human horizons beyond present realities to supply a new horizon of

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<sup>41</sup> Quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.1.1 [on-line] available: [www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-63.htm#P8907\\_2548205](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-63.htm#P8907_2548205) in Damien Casey, “The nature of our salvation in Christ: Salvation as participation and divinization” *Theology@McAuley* #3 (February 2003), paragraph 7 [on-line] available: [dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue3/Casey.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue3/Casey.htm) [2006 April 14].

meaning<sup>42</sup> at the furthest boundaries of time. Transforming them now, hope in salvation perceives a transcendent dimension in life, seen when some poetic images show that the patterns and hierarchies of nature reveal a divine purpose. These transcendent horizons glimpse what is possible in best outcomes. Judith Wright expresses this as a *telos*: “There is a source to which all time’s returned.”<sup>43</sup> Salvation supplies these best possibilities for human transcendence with a direction to the sublime.

Seventh, the academic concern is to marry the fragility and fidelity of faith with the intensity, creativity and surprise of poetry. While these same tools of emotional intelligence are among the imaginative repertoire of poets, they are also among the interpretative tools that readers of poetry employ. Murray envisages transcendence as the happiest timelessness in “the paradise of far eons.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, just as the tragic experience of temporal reality may be balmed or healed by the imaginative trope of salvation, aesthetic escape can refresh, enliven and renew intensities of optimism. Thus, the study shows how both poetic imagery (literary devices) and tropes (ways of thinking) contribute a fresher rhetoric about salvation in an aesthetic search for worth. For as Wright says, poetic images “take the reader beyond the commonsense to the intuitive and unconscious”<sup>45</sup> where faith flourishes. The theme of salvation is an excellent focus for aesthetics.

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<sup>42</sup> To quote Hans Küng, “A global ethic” in Michael Tobias, Jane Morrison and Bettina Gray, *A Parliament of Souls: Conversations with 28 spiritual leaders from around the world* (San Francisco: KQED, 1995), 127.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Wright, “The Vision” verse 8, *C.P.*, 263.

<sup>44</sup> Les Murray, “The Fire Autumn” lines 16, 17, 81, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 34, 36. In the same poem, he berates city sophisticates who oppress their employees who fail to meet company targets: “The cesspools of maturity are heaving with those who leap short” “The Fire Autumn” line 51, page 35.

<sup>45</sup> Wright quoted in Kathie Cochrane, *Oodgeroo* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 173.

Eighth, salvation is the holistic term to answer questions about the fate of this world. To transcendentalists, salvation denotes security in final judgement to suggest God fixes the innumerable evils of the human story. In an apocalyptic religious view, salvation fixes the secular priorities; it sets in place a religious assertion of God's role and place over the world in a final erasure of myth-making, sin and evil, deception, loss, decay, historical process and wastage, in a implementation of the ideal as it was designed to be. To liberationists, final salvation reconfigures unjust social structures where salvation interferes to reckon with an unjust world. To social gradualists, salvation promises social change. To the poet-prophet like Judith Wright, securing national salvation is about reversing political priorities like retiring the deliberate erosion in commercial sand-mining in Queensland or puncturing the nation's moral complacency. In her work, the integrity that is salvation is a profound catalyst to social and environmental reform. The current study views salvation in this gradualist-incarnational framework.

Ninth, to the present purpose, this interpretative theme of salvation fuses religious aspirations and improved human dignity in images of a better world now and a certain justice to come. Raimundo Panikkar provides a working definition: "Salvation is understood to be whatever is considered to be the end, goal, destination, or destiny of human kind."<sup>46</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx notes salvation cannot be claimed until all suffering is over. "Human salvation is only salvation when it is universal and complete."<sup>47</sup> To implement salvation, Schillebeeckx's constants attempt to outline this divine plan for the world. His constants of salvation are to guide human progress. Of course, imaging future realities can be fantastical or utopian. In describing the Australian republic, Murray says that, "we love it better as a field of rosy potentials,

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<sup>46</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *Faith and Belief in Inter-Religious Dialogue: Some Principles* (Mahwar, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1975), 83.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 767.

uncorrupted by the compromises its attainment might bring.”<sup>48</sup> However, salvation and hope catalyse actions to remove the sobbing of a human creature *in extremis*.

Tenth, these poetic images show that salvation is not just a rhetorical construct but describes an empirical fact, for metaphor conjoins ontology and rhetoric. Salvation belongs in both poetics and ontology, as word and reality. Salvation reconciles polarities in theology, such as God and the world, Christ and culture, text and context, the universal and the particular. Salvation bridges different orders of reality at the same time, the rhetorical, temporal and the ontological. As Wright promises: “it is time that holds / somewhere although not now, / the peal of trumpets for us; / that time bears incredible redemptions.”<sup>49</sup> Salvation is a passion for the Real at the broadest extent of sublime human experience. Poetic images of salvation construct better realities to imbue felt experiences with aesthetic balm.

Indeed, salvation is the biggest terror story to live in,<sup>50</sup> for being in the hands of some certainty much bigger than any one. Salvation describes living out the gospel message as dialectics-seeking-transcendence, interfering to contest all the ugliness, despair and anarchy embedded in life today. Like an unfinished crossword puzzle, salvation solves debated questions (*theologoumena*). Salvation gives the transcendental knowledge to grant a route to life’s cure.

The discussion outlined salvation as rescue, the call for justice, the meaningful coherence of faith, faith’s dialectical discourse mandating service, as pointing to

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<sup>48</sup> Les Murray, “And Let’s Always Call it the Commonwealth: One Poet’s View of the Republic” page 35 *Australian Parliament Occasional Lecture Series* #28 1996 [on-line] available: [www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/pops/#28](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/pops/#28) [2005 June 14].

<sup>49</sup> Judith Wright, “The Harp and the King” lines 49-51, 54, *Five Senses*, 124.

<sup>50</sup> Notes taken at the C. G. Jung Society of Queensland lecture by David Tacey, “Jung, Spirituality and the New Age” Australian Catholic University Mitchelton, 3 October 2002.

human transcendence, as a suitable theme for aesthetics, as describing holistic destiny, as embodying directionality, and as bridging rhetorical, temporal and ontological dimensions offering the broadest horizons for the human story. If salvation is imminent, transcending, and transformative, the world's thirst can be imaged in poetry.

#### (b) Poetry

The second key term is poetry. This study plots dynamic tensions and creative possibilities occurring at the interface of these two language discourses, salvation and poetry. Both salvation and poetry employ the emotional imagination to envisage both desirable and undesirable possibilities in different ways. Judaeo-Christian theology gives terms such as exaltation, glory, redemption, victory, rescue, purification, eschatology, eternity and salvation, while literary language employs transformation, fulfilment, completion, destiny, wholeness, consummation, authenticity or enlightenment to describe the end point of a spiritual quest. The discussion proceeds in eight points.

First, poetry supplies contemporary images of salvation. Because salvation is an overarching concept, its poetic images span the epic and the intimate. Biblical images of salvation in a slain lamb, freed slaves, a high priest offering himself as a sacrifice, the canceling of a bond, and nailing God's son to a cross in public come from another era, another time, place and context, only distantly related to us in modern times. Beyond default presentations of salvation in the parables of Eden in *Genesis*, the last judgment in Mt 25:31-46, Paul's "secret plan" of Eph 1:9, and the liturgical doxology of Col 1:10, readers in the community of faith are free to find its expressions in closer sources that excite the aesthetic imagination. Their yearning transforms the meaning of poetic

experiences into enduring images like Murray's "non violent dreamtime."<sup>51</sup> Clearly then, metaphors, images and tropes convey saving experiences well.

Second, poetic language shapes changed perceptions. Social anthropology shows that perceptions change when language changes among opinion leaders in reading communities. Australian theologian Tony Kelly sees poets changing perceptions about salvation when they "give voice to a forgotten human wholeness."<sup>52</sup> For instance, Wright's powerful image of release after the storm is aurally evocative of such decisive change: "a cool sky and a soaked earth left bare / to drink its light in peace."<sup>53</sup> Above all, poetic language refreshes and enlivens with its resilience. When Les Murray observes that "a poem is an afterlife on earth,"<sup>54</sup> he reminds us that its distinctive Wholespeak has a much more robust ability to intimate enduring models of a fulfilled, saved human life. As well, Richard Tarnas reports how great writing opens a space "to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings."<sup>55</sup> Thus, by imagining enduring possibilities, poetic devices do sing of human salvation. Poetry's languages construct new understandings.

Third, poetry offers many analogical possibilities for imaging salvation. Poetry's impulse is the common, unquenchable yearning for wholeness. Judith Wright observes: "Let . . . the passion / of vision that is art, refine, reflect, and gather / the moving pattern of all things in consummation / and their rejoicing."<sup>56</sup> Because poetry supplies the

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<sup>51</sup> Murray, "On the present slaughter of feral animals" line 30, *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1996, 1997), 42, and *Collected Poems 2002*, 408.

<sup>52</sup> Tony Kelly, "Poetry, and the Language of Faith in Australia" edited version of the *E. J. Cuskelly Memorial Lecture*, May 2001, (printed in *Compass* 35/2, Winter 2001, 3-13) [on-line] available: [dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/ankelly/Kelly\\_Cuskelly.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/ankelly/Kelly_Cuskelly.htm) [2005 March 29].

<sup>53</sup> Wright, "Dry Storm" lines 17-22, *C.P.*, 191.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, "The Misery Cord" line 12, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 294.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Wright, "The Morning of the Dead, III, The End" lines 19-22, *C.P.*, 209.



excitement, innovation, richness, fluidity, intensity, mystery and capacity to express nuances about the incommunicable, it can explore salvation very well. Indeed, poetry's superfluity supplies an excellent medium for communicating salvation. Because poetry is inherently open to multiple readings and repeatedly spiralling reinterpretations beyond the control of the authors,<sup>57</sup> readers are free to dream upon its suggestiveness. Poetry's analogies can coax the imagination towards the mystery that is salvation. For instance: "The first man ran / to grasp the glory never in one man's reach."<sup>58</sup> Poetry's intensities refresh belief in the possibility of change for the better, for example, in Wright's image of spring:

A garden in blossom, a river's hush, the promise  
Renewed through change: this world.<sup>59</sup>

In its application of the healing imagination in narratives, poetry's balming sensuality can better convey salvation's more wonderful ways of being embodied.

Fourth, poetry situates saving experiences. Readers need images to understand God and his plan.<sup>60</sup> Poetic images generalise local experiences. Poetry images significant slices of life as saving experiences. Images of salvation synthesise fragments of untold stories. Australian poetic images of salvation like the bud and the warm rain project realisable futures. The poetic images visualise theology's promises and poetic yearnings. As one editor says, "Poets create a language and imagery whose suggestiveness ripples outward

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<sup>57</sup> Eliot observed: "What a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his original meaning." T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the relation of criticism to poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933, 1959), 130.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, "The Moving Image" line 45, *C.P.*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Hart, "Midsummer" lines 24-25, *Flame Tree*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> Jeanne Murray Walker, "On Poets and Poetry" in Leland Ryken, ed., *The Christian Imagination: The practice of faith in literature and writing* revised and expanded edition (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Shaw Books, 2002), 378.

in all directions.”<sup>61</sup> Poetry’s unique polyvalence accesses salvation’s sublimities and intensities eminently well.

Fifth, poetry offers many images inciting understandings of salvation. Like a prism, poetry reveals many previously hidden perspectives upon salvation. They detail salvation’s totality. Poetic images retain the pristine freshness of first encounter, and memorable ones convey movements to identity, empowerment, and the righting of wrongs. Judith Wright’s metaphors of the bud,<sup>62</sup> the flame tree growing in a quarry,<sup>63</sup> the compass heart,<sup>64</sup> the crimson rose without age,<sup>65</sup> the rising sap,<sup>66</sup> the implacable heart,<sup>67</sup> incessant dreaming,<sup>68</sup> a “far hive,”<sup>69</sup> “a gift ungiven,”<sup>70</sup> “the undreamed-of rain,”<sup>71</sup> and “lovers who share one mind”<sup>72</sup> express human and cosmic yearning for fulfilment, for salvation. Les Murray’s poems celebrating wedding vows, warm rain, droving bees and fresh-minted hills similarly connote refreshing and sublime experiences. David Malouf’s key phrase “the tug of immortality”<sup>73</sup> conveys ethical transcendence, while his “eternal E-flat weather” suggests the real possibilities of attaining the sublime. When Seamus Heaney describes poetry as being like an “an ache needing appeasement,”<sup>74</sup> his image also conveys salvation’s yearning as a physical, emotional, spiritual and catalytic power.

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<sup>61</sup> David Impastato, *Upholding Mystery: An anthology of contemporary Christian poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxi.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, “Dark Gift” line 14, *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1994), 71.

<sup>63</sup> Wright, “fountain of hot joy” in “Flame-Tree in a Quarry” line 15, *C.P.*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Wright, “Spring after War” line 29, *C.P.*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, “Dream” line 3, *C.P.*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> Wright, “The Flood IV” line 11, *C.P.*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Wright, “The Flood V” line 15, *C.P.*, 44.

<sup>68</sup> “The Flood V,” *C.P.*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Wright, “Stars” line 17, *C.P.*, 52.

<sup>70</sup> Wright, “The Unborn” line 16, *C.P.*, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Wright, “Rain at Night” line 8, *C.P.*, 89.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, “The Flame-Tree” line 16, *C.P.*, 95.

<sup>73</sup> Malouf, “The Crab Feast” lines 182-3, *First Things Last* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 34.

<sup>74</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 197.

Sixth, poetic images activate new discourses upon salvation. Some poetry can better intimate the future's richer, unimagined possibilities, where, as Murray puts it, "all our projections / fail to curve where it curves."<sup>75</sup> Poetry's envisioning can incite dreams. These projections of the imagination discourse as substitutions in the same way that salvation envisions and liberates. In *The Redress of Poetry* (1995),<sup>76</sup> Heaney notes poetry's imaginative grasp of future possibilities, how it grants "a fleeting glimpse of a potential order of things beyond confusion . . . [and] fills the reader with freedom and wholeness."<sup>77</sup> Heaney recognises poetry's "world-renewing potential of the imagined response."<sup>78</sup> By bridging present reality and a transcendent vision of it, poetry's dialectical shift discourses for new social realities. In this process of imaginative replacement, poetry uniquely coaxes the imagination towards discourses upon redress and healing.

Seventh, the poetic dynamic saves by its healing enchantment, in its dramatisation of alternative insights. Like hidden wisdom, a poem is a fragile gift for the future like a message in a bottle.<sup>79</sup> Poetry's imaginative power draws attention to alternative sets of experiences. It sings a heartfelt cry for help, for the poet believes in the power of literature to convey a critical message. Risking relegation,<sup>80</sup> a poem conveys hope for overcoming overwhelming negativity and impossibilities. A poem's analogical powers do more than state the possible; a poem couches replacements in realisable situations.

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<sup>75</sup> Murray, "The Future" lines 7–10, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 153.

<sup>76</sup> Heaney, *Redress*, 192.

<sup>77</sup> Heaney, *Redress*, xv.

<sup>78</sup> Heaney, *Redress*, xvii.

<sup>79</sup> Kuschel, *The Poet as Mirror*, 130.

<sup>80</sup> This is a key term in the work of Les Murray meaning to be sent to Coventry, to withdraw support and categorise a person or view as marginal. More will be said on this in Chapter 3. In 1996, he named the working class as "that relegated people." *Let's Always Call it the Commonwealth: One Poet's view of the Republic*, 28.

For instance, if “death is now the birth-gate into things unsayable,”<sup>81</sup> poetry can flesh out those saving possibilities in this life. In its potential for imagining a more ideal response, poetic imagery saves by supplying optimal replacements.

Eighth, reading poetry is both emotive and cognitive. Poetry grants special access for reading its images. Its dynamism takes readers beyond pleasure as the devices delight and challenge. The poet's eye and the poet's tongue speak with cogency and valency. Poetry can lead readers beyond semantic delight with offerings of insight, emotional refreshment, and some sense of transcendence over the present. Some poetry supplies images of sublime resolution or transcendent unity. Indeed in identified readers, religious salvation supplies a *telos*, a direction for placing these imaginative substitutions. These rhetorical dynamics foresee transformations, where human goals are realised. They rehearse a change of attitude, of behaviour, and even identity what promises salvation. Poetry then supplies contemporary imagery. In analogies and its particulars, poetic language incites memorable images that compose new discourses.

Poetic language enchants and heals by supplying substitutions and replacements. Poetic images do salve. Since salvation names what is most desirable, the poetic images strikingly dramatise its direction and fulfilments in images like the bud, the warm rain, the teapot of calm, the golden wattle, and the tug to immortality. Such images give sure knowledge through familiar correspondences in the cultural memory. These images variously point to desired best outcomes for the universe. Because certain familiar images like the wattle and warm rain are mediations of significant aesthetic intensity in the culture, they become readily recognisable symbols of salvation. These images become national symbols of transformed experience.

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<sup>81</sup> Murray, “The say-but-the-word centurion attempts a summary” line 18, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 391.

In review, this section's eighteen points have explored and related the key notions, salvation and poetry. Theological reflection values the contemporary interest in these sources of subjectivity, and the poetical imagination is a respected tool for explicating it. Because salvation is imaged in these affective sources, it supplies compelling responses for transcending life's exigencies. With its proven power to evoke comfort and refreshment, the concept of salvation does appear in public poetry in images of social betterment, in recovering justice and rights, and in the call to political responsibility. Poetry may cure or save because it supplies a remarkable emotional intensity for enduring, relativising and analogising present sufferings. Like the religious imagination, the poetic imagination fills the believer's horizon with possibilities for recoveries promising movements with better replacements. The next section articulates the rhetorical implications of this aesthetic activity.

#### iv. Salvation in rhetoric: Tropes, imagery and metaphor

Normal verbal communications and the language of the scriptures are rhetorical with their metaphors, hyperbole and simplifications. Serious human communication is the essentially rhetorical, whereas analysis needs to adopt technical discourse. So to carry out theological reflection, "rhetoric must in the end give the final word [over] critically reflective discourse."<sup>82</sup> Talk of salvation belongs in rhetoric and so this discussion does not adopt the metalanguage of technical terminologies, for poetic discourse and theological discourse share the same domain. Clearly, tropes (ways of thinking) and images (poetical devices) structure poetry. Because poetry uses tropes to convey any imagined reality, its metaphoric images focus emotion that is the soul of poetry. Poetic

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<sup>82</sup> John Thornhill, "Unravelling the complexities of the 'original sin' tradition" *The Australian Catholic Record*, 83, Issue 1 (January 2006), 27.

tropes and metaphors can serve faith by modelling salvation in sensual images, and amplifying the perennial longing for regeneration, rejuvenation, transfiguration and transcendence. Poetic tropes then can univocally rather than just analogically image salvation.

First then, images mirror the familiar to us in unusual or novel ways, so that any reality like salvation takes on a fresh importance as startling or appealing. Poetic images surprise with freshness. They offer the surest means to pass on significant experiences to posterity. Some powerful images found in selected contemporary poems contribute to a fresher rhetoric about salvation for being less freighted with narrower, inherited accretions, and are more likely to spark interest by their topical and cultural relevance. C. Day Lewis noted that the poetic image is a more or less sensuous picture in words.<sup>83</sup> With poetry's uniquely sensuous appeal, salvation can be felt in poetic metaphors such as nature's sweet completion,<sup>84</sup> the pulse of praise<sup>85</sup> and the spring's return.<sup>86</sup> Some poetic images denote the desired fulfilment like "the teapot of calm" or "non-violent dreamtime," while others image the processes effecting fulfilments, like "the compass heart" and the wedding vows. These poetic images acquire a timeless relevance and refreshment as perennial symbols for a nation.

Second, theological hope in salvation and the trope of transcendence in rhetoric work alike. In its many images and extended metaphors, poetry's rhetoric provides excesses of meaning that may image theological salvation. They envisage new experiences of the

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<sup>83</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), 22. See also Alex Preminger, ed., an evocation of the senses is "the mental reproduction of a sensation produced by a physical perception." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 363.

<sup>84</sup> Wright, "The Nautilus" line 23, *C.P.*, 187.

<sup>85</sup> Wright, "Thornbills" line 13, *C.P.*, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Wright, "Unpacking Books" line 27, *C.P.*, 388.

wholeness of life in a longing-desire powerful enough to shape unimaginable realities like salvation. Within such tropes, imagery transforms perceptions. The poetic imagination explores the excesses of meaning available in groups of images and metaphors. Groups of such images not only intensify emotion, they move the imagination to pattern murals of meaning in rhetorical discourses like salvation. Groups of images sustain hope by influencing and re-forming this enriched imagination, illuminating the movement of the imagination, even unconsciously.

While metaphors and images are figures of speech and essential components of poetic language, the trope of transcendence foregrounds Christian thinking that the universe is destined to a happy completion. This mystery says that because God so loved the world and sent his only son to redeem it, he will complete that economy to save it. So this trope of transcendence and hope in a saviour contests worry, doom and despair. It figures that humans need to work to bring about the kingdom of justice, love and peace<sup>87</sup> in their lives and decisions. In this trope, salvation is realised daily, and can be envisaged in human language in poetic metaphors and images. The trope of transcendence then supplies suitable rhetoric for salvation.

Poetry uniquely serves this rhetoric with its powerful displacement devices. Poetry's well-spring is the nagging awareness<sup>88</sup> that beyond banal realities, poetry points to something still more authentic. Because its images dance between what is held now and what is wondrously new, poetry's attractive images variously reinforce any glimpses of transformative possibilities. Poetry's emotional forces and colliding metaphors generate heightened perceptions to supply a wonderful intensity about substitutes like salvation.

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<sup>87</sup> Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, *Gregorian Missal* (Solesmes: St. Peter's Abbey, 1990), 601.

<sup>88</sup> Like Heaney's "ache," this is a pertinent phrase quoted from Edward W. Said, "Molestation and authority in narrative fiction" in J. Hillis Miller, ed., *Aspects of narrative: Selected papers from the English institute* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 50.

Furthermore, the trope of transcendence explicates a distinctive way of thinking. Its ways of thinking about life identify the community of readers using rhetoric about salvation. For nature's restoration, Murray's image of fresh-minted hills<sup>89</sup> when "the paddocks were endless again" after the blindness of storm suggests that recurrent refreshment, and denotes being cleansed of decay, suffering and death. Murray's celebration of wedding vows shows salvation's promise in the faith and commitment to promise stability. The vows image future realities among those "who share one mind." Malouf's metaphor, "the tug of immortality,"<sup>90</sup> conveys a similar transcendence over self-interest. Different images identify salvation's still-unscripted possibilities.

Certainly if read as metaphor, salvation is total replacement/substitution of new for old. Images of such substitutions offer considerable refreshment and consolation because they discourse upon salvation. They reply to an ache, or offer the outcome of a yearning for something new to replace the greed, evil, violence, sin, apathy, terror and misery of present life. In this dynamic of substitution, the power of one image and the intensity of metaphors in collusion round it make the new reality seem that much more real. How the faith community responds to these images defines its urgency about salvation, as either an immediate cleansing/completion, or a remote, transcendental total substitution/replacement model. Within this study, salvation is taken as the cleansing/ completion model.

Third, the dynamics of such rhetoric guides the search for transformation. If the poetic images are similes, they infer resemblances to present ones, and if they present metaphors, they point to new realities. Whether salvation describes something similar

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<sup>89</sup> Murray, "Spring Hail" line 9, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Malouf, "The Crab Feast" lines 182-3 *First Things Last* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 34.



to what we already know, or whether it is something entirely different, it is a reordering of what is, or even a total substitution for what is, in a transformation/completion of what exists. In a working sense, images of salvation preview “an apprehension of an identity within the difference.”<sup>91</sup> Poetic images confect this newness by transforming present actions, circumstances and attitudes.

This dialectical dynamic occurs not just at an individual level but engages whole communities within its elastic and durable operation. With its transformative power, metaphor enhances understanding, and indeed produces emotional participation in poetic explanations. So when images in Wright like the bud, the compass heart, the undreamed-of rain and the spring’s return are read as metaphor, they present salvation as real possibilities to offer transformative meanings for whole communities of readers, whether literary or religious or both, since they fix<sup>92</sup> or stabilise common human observations in striking ways.

That productive dialectic fires the *mythos* of salvation that identifies the believing community. The imagination’s movement *to* mystery, holding stories and images “in tension,” is, as Paul S. Fiddes observes, in “a dialogue between the religious tradition and creativity within certain texts.”<sup>93</sup> Metaphor uniquely engages the emotional imagination, storming otherwise unattainable, imaginary horizons in possible worlds through its emotional access to alternative experiences. Metaphor’s aroused emotions

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<sup>91</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language* trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello S.J. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 26.

<sup>92</sup> I pursue this pun to advantage: just as salvation fixes the world’s problems, the photographer’s film fixes the flux of life in durable photographic images.

<sup>93</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), 35. Furthermore, “The imagination forms a new world which has indirect reference to the world in which we live. This referential quality allows us to understand imagination as a mode of empathy, creating poems and novels which are ‘extenders of consciousness’.” Quoting from Kathleen Coburn, ed., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge III*, 3632 (London, 1973) in Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 21.

intensify these performative aspects of metaphor. Poetic metaphors critique worlds beyond local settings and characters in a *progression d'effect* to create fresh realities about preferred futures.

Fourth, the rhetoric works on multiple levels when the images collide. Judith Wright's metaphors of the bud,<sup>94</sup> the flame tree growing in a quarry,<sup>95</sup> the compass heart,<sup>96</sup> the crimson rose without age,<sup>97</sup> rising sap<sup>98</sup> work to image salvation in most invigorating ways. Wright's compass heart suggests a natural tug to wholeness, love, resolution and completion along the real but latent polarity of a true-north finality. Like migrating birds, the heart knows its own true direction. Her images of incessant dreaming and the implacable heart suggest the heart's perseverance and persistence on the scent of certainties to find a way through to fulfilment. Her metaphors, the implacable heart,<sup>99</sup> incessant dreaming,<sup>100</sup> a "far hive,"<sup>101</sup> "a gift ungiven,"<sup>102</sup> "the undreamed-of rain,"<sup>103</sup> and "lovers who share one mind,"<sup>104</sup> image a second chance and a new start. Distinctive groups of these images fire the rhetoric of salvation. In this way, some Australian poetry supplies fresh images<sup>105</sup> to make the road to glory more profoundly close and intense to Australian readers.

In review, tropes, images and metaphors excite faith to present transcendence in supersensuous ways. Images arouse excesses of connotation to transform realities by

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<sup>94</sup> Wright, "Dark Gift" line 14, *C.P.*, 71.

<sup>95</sup> Judith Wright, "fountain of hot joy" in "Flame-Tree in a Quarry" line 15, *C.P.*, 60.

<sup>96</sup> Wright, "Spring after War" line 29, *C.P.*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Wright, "Dream" line 3, *C.P.*, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Wright, "The Flood IV" line 11, *C.P.*, 43.

<sup>99</sup> Wright, "The Flood V" line 15, *C.P.*, 44.

<sup>100</sup> "The Flood V" *C.P.*, 44.

<sup>101</sup> Wright, "Stars" line 17, *C.P.*, 52.

<sup>102</sup> Wright, "The Unborn" line 16, *C.P.*, 48.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, "Rain at Night" line 8, *C.P.*, 89.

<sup>104</sup> Wright, "The Flame-Tree" line 16, *C.P.*, 95.

<sup>105</sup> This is a work of complementarity with traditional formulations, not a substitution of new language for old.

displacing them. Distinctive groups of these images compose a distinctive rhetoric about salvation. Distinctive groups of such images present salvation in familiar and credible ways to its own culture. These shared icons of transcendence compose the *mythos* of a particular reading community like the church. Similarly, Australian poetic images compose the shared rhetoric of glory for Australian readers.

#### v. Methodology

This study employs the standard reader-response approach<sup>106</sup> to enact a three-way conversation between the Christian scriptures, living faith and insightful poems. This is an exercise in contextual theology<sup>107</sup> at the interface of reading Australian literature in the living context of the Catholic tradition. When salvation is not a poem's explicitly invited reading, my alternative reading does not adopt a resistant reading stance either. While generally accepting the worldview of the poems, my reading may differ from inscribed meanings by a process of cautious accommodations with them.<sup>108</sup> Employing Larry J. Kreitzer's concept of "reversing the hermeneutical flow,"<sup>109</sup> I read using the themes and motifs of the classic Christian texts, not as a fishing net of doctrines with which to catch data to support them, but as catalysts to valorise themes and motifs in public poetry that express the dream of embodied transcendence. If introspection is said to lack objectivity, I sail between Scylla and Charybdis, between the extremes of awe

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<sup>106</sup> Reader-response practices are now well established in the work of Wolfgang Iser *The Act of Reading: A theory of aesthetic response* (1976) and Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1977) and their critics.

<sup>107</sup> Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1981), 263 says: "theology is human work . . . done by humans for human purposes drenched with *figurae* from our experience of ourselves and the world." Quoted by Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Religion and the imagination" *Thought*, Vol. LXVI, No. 261, p. 158.

<sup>108</sup> Emma Robinson and Sophie Robinson, *What does it mean? Discourse, Text, Culture: An introduction* (North Ryde, NSW: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 11. An alternative reading is a compromise between the invited reading and a resistant reading.

<sup>109</sup> A valid deductive process. See Larry J. Kreitzer, *Pauline images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield, UK: Academic Press, 1999), 7.

and flaw, using protocols monitoring content and processes in the readings. My defensible methodology observes defined parameters within the framework of the analogical imagination.

This study offers insightful readings that grow from within the interpretative community of the Christian faith. It is a work beyond deconstructing features, or studying influence or comparing styles. In its intelligent daring, this hermeneutic “leans on things”<sup>110</sup> to stress and test them. It reads poetry to shift conventional ways of conceptualising salvation. This study offers some answer to Jajdelski’s concerns whether a Christian literary theory is conducive to salvation or expressive of charity.<sup>111</sup> My thesis serves to focus the Christian life. Heeding Rowe, I seek to derive fresh symbols and expressions from interpretative reflection, to highlight already proclaimed truth. Poetic images do most helpfully illustrate the doctrine of salvation.

The dissertation avoids the claim that the hermeneut should read deliberately ignoring or bracketing off a poet’s intentionality, as in a phenomenological analysis, or indeed must read only what no one has dared read to achieve any original reading. It uses the critical apparatus available, and defines the limits of influences upon solo readings. While avoiding “the officious precedent of precedent,”<sup>112</sup> the study assumes that genuinely original re-readings of artworks are always possible and are typical of our era.

My approach is open and positive, public and cautious. If a poem offers a new analogy, new exemplars or experiences of salvation, or new ways of contextualizing them, then

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<sup>110</sup> Murray, “The Quality of Sprawl” line 46, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 183.

<sup>111</sup> Wojciech Jajdelski, reviewing *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* by Luke Ferreter (sic) *Literature & Theology* 17.3 (2003), 345.

<sup>112</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 298.

the reader's appreciation of salvation is enhanced, renewed or extended. Certainly themes of rescue, fulfilment and hope appear in contemporary poems. The three selected poets' distinctive angles provide alternative viewpoints, new exemplars, and new perspectives and expressions for understanding literary and theological themes like salvation. The hermeneutical reader explores them; the religious reader finds in them a refreshing critique.

To read poetry, a poet's intentionality as a guide to meaning is sometimes available in extra-textual resources like diaries, interviews and commentaries, as well as in internal evidence such as in identifiable patterns of syntax and metaphors, key vocabulary, stylistic idiomatics of various kinds, and semantic codes. Among these are writer's recollections of intentions in writing a poem as Murray offers in his key essay "The Human-Hair Thread."<sup>113</sup> Yet the artist, the critic and the reader are already bound together in so many unseen ways within the culture in endless intertextualities of originality and intentionality that a poet's expressed intentions are both difficult to discern and difficult to isolate. Consequently, authorial intentionality is a debunked concept. So the methodology does not rely on a poet's reported intentions but may draw on some expressed views for guidance or reference.

A surer criterion for accepting a hermeneutic is to focus on truth for the reader. The critical reader may find much evidence in the present work to respect this scribe's honest intent. This study uses data where the reader's purpose distinguishes the kind of reading undertaken. As an interdisciplinary study, I draw on two discrete, established domains (literature and theology in equivalent priority) in an effort to find echoes for intensifying belief from whatever images, intimations or tropes explore a preoccupation

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<sup>113</sup> Here we find an extensive prose explanation of themes in his poetry. Les Murray, "The Human-Hair Thread" *Meanjin* 36.4 (December 1977), 550-572.

with salvation in the published poems. My overriding purpose is to seek new continuities in a postmodern age, and to refresh rhetoric about salvation.

This hermeneutic is a particular viewpoint seeking a better coherence, as Ricoeur wrote, “to interpret is to bring out a coherence.”<sup>114</sup> My geographical, temporal and social contexts enable me to identify this faith coherence, confident that it is meaningful to those already within the faith community, and a useful and acceptable organising theme to others contiguous with it. I strive to contextualise the coherence that is salvation.

A hermeneutic excavates insights from “scraps of experience” (Judith Wright’s seminal phrase)<sup>115</sup> to find coherences in the religious concept of salvation for readers today. Its process is an articulated reading from within a faith consciousness to find fresher imagery for contemporary Christian readers. Its focus is an interactive and recursive reading of some poems by poets Judith Wright, Les A. Murray, and David Malouf. For hermeneutic excellence, I aspire “to write passages of splendid intuitive interpretation.”<sup>116</sup> My hermeneutical reading of these poetical images gleans religious meanings by applying Ricour’s celebrated “understanding, explanation and interpretation” template.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I” in Don Hide, ed., *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 297.

<sup>115</sup> Judith Wright, Introduction to *Australian Poets: Judith Wright* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), vii.

<sup>116</sup> Judith Wright, “Introduction” *A Book of Australian Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1956, 1962), 3.

<sup>117</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1974), 72-3, 79, 86, 92. His discussion covers the literal/figurative, denotative/connotative, cognitive/emotional, and metaphoric/symbolic aspects in the act of reading. It seems critical to my purpose to answer his question there, “Whether the surplus of meaning characteristic of literary works is a part of their signification or if it must be understood as an external factor, which is non-cognitive and simply emotional?” (Ricoeur, “Metaphor and Symbol” 45-69 in Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 45). If completely detached, it would not apply his triad template correctly, yet to be tied to structuralist explanations denies the reader the freedom to make the interpretation an event of personal appropriation and relevance. My interpretations achieve validity by being readings typical in a community of readers finding intelligibility in the text so as to make religious sense of it. Murray

This hermeneutic is not an arbitrary appropriation. It respects the integrity of the poems as fragments of discourses in the literary domain. My readings are not invoking doctrinal applications.<sup>118</sup> I read not for subjective enjoyment, but rather to recognise objective salvation (objective events as opposed to the internal drama) happening in the fight for justice and a better world. The hermeneutic seeks to reconcile word with deed, and faith-vision with experience. I engage with a real-life consciousness of inevitable conflicts at the interface of life and religious vision. These disjunctions are refereed within the reference group of the Christian community of faith.

To cluster these images, I foreground my interpretative purpose for this study, as the hermeneutic of a mainstream Roman Catholic Christian reader. It is a view striving to perceive God being involved in the processes of the natural universe and as a presence in the minds and hearts of its believing community. Similarly, to show that my interpretative strategies<sup>119</sup> are transparent, my interpretative readings are supported with critical commentary.

Hermeneutical interpretation is not just cognitive but also heightens an emotional embodiment for reader, thinker and receiver of messages. Indeed, interpretation is something that happens to the interpreter. Its self-aware dynamic lends a new perspective, as a reader finds in a changed location such as in the numinous perception with changed timeframes, attitudes and values. Interpretations explore new identities,

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observes: "Poetry has a way of reminding us by its very inexhaustibility, that there are always more sides to a thing." "The Trade in Images" *The Paperbark Tree*, 298.

<sup>118</sup> See Eco's acceptance of Hartman's provocative notion of the *intentio operis* as opposed to the pre-textual *intentio auctoris*, as a constraint on the *intentio lectoris*. Umberto Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" in Stefan Collini, ed., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 45-66, especially 64-66.

<sup>119</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretative communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 61,

wider ethical possibilities and suggest more human liberations. Reading for salvation readily activates such attitudinal shifts arising in poetic transcendences.

The study uses four criteria to recognise primary images as salvational. The first criterion is that the image is perceptually stable and has applications to enhance human dignity. The second criterion is that the image is positive and points towards peace, justice and non-violence. The third criterion is that an image is creative, dialectical or critical; otherwise, it would never point to a goal not yet fully attained. The fourth is that an image enhances the narratives of human lives.

The study maintains methodological rigour by employing a critical self-awareness of public and academic scrutiny. In summary, I adhere to five norms<sup>120</sup> for establishing fair and comprehensive readings:

1. Deal with themes major in these poets.
2. Be true to the spirit of the poems.
3. Honestly foreground my own bias, intention and value system.
4. Pay attention to academic criticism.
5. Be consciously self-critical in the hermeneutical process.

These criteria ensure fair interaction, honest communication and due caution.

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<sup>120</sup> An original grid composed upon journal articles by Malina, Brown and Craffert: (1) Bruce J. Malina, "The Bible: Witness or Warrant: Reflections on Daniel Patte's 'Ethics of Biblical Interpretation'" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26.2 (Summer 1996), 82-87: "Readings produced with no thought about being considerate of what the authors of the documents said and meant in their original time, place and culture are, as a rule, unethical readings" (84). (2) Delwin Brown, "Refashioning self and other: Theology, Academy and the New Ethnography" in Delwin Brown and Sheila Greene Davaney, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41-55 especially 45-48 on Clifford Geertz's ethnographic epistemology. (3) Pieter F. Craffert, "Relationships between Socio-Scientific, Literary and Rhetorical Interpretations of Texts" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26.1 (Spring, 1996), 45-55: "Reading is a process of attributing meaning to a document by means of one or another scenario, cultural system, or reading convention."



The methodology is defensible. Deferring evaluation for the sake of productive understanding, I defer to the text, stand under the light of these poems, being vulnerable to challenging messages perceived in them, and, in general, seek that surplus of vision that desires transformations. I seek to enhance poetry's comprehensive status as knowledge-for-life, in a mediating balance between subject and object, person and image. This new balance is a post-Enlightenment attempt to reintegrate what is known with its knower. Rather than see knowledge as objective, useful and impersonal, this post-critical effort reintegrates what is known more closely with the one who knows it. In many ways, it remedies the limitations of the scientific method, where valid knowledge is only what is experimentally repeatable. It shows that data gathered by other methods is similarly justifiable. That truth-for-life arises after all not in the texts alone nor in pegging out their contexts nor in divining their authors' recorded intentions, but in nurturing the reader's faith. Accordingly, a survey of its theological framework follows.

This dissertation's methodology modulates any all-too-glib transfer from life experience into religious language. It avoids the risks of the rhapsodic fallacy, "that includes and excludes material from works according to shared expectations about the good poem's contours."<sup>121</sup> I read to expand the vocabulary of salvation, the better to hear its parabolic resonances.<sup>122</sup> I undertake to "interpret slowly" (Kinzie), taking the time and space to delay ready-made answers,<sup>123</sup> to hear resonances, and be ready to receive challenges. This dissertation embarks on the recursive part of the hermeneutic circle in an exercise of its more difficult inductive process. I seek a "reconnection with the

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<sup>121</sup> Mary Kinzie, *The cure of poetry in an age of prose: Moral essays on the poet's calling* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>122</sup> I seek explications of rescue, restoration, or fulfilment in whatever cues to scriptural, liturgical, devotional, historical or life themes occur in the selected poems.

<sup>123</sup> Culler's term is also apposite: "to avoid premature foreclosure – the unseemly rush from word to world – and stays within the literary system for as long as possible." Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 130.

fundamental symbols of consciousness”<sup>124</sup> as Ricoeur puts it. The search for images of salvation valorizes a second, considered reconnection with primary experience found in the poems’ reinterpretations. To do so entails a brief consideration of the structures of reflection.

The methodology draws on Ricoeur’s celebrated hermeneutic of the symbol. It has three distinct but related levels: the primary, the mythic and the relational. Primary symbols, the first immediacy, are closest to experience; mythic symbols re-enact primary symbols as a “second immediacy”<sup>125</sup> so that the intention of the symbols is preserved in the transfer. Thirdly, relational symbols have the highest degree of articulation and are explanatory rather than descriptive. The dynamic process of attaining these levels progressively builds up levels of truth, so that what is “true for me” becomes “true for us” in the reading community, and finally becoming true more universally. The progress through the stages could be typified as a progress from experience through mythology to ontology, as primary experiences or separate symbols gathering under one umbrella become a discourse. In this case, the separate images of salvation in poetry in primary experience grow to form a discourse upon salvation at a more defensible level of truth.

In Ricoeur’s model,<sup>126</sup> real or imagined experiences of relief from pain, or timely refreshment, or reconciliation, or moments of transcendence in the poems compose the primary symbols. Because they are already expressed in poetic words, they have already moved from raw experience to become symbols of experience. More secondary religious symbols of salvation like the Cross, the Pietá, the Mother of Sorrows, the Risen Christ, the Day of Judgment, and the Last Trumpet compose the mythic

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<sup>124</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The symbol gives rise to thought” in Giles B. Gunn, ed., *Literature and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 214.

<sup>125</sup> Ricoeur, “The symbol gives rise to thought,” 215.

<sup>126</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* trans. E. Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 25-174, 347-357.

dimension encompassing them. These symbols focus, describe and collate primary experiences without necessarily explaining them. Finally, explanatory terms like the work of Providence or the biblical construct of salvation history compose the relational level of this model of the structures of reflection. All three levels occur in an explication of belief, and the model structures that belief. The symbolic levels find greater validity and universality with more explication in the community of faith as the hermeneutic thickens. This study is very much a work of refereed interpretation, working at the first level of Ricoeur's model to echo faith in salvation.

In this sixth subsection, the chosen methodology of interpretative hermeneutics is elaborated. My methodology is open and defensible, rigorous and self-critical. Four criteria recognise primary images as salvational, and achieve fair and comprehensive readings. Using Ricoeur's "understanding, explanation and interpretation" hermeneutical template explains how a discourse grows within three levels of symbolism. It yields richer reading for including reader recollections and associations, reporting author re-readings if available, and practising reader deferrals. It reads slowly to hear parabolic resonances, and it seeks a surplus of vision that seeks evidence of transformations in persons.

The thesis proceeds by description and interpretation. It uses recursive interpretation and conceptual interpretation,<sup>127</sup> drawing on concepts in literature and theology to explain significances. The study seeks images of hope and transcendence to coax attitudinal shifts. The study is an examination of primary experience as in receiving the warm rain. The study presents new and grounded discourses upon salvation from reconsiderations of images found in the poetry of Wright, Murray and Malouf.

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<sup>127</sup> Terms from Maria Piantanida and Noreen B. Garman, *The Qualitative Dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1999), 253.

## vi. Elaboration of theological framework

Having outlined the aims, the key concepts and its particular standpoint, the discussion moves to a brief outline of its theological framework.

Theology, or more practically, theological reflection, must be both affective and critical, including being self-critical. Significant emotions drive that on-going reflection. Consequently, theology cannot afford to remove itself from affect-driven activities such as “imaginative grasp”, “attention”, “a sensitivity to context and situation”, and “a readiness to deal with the unforeseen.”<sup>128</sup> Such fruits of the emotional imagination are significant sources of insight in theology.

As theology, this work of poetic hermeneutics explores what Vincent Buckley called the sacralising imagination<sup>129</sup> whereby the act of writing poetry reveals the sacred. Buckley identified the sacred in that act when the poet creates a movement in “an aspiration to self completion”<sup>130</sup> Kevin Hart’s tribute to Buckley records that sacralised space as an enhanced respect for reality, as “a larger calmer world / Where everything is loved for what it is.”<sup>131</sup> Murray calls it sacred when the dreaming experience stops time, and leaps the poet into timeless moments of numinous awareness, so that, “immortality is

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<sup>128</sup> Jeff Astley, *Ordinary theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), quoting Wood (1996b:350, 355).

<sup>129</sup> Buckley writes, the “religious impulse persists in a remarkable and perhaps astonishing way in poetry so that even within desacralized society like our own, there are some poets who, as *a mode of life*, concern themselves with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred.” [Buckley’s emphasis] The task of writing poetry is a “sacralizing act” for revealing the significance of persons or events as an aspiration to self-completion. Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), 17, 20, 21. Discussed further in Ch. 2.

<sup>130</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Kevin Hart, “Winter Rain (in memory of Vincent Buckley),” *Flame Tree: Selected Poems*, 113.

real and can be expressed in our mortal life.”<sup>132</sup> Such experiences of the sacred are consistent with Rahner’s “realised eschatology” where the belief/vision infuses practice. Exploring this transcendence is pertinent theological reflection.

To frame the study, I draw on (a) Schillebeeckx’s seven anthropological constants, (b) Rahner’s words of the heart, (c) Heidegger’s logic of the heart, and (d) Rudolf Otto’s concept of the numinous. The following overview takes each in turn.

- a. Edward Schillebeeckx’s constants

The current study applies the framework of the seven anthropological constants from Edward Schillebeeckx’s *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (1986) for reading the selected poems. Schillebeeckx’s seven constants are positive in direction, affirm human progress and offer markers for realising the “not yet” aspect of human salvation because salvation is the theme of the whole of human history.<sup>133</sup> They act as the kelson guiding the erection of this study.

His seven constants are guidelines for identifying genuine human fulfilment. These litmus tests for salvation are clear signposts and, at the same time, a reliable pattern for the not-yet. They encompass all elements for recognising authentic salvation, for “Christian salvation (salvation from God for *men*) is concerned with the whole system of coordinates in which man can really be man”<sup>134</sup> (sic). This discussion draws on the constants as a theological framework for reading the data of poetry. In summary then,

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<sup>132</sup> Les Murray, “One poet’s view of the republic” *Occasional lecture 1996*, 31.

<sup>133</sup> As Edward Schillebeeckx has said, “extra mundum nulla salus, there is no salvation outside the human world [in the sense that] the world of creation, our history within the environment of nature, is the sphere of God’s saving action in and through human mediation.” Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 17.

<sup>134</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 730.

these seven anthropological constants frame this study:

Salvation relates to human corporeality, nature and the ecological environment.

Being human involves responsibility for others.

Salvation connects social and institutional structures.

Salvation respects the conditioning of people and culture by time and space.

Salvation involves the mutual relationship of theory and practice.

Salvation involves the religious and para-religious consciousness of humans.

Salvation involves the irreducible synthesis in these dimensions.

As values for attaining salvation, these seven constants offer a significant framework as guidelines for salvation. They map a way forward to distinguish human actions as saving actions. They posit a firm belief in humanity's potentials, in its capacities for change and the essential goodness in our nature.

- b. Karl Rahner's words of the heart

The second thread of my theological framework comes from Karl Rahner's four determinants for literary studies in his essay, "Poetry and the Christian" (1966). Rahner points to the essential need to be open to mystery, learning to listen in truth and love, knowing that temporal words can demean and oppress persons, and feed pride and greed. This tenet is the basis for his incarnational theology of service in the world. To hear the message of Christianity, one must have ears for the silent mystery that is the foundation of our being. So to recognise salvation, one must be open to vulnerability, heeding the power to hear words that reach the heart. God's word needs to reach the whole person.<sup>135</sup> The ten virtues that focus this study emphasise these qualities of vulnerability, hope, responsibility and dreaming the transcendent. Rahner calls for a proper hearing of the gospel message, for words that unite lie in hearing it.

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<sup>135</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 360.

As a Christian reader of poetry then, I read with a reflective consciousness of mystery, open to all reality, both seen and unseen, listening with the whole heart to words of truth, and seeking words for joy, unity and coherence. Judith Wright's call for candour in her distinctive "capacity to be naked to life"<sup>136</sup> and her sense of the mystery of things in "a new kind of unity and meaning"<sup>137</sup> captures Rahner's desirable attitudes of openness and vulnerability. This deliberate choice for openness and vulnerability, like Heidegger's tending towards the wholeness of the Open, characterises these aesthetics as a Christian reader of poetry. So the primary orientation here is to seek images of meaningful liberations, restorations and fulfilment. Rahner's "words of the heart" then prefigure this promised transformation via embodied or incarnational service. For, transformation, continuity and destiny are my focus as the reader sees in my readings of poems by Wright, Murray and Malouf.

- c. Martin Heidegger: In pursuit of the holy

The third embedded thread comes from Martin Heidegger, who argued in his noteworthy essay, "What Are Poets For?" (1946),<sup>138</sup> that a reader must experience the "inner life" of a text in order to understand it at all. For Heidegger, a valid interpretation may become irrecoverable and will always be relative: "Salvation must come from where there is a turn with mortals in their nature."<sup>139</sup> Consequently, the poet's language offers a unique access to "the unbounded whole of the Open . . . and invisible region of

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<sup>136</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966), 119.

<sup>137</sup> Judith Wright, "The Eucalypt and the National Character" line 17, *C.P.*, 362.

<sup>138</sup> Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), 91-142.

<sup>139</sup> Heidegger, *Poets*, 118.

the heart”<sup>140</sup> where truth is revealed.

The poet’s language properly works in the precinct of the heart. In accessing that language of the heart, poetry accesses the wholeness of Being (*Dasein*). Because the permanence of Being contains the transitoriness of Becoming, through its images poetry accesses Being. Heidegger thus establishes the critical theoretical link between the poet’s vision and the practice of his trade. In writing to access wholeness, poets actually create fulfilment; they image salvation. Murray’s language of “Wholespeak” is such an example. Heeding Heidegger then, I read for that integrity and comprehensiveness known as salvation.

- d. Murray’s use of Otto’s numinous dimension

The fourth strand of the study’s theological framework comes from Les A. Murray. Murray’s insightful connection or *chiasm*<sup>141</sup> of the sacred and the mundane is based on Otto’s idea of the numinous. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) regarded metaphysical knowledge as an *a priori* (already given) concept, using J. F. Fries’ doctrine of the *Ahnung* (inkling, notion, surmise, foreknowledge) that permits one directly to access the holy or divine. Otto established his concept of the numinous as an already given concept such as time or causality, “qualitatively different from anything that ‘natural’ sense-perception is capable of giving us.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Heidegger, *Poets*, 128.

<sup>141</sup> I use ‘chiasm’ from the Greek letter χ (chi) as a matrix describing the process of accessing the numinous in its intersection of sacred and profane in the local, temporal and particular instances of experience. In it, the horizontal (human) and the vertical (divine) axes of intentionality coincide within this dreaming perception.

<sup>142</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 5, also cited in Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 188.



Murray uses this model for his “substantial inspired imaginings.”<sup>143</sup> His religious neo-romanticism privileges the poetic imagination as a source of value to access the numinous and to give sacramental dimensions to existence. Thus, from the viewpoint of an instinctive hope rejecting the dominance of evil in human nature, his contemplation of nature and experience in the world recorded in poetry permit one to access God’s immanence. As Murray says, poems “become ritual enactments that catch the numinous as ‘God is the poetry caught in any religion / caught, not imprisoned’.”<sup>144</sup> Thus, as a poet, he is at once seeing both the ordinary and the spiritual, accessing immanence, and “making room”<sup>145</sup> for the numinous. Murray’s numinous grasp gives his readers a viable way to perceive salvation happening in ordinary events.

In exploring the numinous, Murray reasserts the poetic arts’ traditional role of having a distinctive view upon events: to view them from within a larger frame, enabling readers to be more aware, more reflective and perhaps even more moral. In this intriguing synthesis, he integrates his poetic and religious visions.

My theological framework is comprised of Schillebeeckx, Heidegger, Rahner and Otto. This theological framework is characterised by openness and vulnerability (where Rahner’s incarnational eschatology infuses all perceptions as anticipating final fulfilment), scope and comprehensiveness (Heidegger’s access for grasping the wholeness of things), direction and purpose (application of Schillebeeckx’s anthropological constants), and hope and transcendence (in Rudolf Otto’s concept of the numinous). I read from within this Christian interpretative tradition.

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<sup>143</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 189.

<sup>144</sup> Murray, “Poetry and Religion” lines 17-18, *C.P.1961-2002*, 265.

<sup>145</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 193.

## vii. Data sources: selected poems

The data for this research are drawn almost exclusively from my notes, reflections and commentaries derived from repeated readings of some poems by three selected Australian poets. The readings are arranged thematically as “contemporary poems that intrigue and sustain me.”<sup>146</sup> These major poets are representative of disparate approaches to the metaphysical domain in Australian public writing. Judith Wright was a radical thinker in the conventional Christian culture,<sup>147</sup> David Malouf is a professed non-believer, yet a product of a Marionite Catholic upbringing,<sup>148</sup> and Les Murray is an adult convert to Roman Catholicism.<sup>149</sup> This range of biographical backgrounds tests the hermeneutic to better effect in their contrasting perspectives and approaches. Including Malouf further supports my claim not to commit the intentional fallacy.

The selections are poems of worth. Judith Wright’s eminence is undoubted, and Les Murray is Australia’s unofficial poet laureate.<sup>150</sup> As a prominent novelist, David Malouf enjoys an enviable literary reputation. I locate Murray and Malouf in the tradition of Wright, in their themes of imaginative insight and retrieved memory, continuity and identity. My readings of their poems do not second-guess their intentions or guild their

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<sup>146</sup> Kevin Hart, “Introduction” to *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), xv.

<sup>147</sup> Wright was brought up in the broad church of Anglicanism in New England. See “For a Pastoral Family” line 83 *C.P.*, 408. Charles Higham has overstated or at least referred only to formal religious language when he notes: “Judith Wright’s Christian upbringing has apparently had no effect on her when plunging into the crucible of poetic creation. . . . Her declaration of faith [is]: ‘All that is real is to live, to desire, to be’.” Charles Higham, “Judith Wright’s Vision” *Quadrant* 19 (Winter, 1961), 33-41. Her sense of the religious in mystery cannot be denied, and her use of Christian metaphysics is evident.

<sup>148</sup> In particular, David Malouf (1985), *12 Edmonstone Street: An unforgettable portrait of one man’s life* (London: Vintage 1990), 6-9, 25-27.

<sup>149</sup> Steven Matthews, *Les Murray* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 102, and Alexander *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, 107.

<sup>150</sup> Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray A Life in Progress*, 256. His contribution for his Order of Australia award (1989) with writing the Oath of Allegiance (1992) and his Constitutional Preamble (1999) are well known. See David Nicholls’ discussion 24 March 1999 website: [www.home.aone.net.au/~byzantium/preambles/jp.html](http://www.home.aone.net.au/~byzantium/preambles/jp.html) [accessed 2006 April 03].

personal agendas but explicate the great themes of redemption, a second chance, purification and atonement in the praxis of salvation found in them.

My selections explore some of their poems from published anthologies. Judith Wright's poetry is widely available, particularly in *Five Senses* (1963), *Collected Poems 1942-1970* (1971) and *Judith Wright: Collected Poems 1942-1985* (1994). Similarly, Les Murray's output has been prodigious. His *Collected Poems* (1976) has been revised, enlarged and reprinted several times (1991), while his *Collected Poems 1961-2002* (2002) is a comprehensive source. I draw selectively from Malouf's anthologies, *First Things Last* (1980) and *David Malouf: Selected Poems* (1981), and some of his widely celebrated fictions. These are three significant voices in the culture.

I also draw, as is appropriate, on their prose writings, Wright's *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), Murray's *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (1992) and *A Working Forest* (1997), and Malouf's fictions, principally *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Remembering Babylon* (1994) and his short stories like *Dreamstuff* (2001). Selections from each poet are read in turn for comprehension and elaboration. The concluding chapter draws ten conclusions on the theme of transformation.

My selections show critical independence at work. Certainly, poetic images of redemption found in the selections such as the bud, the marriage vows, the warm rain and the compass heart occur as primary expressions of transcendence. The selection reflects my desire to elicit contemporary images from quality poetry. For notable images intensify faith's certainties. Excellent poetry dramatises the human story in unique ways as a cure for life's ills. As selected quality poems from the Australian cultural inheritance, these voices speak to enrich society with calls to responsibility.

## viii. Research problem

The aims are specified, the writer and his framework are identified, and the methodology and data sources are laid out. The study addresses the need to make salvation central, topical, and the powerful expression of faith and service in an increasingly diversified society.

First, it addresses the research problem of contextualising salvation for the emerging virtual culture. Salvation is an aspiration, a critical instance of what the tradition believes, and a classic *topos* of its belief. The emerging visual/virtual culture would benefit from more illuminating examples to resituate the centre of faith in its continual process of enculturation. For, as Tracy notes, believers “need to find new ways of interpreting ourselves and our traditions.”<sup>151</sup> In reply to Jajdeski, this study addresses the need to make salvation central, topical, and a more powerful inspiration for Christian service in an increasingly diversified world. It shows the power of the analogical imagination to visualise faith.

Second, salvation needs to be applied in more striking categories for a new century, one more aware of emergent religious plurality. The contextual theologian needs to image salvation within every cultural context. In ever widening cultural and religious pluralism, faith finds it has fewer points of common contact about the basics of life. The biblical images although widely accessible are not evident in the media-drenched culture, such as Noah’s dove returning with the freshly plucked olive leaf to show the flood waters had abated (Gen 8:11). Poetical images from one’s natural landscape are

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<sup>151</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 8.

visual language and so they offer easily recognisable common reference points within a culture. This poetic imagery does image salvation well, for its significance and applications are immediately recognised in its home culture. In the sunburnt country, poetic images like the bud, the compass heart, the warm rain and the fresh-minted hills readily convey salvation's restorative operations.

Third, the dissertation shows the benefits of this interpretative hermeneutic for faith. It continues the very important interactions between faith and the arts. It shows that word and image may ground faith. Reading poetry for surplus in this religious way is quite possible, because poems usually do not bear a living tradition of interpretation that must be respected or resisted.<sup>152</sup> In fact, all grasps of truth are at base actually interpretations, subject to the same limitations of reader's purpose and point of view. A competent reader makes a reading plausible and justifiable.<sup>153</sup> To justify this point, it is necessary to address the interpretative dilemma posed by Noel Rowe.

#### ix. Recognising an objection (Noel Rowe)

Noel Rowe's 1993 challenge to theology claimed that theology had yet to dialogue with the newer ways of reading literature on terms other than its own. I quote him in full:

An Australian theology which wants to work with literature will need to acknowledge and appreciate the effects of postmodernism in more recent writing, or it will find itself drawn to literature (especially of the forties and fifties) which can be used to affirm its own metaphysical fictions. If this happens, Australian theology will simply reauthorise theology's conventional methods and use literary materials as a new way of sustaining, if not old conclusions, an established way of thinking. It will not, in its own textual procedures, be sufficiently *kenotic* to become incarnate in culture(s).<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Instead of the erotic fancy some take "The Crab Feast" to be (Chapter 5), I read it as a meditation on survival and enhancement of life on earth.

<sup>153</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 124.

<sup>154</sup> Noel Rowe, "Are there really angels in Carlton? Australian literature and theology" *Pacifica* 6 (1993), 164.

Rowe's challenge requires some more systematic responses than this study supplies. It will be addressed at more length in Chapter 5. Now however, since he threw down this gauntlet, much has happened. Contextual theology today is grounded in what were previously marginal issues: liberation theologies, feminist theologies, ecumenical and environmental theologies, and religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. Contextual theologies now deal better with critical literacy issues. Rowe's gauntlet is being addressed here in a limited way by pursuing a middle way, neither compromising theology's interpretative and normative purpose nor moderating literature's inspirational effects. The discussion demonstrates an acceptable modulation in terms of reading purpose. Self-emptied of prescriptive categories and alive with salvation's resonances, I read the focus poems as literary artefacts that offer echoes of transcendence even to readers who do not consider themselves as believers.

At the knife-edge of the problematic is Rowe's challenge, either to choose or to refuse to employ deconstructive methods in reading data. Rowe does require theology to clarify its intentions and sift material honestly. In being *kenotic*, any theological reading of literature needs to shelve, hedge or otherwise delay *a priori* stances, when respecting new data and in addressing events and insights, not on its own terms, but as intertextual realities. Critical Christian readers do not seek to appropriate data for doctrines, but seek echoes of their belief in the poems. They read within a long, public tradition.

Of course, I agree with Rowe that theologians may not seize upon religious references to support predetermined doctrines. An authentic reading shapes responses more inductively along the contours of primary experience. A theological reading and a literary reading are not necessarily co-extensive. The theological responses to follow

plough the same contours as the literary, like Murray walking “into furrows end-on.”<sup>155</sup>

Any differences of approach and language between theological and literary readings need not inhibit this intertextual undertaking. As Kuschel notes:

Text and context [must be allowed to] stand in reciprocal relationship without the context being allowed to manipulate the meaning of the text arbitrarily or the text ‘in itself’ becoming the only criterion of truth.<sup>156</sup>

Of course, in pursuing whispers of the sacred, I am striving to express what is inexpressible. An authentic and responsible reading hermeneutic avoids over-hasty identifications, or worse, undue appropriations. The true-to-life experience criterion grounds it by being responsive to the memories and categories of its reference group, here the faith community. The end results are fair and responsible for conforming to the stated norms already explained.

#### x. Shaping a thesis

The time is right. Ricoeur’s invitation to subjectivity, valuing the interpretative act as having integrity on its own, invites this exploration of salvation. The hermeneutics of caution effectively buffers and monitors that expression of subjectivity, “to mediate the relationship between text and context,”<sup>157</sup> in the hermeneutical circle.

This study presents a poststructuralist re-reading of poetic classics. As in Leland Ryken’s *The Christian Imagination* (2002) and Sherry’s *Images of Redemption* (2003), that read contemporary literature and films to find food for faith, this kind of reading

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<sup>155</sup> Murray, “Towards the Imminent Days” line 50, *Collected Poems 1961-202*, 38.

<sup>156</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *The Poet as Mirror*, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 37.

foregrounds the Christian perspective as its hermeneutical value system. The present work focuses on inciting moments in poetry as possible catalysts for considerations of salvation. In the age of terrorism, salvation is returning as a motif in the popular media.

This study heeds Rowe's call to be openly kenotic. The chief danger in this kind of correlative, interdisciplinary study lies in how well it is done. Heeding his caveat, I address this danger in three ways. The central topic for study, salvation, is a non-denominational theme, indeed not necessarily only a Christian theme, for it features in the three religions of the Book, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It is the preserve of no one faith or Christian denomination. Second, salvation concerns not just religious people but everyone, the whole human race. How humans are to be saved may fairly be a focus of the arts and theology. Just how resolution and judgement comes is an open question that lies only in the progressive story of history.

Third, there is no doctrinal colonialism or apologetics in its honest intentions. My purpose and context are already foregrounded. This study records one person's self-conscious readings of selected poems from the common stock within a foregrounded context and purpose. The hermeneutical interface engages an incarnational version of salvation, applying a mainstream reader's hopes and expectations founded in an informed Christian faith. The voice of the Christian tradition continues to resonate throughout. For these three reasons then, because salvation is of universal concern and application, because no particular version of salvation is prescribed. Because the current writer is open and honest in intent, any accusations of doctrinal imperialism cannot compromise or disqualify this study.



The thesis is that poetic tropes imaging salvation enhance faith's perceptions about life and time. Shaping this thesis is defensible because it finds images of promise, rescue and transformation in poetry that contribute to a wider discourse on salvation. If a poem offers a new analogy, a fresh image of salvation, then the faith community's appreciation is enhanced, renewed and extended. The poetic image may absorb gaps and silences that elude traditional formulations. A poem's fresh, poetic analogy may well be able to provide answers to anomalies in the inferential language of poetic discourse. Re-readings refresh faith understandings upon salvation. Exploring levels of meaning in poetic metaphors enhances faith's certainties. Employing the engaged imagination then, this study reads contemporary poetry for fresh relevancies about the road to glory.

The study holds continuities with the tradition in its traditional belief in God's universal plan for the whole human race, that Jesus' life, death and resurrection uniquely save us, that his word of salvation continues in the church through the ages, that grace comes as a gift, that believers wait for salvation in God's time, that the just will be saved, that wrong-doers are punished, and that sanctification comes with confession, contrition and remission of sins. It shares faith in a creator, a saviour and a Providence brooding over the world. Faith infuses this interpretative process, just as the same community reads new events and experiences from its continuous perspective of belief in Jesus.

Its elements of discontinuity with the tradition are few. I write to complement official statements of its faith, striving to find evidence of the divine in transcendent experiences, immanence in deeper interiority, and the kingdom in just solutions to the world's problems. These chosen poetic images speak from outside the language of the creed to particularise and contextualise actions and trends that serve that kingdom, and

couch them in terms accessible to Australian believers today. The main discontinuity is to extend the language of salvation beyond inherited categories to new applications. The images serve to bridge faith and experience, the revealed and the imagined. As Malouf might say, they dramatise “our terror of being remade.”<sup>158</sup>

#### xi. Outline of thesis and its progress

This discussion argues that, in pursuing hope and transcendence and exploring images of better circumstances, these poets do strive for positive, inclusive, socially worthwhile outcomes in their craft. Because the concept of salvation describes both the right path and mandates its completion, salvation is not an escape from the world, but rather an engagement to act justly and humanely. By imagining selflessness, sacrifice, justice won, health regained and an environment recovered, they do indeed mediate images of salvation to their contemporaries and so, in effect, project this theological theme for a wider public audience.

Chapter 1 outlines the aims, the writer’s viewpoint, his theological frameworks, the methodology, the selected hermeneutic, and addresses the objection by Noel Rowe. Chapter 2, Example One, reads selected poems by Judith Wright. Chapter 3, Example Two, discourses on selected poems by Les Murray. Chapter 4, Example Three, reports my readings of some poems and prose fictions by David Malouf. Chapter 5, reviews the readings and the interrelationships between theology and poetry, showing how salvation can be the horizon of poetry and may be imaged in poetry. Chapter 6, towards a fresher discourse, proposes ten virtues for gaining salvation distilled from the readings.

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<sup>158</sup> Malouf, “Pages from a Novel” *New Poetry* 25.1 (1977), 42.

Having surveyed the dissertation's aims, method, and data sources, the discussion now proceeds. An outline of the three central examples follows.

Table 1: Plan of the dissertation's three central data chapters.

Reading Judith Wright	Reading Les A. Murray	Reading David Malouf
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Introduction</li> <li>ii. Life, themes and reception</li> <li>iii. Identity, death and rescue</li> <li>iv. Ecology, renewal and reintegration</li> <li>v. Simplicity, directionality and reverence</li> <li>vi. Vulnerability, mystery and wonder</li> <li>vii. Relationships, limits and transformation</li> <li>viii. Intuition, the feminine and integrity</li> <li>ix. Redress, responsibility and connectedness</li> <li>x. Thirsting, waiting and readiness</li> <li>xi. Kenosis, integration and acceptance</li> <li>xii. Remembrance, honour and accountability</li> <li>xiii. Gifts, costs and conditions</li> <li>xiv. Recovery, fruitfulness and love</li> <li>xv. Addiction, despair and compassion</li> <li>xvi. Grace, transcendence and continuity</li> <li>xvii. Ten conclusions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Introduction</li> <li>ii. Accessing the numinous</li> <li>iii. Salvation as glory in the natural world</li> <li>iv. Rituals reveal numinous realities</li> <li>v. Salvation involves critical choices</li> <li>vi. Salvation supplies identity and continuity</li> <li>vii. Salvation denotes infinite possibilities</li> <li>viii. Salvation in shared gift</li> <li>ix. Salvation imaged in holiday</li> <li>x. Salvation tests communal beliefs</li> <li>xi. Salvation imaged in solemn promises</li> <li>xii. Salvation imaged in regeneration</li> <li>xiii. Review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Salvation in life narratives</li> <li>ii. Elegy for species</li> <li>iii. Salvation imaged conserving ecology</li> <li>iv. Ethical insight begins salvation</li> <li>v. Intimacy images salvation</li> <li>vi. Transformed attitudes risk transcendence</li> <li>vii. Feasting on crab meat</li> <li>viii. Thematic analysis</li> <li>ix. Salvation discovered in critical experience</li> <li>x. Ethical transcendence</li> <li>xi. Applying the authentic imagination</li> <li>xii. Salvation in shared language</li> <li>xiii. Salvation in acceptance</li> <li>xiv. Salvation entails risks</li> <li>xv. Review</li> </ul>

Table 1: Plan of primary data chapters in the dissertation

Having established these preliminaries, the discussion moves to our first example in Chapter 2, where the poetic data are now read according to the methodologies outlined within the frameworks described. Please immerse yourself for a time under the influence of these poetic spirits of our age, and allow their intensive insights to work their enchantments upon you.

## Chapter 2: Example 1: Reading poems by Judith Wright

### i. Introduction

Now that we have established the hermeneutical aim, method, and context, we segue to read the data from selected Australian poets, the first of whom is Judith Wright, whom we could describe as a radical thinker with a conventional Christian background. In her poetry, salvation is imaged variously such as in “the incessant dreaming,” the “implacable heart,”<sup>159</sup> the compass heart,<sup>160</sup> and cleansing fire in “exorcising verse.”<sup>161</sup>

Because her verse was not for thinking sweet thoughts but for facing hard issues, many images and symbols of salvation occur in Wright’s poetry. One notable orientation that emerges in her poems is still intensely pertinent: that as individuals, families and in society, people imagine their transcendence in better outcomes and resist many negatives. A dominant theme in her work is hope for the spring’s return with the bud as its symbol,<sup>162</sup> and the rain as a harbinger of salvation.

Discussed below, her signature poem, “Woman to Man” (1949), works magnificently by emitting different images of married love: the eyeless labourer, the seed, the unnamed child, the hunter, the arc of flesh, the blood, the head butting, and the blaze of light. This chapter proceeds in a similarly organic way colliding metaphors to create a mural of collage of her images of salvation from various poems, in a broad movement across her public agendas.

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<sup>159</sup> “The Flood IV” line 15, *Judith Wright: Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson 2002, hereafter *C.P.*) 44.

<sup>160</sup> “The compass heart swings seeking home / between the lands of life and death” lines 29, 30 “Spring After War” *C.P.* 33, a wonderfully emblematic image for our study of salvation.

<sup>161</sup> “The Histeridae” line 26, *C.P.*, 259.

<sup>162</sup> Wright, for example, “the upward hand / clenches its bud” “Dark Gift” line 14, *CP*, 71; “we felt the pressure of the bud” in “Song for Winter” line 1 *C.P.* 91; “the buds on the peach tree / new leaf on the fern” in “Two Hundred Miles” lines 15-16 *C.P.* 97; “The bud bound in and folded / round love’s illumination” in “For the Loved and the Unloved” lines 9-10 *C.P.* 125; “Now I bud, and now at last I break / into the truth” “The Wattle-tree” lines 22-23, *C.P.* 142’ “the upward weave of blood / that frayed against the sky in luminous bud” in “Metamorphosis” lines 4-5, *C.P.* 217.

My readings are arranged thematically as tabulated in Table 2. My selections include at least one poem from every one of her eleven anthologies, *The Moving Image* (1946), *Woman to Man* (1949), *The Gateway* (1953), *The Two Fires* (1955), *Birds* (1962), *Five Senses (The Forest)* 1963, *The Other Half* (1966), *Shadow* (1970), *Alive* (1973), *Fourth Quarter* (1976), and *Phantom Dwelling* (1985), to indicate the scope of her writing interests and to be representative of Judith Wright's career. I have found echoes of salvation in a representative spread of her poems, in selections from the *Collected Poems 1942-1982* anthology (2002 edition) as suits my purpose. The planned journey makes internal connections by themes, the better to appreciate the poems' personal emotional intensities and relevancies.

The discussion proceeds in eighteen sections. After (i) this introduction, and (ii) her life, themes and reception, it shows how salvation appears in themes of (iii) identity, death and rescue, (iv) ecology, renewal and reintegration, (v) simplicity, directionality and reverence, (vi) vulnerability, mystery and wonder, (vii) relationships, limits and transformation, (viii) intuition, the feminine and integrity, (ix) redress, responsibility and connectedness, (x) thirsting, waiting and readiness, (xi) kenosis, integration and acceptance, (xii) remembrance, honour and accountability, (xiii) gifts, costs and conditions, (xiv) recovery, faithfulness and love, (xv) addiction, despair and compassion, and (xvi) grace, transcendence and continuity. The chapter closes with (xvii) ten conclusions.

Table 2 below names the poems in their order of appearance with their origin anthologies, to generate some key themes upon salvation.

Poems read in order of appearance with relevant page number in <i>Collected Poems (1994-2002)</i>	Anthology of publication and commentators	Themes
		i. Introduction
“The Flood IV” 44 “Spring After War” 33 “The Histeridae” 259	Wright (1963); Gerard Hall (2000); R.F. Brissenden (2001); Andrew Johnson (2001); Maurice Dunlevy (1977); Charles Higham (1961); David Malouf (1998); Veronica Brady (2001); Richard Glover (1993); R.I. Scott (1956).	ii Life, themes and reception
“The Vision” 262 “For Precision” 129	<i>The Moving Image</i> 1946 <i>The Two Fires</i> 1955 <i>The Shadow</i> 1970	iii. Identity, death and rescue
“The Wattle-tree” 142	<i>Two Fires</i> 1955	iv. Ecology, renewal and integration
“The Eucalypt and the National Character” 362, “Peacock” 161, “Eggs and Nestlings” 162-3, “Currawong” 164, “Thornbills” 165, “Dove-Love” 167, “Migrant Swift” 167-8, “Black Cockatoos” 173, “Silver Terns” 172, “Apostle-Birds” 168, “Magpies” 169, “Lyrebirds” 176 “Oriole, Oriole” 318	<i>Fourth Quarter</i> 1976 <i>Birds</i> 1962	v. Simplicity, directionality and reverence
“For John Shaw Neilson” 235 “The Nautilus” 63	<i>The Other Half</i> 1966 <i>Five Senses (The Forest)</i> 1963	vi. Vulnerability, mystery and wonder
“Night” 49 “Camphor Laurel” 35	<i>Woman to Man</i> 1949 <i>Woman to Man</i> 1949	vii. Relationships, limits and transformations
“Eve to her Daughters” 232	<i>The Other Half</i> 1966	viii. Intuition, the feminine, and integrity
“Trapped Dingo” 9 “Eroded Hills” 81 “Old House” 81 “For a Pastoral Family” 406-10 “Two Dreamtimes” 315	<i>The Moving Image</i> 1946 <i>The Gateway</i> 1953 <i>The Gateway</i> 1953 <i>Phantom Dwelling</i> 1985 <i>Alive</i> 1973	ix. Righting wrongs, responsibility and connectedness
“Waiting” 9 “Dry Storm” 190	<i>The Moving Image</i> 1946 <i>Five Senses</i> 1963	x. Thirsting, waiting, and readiness
“The Gateway” 76	<i>The Gateway</i> 1953	xi. Kenosis, integration and acceptance
“Bullocky” 17	<i>The Moving Image</i> 1946	xii. Remembrance, honour and accountability
“Eli, Eli” 44	<i>Woman to Man</i> 1949	xiii. Gifts, costs and conditions
“Eden” 90 “The Moving Image” 3 “Lion” 86 “Woman to Man” 27	<i>The Gateway</i> 1953 <i>The Moving Image</i> 1946 <i>The Gateway</i> 1953 <i>Woman to Man</i> (1949)	xiv. Recovery, fruitfulness and love
“Metho Drinker” 51	<i>Woman to Man</i> (1949)	xv. Addiction, statistics and compassion
“Grace” 331	<i>Alive</i> 1973	xvi. Grace, transcendence and continuity
39 poems	11 anthologies	14 themes

Table 2: The plan of Chapter 2. Some other poems are quoted throughout the dissertation.

## ii. Life, themes and reception

A short overview of Wright's life and themes begins the discussion, to contextualise her work and establish a consciousness of the already stated criterion to be true to the spirit of the poet when dealing with themes major in her work as a whole.

Of her own trade, Judith Wright wrote that a poet is "arranging and rearranging bright scraps of experience into different shapes and patterns in an attempt to make a new kind of unity and meaning."<sup>163</sup> She longed for radiance in what she considered an increasingly spiritless age. Her poems are examples of language artfully escaping from the demands of conventional expectations. Her lyric naturalism successfully challenged contemporary gender ideologies that were inextricably dominating Australian life. Indeed, her work grounded that much larger political rhetoric that mediates human rights to us today. She saw her life as work recovering these rights for more social unity and meaning in life.

Hall comments how Wright's poetry celebrates the Australian physical landscape, consisting of "tree-frog and dingo, rainforest and sea coast, stark cliffs and eroded hills, bushfire and flood, dust and drought, wind and rain, flame-tree and cicadas, gum tree and cyclone."<sup>164</sup> Each has its distinctive oral/aural communication to make; each has its poetic and phonological identity with ready resonances to the ear in Australia's collective memory. Distinctively, her poetry images Australian landscapes. To speak of humanity's thirst<sup>165</sup> in a dry land then has an elemental resonance. Collectively then, her poetic images bear multiple dimensions: the physical, the metaphorical and the metaphysical. Using natural images shows her assimilated sensibility for reading the world with a particular sense of the coherence of things.

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<sup>163</sup> Judith Wright, Introduction to *Australian Poets: Judith Wright* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), vii. Also quoted in Maurice Dunlevy, "Judith Wright: Bard of her Tribe" *Literary Perspectives* (Melbourne: Cheval, 1977), 21.

<sup>164</sup> Gerard V. Hall, "Australian poet and prophet (1915-2000)" *National Outlook*. (November 2000). 26 [on-line] available: [www.acu.edu.au/theology/Judith.htm](http://www.acu.edu.au/theology/Judith.htm) [2003 March 25].

<sup>165</sup> Wright, "the world's thirst," in "Seven Songs from a Journey IV The Prospector" line 16, *C.P.*, 137.

Her poems explore dialectics within the culture. They show her un-selfconscious pride in being Australian, and “a sense at once of the fundamental community of common humanity to which we all belong.”<sup>166</sup> Her evident passion and celebration of Australian life and the land justifies the fair claim that, “Hope and Wright were instrumental in shaping Australian literary life.”<sup>167</sup> Before her death in 2000, Wright had “became a public poet of considerable power.”<sup>168</sup> Higham’s 1961 review of her work began with the already polished claim that,

No poet in Australia has a greater reputation inside and outside the literary world than Judith Wright, and her name is respected in overseas countries where many of her *confrères* are unknown . . . The appeal of her work is rich, immediate and wide.<sup>169</sup>

Her moral leadership won her many tributes. In his 1998 Boyer Lecture, “The Making of Australian Consciousness,” fellow poet David Malouf noted Wright’s shift in forming national consciousness about the natural environment as her great achievement:

She points out that ‘except for the wattle . . . there is very little mention of trees, flowers and birds by name or by recognisable description in Australian verse during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.’ This is not because they were not there in the landscape, to be seen and appreciated, but because there was as yet no place for them in the world of verse. The associations had not yet been found that would allow them entry there. Currawong and banksia carried no charge of emotion like ‘nightingale’ or ‘rose’.<sup>170</sup>

Wright nurtured the national consciousness over four decades in the twentieth century, through different stages of Australia’s growth into its more mature identity as a nation. More pertinently, Wright could be termed a nature poet with the insight of a mystic. For

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<sup>166</sup> R. F. Brissenden, “The Poetry of Judith Wright” *Meanjin* 54 (spring 1953), 258.

<sup>167</sup> Andrew Johnson reviewing: “That Fatal Song: A Tribute to Judith Wright and A.D. Hope, Southerly, Volume 61, Number 1, 2001.” *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*. (Melbourne: Monash University, 22 August 2001) [on-line] available:

[www.arts.monash.edu.au/others/colloquy/archives/Issue20Five/johnson2/](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/others/colloquy/archives/Issue20Five/johnson2/) [2003 March 21].

<sup>168</sup> Maurice Dunlevy, “Bard of Her Tribe” *Literary Perspectives* (Melbourne: Cheval, 1977), 22.

<sup>169</sup> Charles Higham, “Judith Wright’s Vision” *Quadrant* 19 (Winter, 1961), 33-41.

<sup>170</sup> David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1998), 38 [on-line] available: [www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/98boyers2.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/98boyers2.htm) [2003 April 7].



instance, her *Five Senses (the Forest)* (1963) featured topical meditations on the exploitation of and lost opportunities for establishing continuities with the natural environment. It contains wonderful vignettes of detail, mystery, philosophical speculation and evocations for a better way of treating the natural world. Her insight is always fresh and is the work of a careful distillation of experience.

### iii. Identity, death and regeneration

Pre-eminently, Wright showed that poetry is a unique way of being and utterance. Using poetry's transformative modalities, she addressed her quite practical Australian audience. In her invocation of ultimate frameworks, I find many interpretative spaces to refer to salvation. For Wright, hope and desire were not cruel tricks or ironic habits when she explored questions of intimacy, identity, death and rebirth.

Her major themes explore the dualities that transform social patterns into social transformations. She recognised, as Noel Rowe says, that "theological language is more contested than privileged."<sup>171</sup> Understandably avoiding doctrinal terms in her desire to reach the mainstream, Wright nonetheless uses Judaeo-Christian references and theological terms like grace, eternity and redemption. Her themes include the relentless passage of time with the recurring use of spring and autumn, light and shade, and good and evil.<sup>172</sup> In various poems, she contrasts male thinking with female knowing and intuition, for example, "The compass heart swings seeking home / between the lands of life and death."<sup>173</sup> These tensions and oppositions are the catalysts for imaging the social changes she urged.

Wright's mindscape suggests a meaningful coherence in the world, "some Parmenidean

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<sup>171</sup> Noel Michael Rowe's words here on James McAuley readily apply to Wright too. Noel Rowe, "The Will of the Poem" *Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation* (The University of Sydney 1988), 132.

<sup>172</sup> Richard Glover, "World Without Words" *The Age Good Weekend* 26 June 1993, 39.

<sup>173</sup> "Spring After War" 29, *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, 33, *Half a Lifetime*, 252.

constancy”<sup>174</sup> as she put it. Poets are not philosophers but, instead, try “to crystallize moments of emotional perception, and to make them clear and significant to every man (sic).”<sup>175</sup> One phrase in particular, “joins all, gives all a meaning, makes all whole,”<sup>176</sup> typifies her framework of connectedness for seeking coherences in the regenerative cycle of the seasons. She brings dualities together on a metaphysical note, such as when she sees all things culminating, or “forming into one chord.”<sup>177</sup> I connect these metaphysical coherences with the theological coherence that is salvation.

Her finest poems in *Woman to Man* (1949) and *The Gateway* (1953) have this genuinely metaphysical appeal, and they are, moreover, expressed with a disciplined clarity that is not common in modern poetry.<sup>178</sup> In her compressed comprehensions, she grasps the antinomies of birth and death, growth and decay, love and loneliness, union and isolation. In her best work, this effort results in a tension of ideas and an intensity of feeling that suggests a coherent universe. That vision of resolution, of salvation appears strongly in these lines written late in life: “I sit here now intent / on poetry’s ancient vow to celebrate lovelong / life’s wholeness, spring’s return, the flesh’s tune.”<sup>179</sup>

Because her poetic visions often have a philosophic ring to them, she offers deeper relatedness with life and the environment. As a public poet, she accesses these dimensions with accessible metaphors from everyday experience, like “the uncompleted heart.”<sup>180</sup> Exploiting the ambiguities in life’s paradoxes, her interrogations signal a more salvific sensibility about exciting possibilities beyond conventional explanations, like “the undreamed-of rain.”<sup>181</sup> She shares that same sense of mystery that Rahner points to in the essential need to be open to listen, and to learn to listen in truth and love.

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<sup>174</sup> Scott, R.I., “Judith Wright’s World-View” *Southerly Number Four*, (1956), 189.

<sup>175</sup> Scott, *World-View*, 193.

<sup>176</sup> “For Precision” line 18, Judith Wright, *The Two Fires* (1955), *C.P.*, 129.

<sup>177</sup> “For Precision” line 13, in *The Two Fires* (1955), *C.P.*, 129.

<sup>178</sup> Brissenden, “Judith Wright,” 260.

<sup>179</sup> “Unpacking Books” lines 25-27, *C.P.*, 388.

<sup>180</sup> “Spring After War” line 29, *C.P.*, 33.

<sup>181</sup> “Rain at Night” line 8, *C.P.*, 89.

Her intellectual framework should certainly be considered consistent with the Christian religion, for it invites considerations of transcendences, when religion is defined as,

a mode of awareness that evokes a transcendence of other transcendences, that is, it prompts a way of attending to human experience as if from a perspective beyond our lifeworld.<sup>182</sup>

This metaphysics of rescue culminates in her term, “the spring’s return.”<sup>183</sup> Her celebration of life’s recurring wholeness and fertility suggest the real possibilities of transcendence. This metaphysical framework undergirds her attitudes in the tropes, intuitions, ethics and convictions that motivate, enliven and create images prophetic of salvation. Wright’s persistent rejection of materialism, greed, violence, exploitation and oppression shows how her coherent framework was driven by an ethical vector, arguing for justice towards an indigenous treaty (still unrealised in this new century) and a practical respect for the natural environment.

This pre-eminently national poet wrote how she was haunted by the spectre of death, and its shadows, the dualities of time and eternity, flesh and spirit, decay and regeneration, and love and neglect. She could envisage humans as specks in time, within the moving image of eternity, “moving in its web of time and harm.”<sup>184</sup> Her first and best anthology, *The Moving Image* (1946), explores love and life’s evanescence, and time and eternity. With intimations of salvation’s coherence, *The Moving Image* evokes the cave allegory in Plato’s *Timaeus*.<sup>185</sup> Many of its poems offer great appeal for mulling over the same philosophical point in successive poems.<sup>186</sup> While discrete themes emerge in the analysis to come, they are interrelated in her embodied spirituality.

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<sup>182</sup> Martin Marty, “What role should religion play in public life?” address at The Public Religion Project Symposium, Minneapolis, 28 April 1998 quoted by Jack A. Hill in “Images of religion in South Pacific fiction: an interpretation of *Pouliuli*” *Literature and Theology* 17 No 2 (June 2003), 187.

<sup>183</sup> “Unpacking Books” lines 25-27, *C.P.*, 388.

<sup>184</sup> “The Twins,” line 12, *C.P.*, 40.

<sup>185</sup> See also Plato’s *Republic*, Book VII. 514 a–c, to 521 a–e.

<sup>186</sup> Higham, *Vision*, 37.

Her intellectual framework speaks from within the broadly Christian metaphysical framework.<sup>187</sup> Her intimations upon the human search for meaning echo a Christian worldview. Her poem in tribute to her husband, the philosopher J. P. McKinney, "The Vision," suggests some transcendence for life: "The maze we travel has indeed its centre. / There is a source to which all time's returned."<sup>188</sup> Wright explored Reason and Unreason in love, in humankind's relationships with the environment, and in the vaguely Buddhist beliefs of the later poems.<sup>189</sup> Her images refresh salvation for our times.

Some may perceive an apocalyptic element in her poetry's universal searching: "Time seeks eternity. The flesh continually works towards its ending," and "brief is the warm day / wherein we have our home,"<sup>190</sup> and again, "O time that brings us harm."<sup>191</sup> Echoes of the traditional liturgical *Dies Irae* inform "The Flood":

Lord, in this thy Day  
Remember my good deeds. Let the others be washed away,  
but I have done no harm. Remember my good deeds.  
*Laus, Domine. Salve me.*<sup>192</sup>

Memorable phrasings, like "a million images of the Sun, My God,"<sup>193</sup> offer insightful possibilities that resonate with the directional consciousness that reads salvation.

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<sup>187</sup> "She brought a particular perspective to the world of people, things, ideas and values, that made her who she was. 'Essentially Judith Wright's self has been oppositional. She has played a match against the current of the times, against technology and the destruction of the environment, against war and its violations of our common humanity and against the historical amnesia that condemns the past and the original inhabitants of this country to oblivion . . . reminding us of 'the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death, and love.' . . . She lived her own life, never the one others posited for her, and she kept her own way of 'looking aslant on the world', to borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson." Veronica Brady, "Judith Wright's Biography: A Delicate Balance between Trespass and Honour" [on-line] available: [www.nla.gov.au/events/doclife/brady.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/events/doclife/brady.html) [2004 October 20].

<sup>188</sup> "The Vision" verse 8, *C.P.*, 263.

<sup>189</sup> Consciousness of Asian religions grew during the Vietnam conflict: "'All is fire,' said the Buddha, 'all-'" in "Fire Sermon" *C.P.*, 277.

<sup>190</sup> "Night" lines 19-20, *C.P.*, 49.

<sup>191</sup> "The Bushfire" *C.P.*, 47.

<sup>192</sup> "The Flood III," 28-31, *C.P.*, 43.

<sup>193</sup> "The Wattle-tree" line 24, *C.P.*, 142.

#### iv. Ecology, renewal and continuity

Notably, Wright connects with the ecology of the body. She notes how the cycle of the seasons images change and renewal in the natural world. The universal cycle of growth, decay and regeneration has inevitably become a powerful template for much of her thinking. The four seasons contain all the colours of the rainbow, all the possibilities for change, and directionality towards sustaining and increasing life. Such a cycle images rescue, re-growth, regeneration and endless transformation as nature's way. Stasis, regression, exploitation, hopelessness, despair, misery and heartlessness lead nowhere useful or meaningful. Wright held that entropy and meaninglessness is not life's plan; death also involves new life and transformation. In this insight, she integrates the body, nature and ecology in one whole context for salvation.

Pertinently, Schillebeeckx's first constant considers it is self-evident that we humans are in undeniable "relationship to human corporeality, nature and the ecological environment." Our corporality is best demonstrated in the natural environment, in all its created wonder, moods and destruction. In its very dynamics, creation itself presents images of its own directionality and fulfilment, that is, towards its preservation and enduring survival. Wright led the nation with these deeply felt ecological concerns. Her poem, "The Wattle Tree" (Appendix 1), argues that a viable future, that is, salvation for the planet and its inhabitants, is won only in finding a respectful relationship with the natural environment.

It seems obvious that to be at one with the environment, that humans ought to relate to the planet's attempts to recover life. Salvation patterns those concerns for life because, "God's covenant . . . intends justice and right-relatedness in creation."<sup>194</sup> Faith locates humankind within God's enduring act of creation, providence and salvation.

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<sup>194</sup> J. W. Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 195-6.

Wright's poetical celebration of Australian flora and fauna remain as her outstanding achievement. One poem in particular builds on history and draws out the cultural inheritance. The mid-nineteenth poet Adam Lindsay Gordon view of Australia "as a land of 'scentless blossoms' and 'songless birds' prevailed."<sup>195</sup> In 1871, the Australian Natives Association led by A. J. Campbell had begun a campaign to establish a national floral emblem. This movement paralleled the growth of a national consciousness through Federation. It strove to reverse the view that Australian birds, animals and plants were inferior to the European ones.

The wattle's irresistible prodigality images salvation's superabundance. Wright's poems celebrating the wattle focused Australia's strong and enduring symbol of itself. Thus, after a long process of experimentation and discovery, the Golden Wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*, became the national floral emblem in 1988. The wattle was justified, being found in all colonies (prevalence), its bark was used in tanning hides (commercial value), and it offered a distinctive, bright beauty (aesthetics). Its prodigality and golden prosperity were symbolic of the hopeful spirit of the emerging nation. Aboriginal people have a strong traditional relationship with a number of wattle species, which they used for food, fuel, medicine and various woodcrafts.<sup>196</sup> The nation's green and gold sporting colours are based on the wattle's colours.<sup>197</sup> I consider the distinctive aroma of the wattle is salvation's own,<sup>198</sup> for its prevalent pungency conveys salvation's pervasiveness and acerbic prodigality. As Les Murray says, "The Day of our peace will need a native / herb that out-savours rosemary."<sup>199</sup> It is a symbol of national solidarity.

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<sup>195</sup> Libby Robin, *Nationalising Nature: Wattle Days in Australia* [on-line] available: [cres.anu.edu.au/people/wattle-day.pdf](http://cres.anu.edu.au/people/wattle-day.pdf) [2003 May 8], page 4.

<sup>196</sup> Rod Panter, "Australia's Wattle Day" *Current Issues Brief 1 1995-96* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library 19 August 1997) [on-line] available: [www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/1995-96/96cib1.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/1995-96/96cib1.htm) [2006 January 16].

<sup>197</sup> Anne Boden, *Floral Emblems of Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 7.

<sup>198</sup> Powerful evocations stem from the sense of smell. Murray's "Visiting Anzac [Cove] in the Year of Metrication" plays on the powerful associations with scrub and rosemary, lines 4, 12, 23, 24, 36, 60, 72, and 84 in *Collected Poems 1961-2002* pp. 119-122, cf. Ophelia's rosemary for remembrance *Hamlet* IV. 5. 176.

<sup>199</sup> Murray, "Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication" lines 59-60, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 121.

The use of the wattle at funerals in the aftermath of the Bali bombings (2002) and since is a contemporary reassertion of the wattle's power as a national symbol.

Wright's poem, "The Wattle-tree" (1955),<sup>200</sup> is a meditation on growth, mortality and identity. The poet reminds that the wattle-tree is composed of the four basic elements in medieval philosophy, and so combines four truths in one. In its growth and abundance, the tree images "one great word of gold." Thus, wishing to learn that word, the poet exalts its symbolism, "For that word makes immortal what would wordless die." The poet celebrates the permanence of the word, because this tree "welds love and time into the seed" of eternal renewal. Combining all basic elements, the tree recombines natural elements to produce its blaze of gold, nature's richest colour. Its symbolism continues to resonate. Gold saved the nation in the gold rushes of the 1850s. In the beauty of this native flora, Wright gave Australia an instantly recognisable image of the life cycle, as an epitome of its history and enduring symbol of religious transformation.

One phrase here in particular appeals: "Now I bud, and now at last I break / into the truth."<sup>201</sup> Wright uses the image of the bud in many poems for example: "the upward weave of blood / that frayed against the sky in luminous bud,"<sup>202</sup> "the upward hand / clenches its bud,"<sup>203</sup> "we felt the pressure of the bud,"<sup>204</sup> "the buds on the peach tree / new leaf on the fern,"<sup>205</sup> and "the bud bound in and folded / round love's illumination."<sup>206</sup> This motif of regeneration clearly displays the theme of salvation.

So a primary image of salvation is the bud. The bud is an "elemental" judgment

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<sup>200</sup> Wright, *C.P.*, 142. Parallel readings with "Camphor Laurel" 35, "The Cedars" 74, "Flame-tree" 95, "Flame-tree in a Quarry" 60, "The Forest Path" 111, "Metamorphosis" 217, and "Orange Tree" 87 make for most insightful complementarities here. See my article: "We are turned into a great tree: Judith Wright's strange word about trees" *Australian Ejournal of Theology* Issue 7 Pentecost 2006 edition [on-line] available: [dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_7/greg.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/greg.htm) [7 June 2006].

<sup>201</sup> "The Wattle-tree" lines 22-23, *C.P.*, 142.

<sup>202</sup> "Metamorphosis" lines 4-5, *C.P.*, 217.

<sup>203</sup> "Dark Gift" line 14, *CP*, 71.

<sup>204</sup> "Song for Winter" line 1 *C.P.* 91.

<sup>205</sup> "Two Hundred Miles" lines 15-16, *C.P.* 97.

<sup>206</sup> "For the Loved and the Unloved" lines 9-10, *C.P.* 125.

confirming that conditions for its existence agree. The bud's appearance shows the chemistry of minerals, soil and water is right, for they interact cooperatively, productively. The bud proves that the forces and conditions concur for life to occur. As a *chairo*s opportunity, the bud fixes a moment in the cycle of the seasons, indeed in time, when the bud bears forth life. The bud is also *charis*, grace, showing that all previous work was worthwhile, that bushfire was not disaster, that seeding and watering were not futile. While the bud images the fruit of labour and the work of human hands, it has its own independent mystery and story to unfold. It sends a silent signal from mystery. The bud depicts judgment because it fruits an unspoken design.

The bud's arrival promises much more. Its arrival decrees that things will be different forthwith. Where there was dry ash, now there is juicy life; where there was monochrome sameness, now there is to be variety; where there was retreat, now there is glory. The bud is proof that the waste of ashes can power up again. The bud is a clean break into new space. Buds never bloom alone. Buds presage a new agreement with the earth, a new concert of renewed energies that together rebuild the bush. Lastly, as the buds shoot forth, they show that what was tentative is confirmed, that the rhythm of life is retrieved. In their plenty, buds persist in dark and rain, and feed off the thunder, as it were. Marvellously, the bud betokens ecology, renewal and continuity.

Having passed through the growth stages of bud to blossom, analogously the poet has a voice to speak life's truths. Just as the tree in its renewal is true to its nature, "is forever tree," so she prays that in her vocation as a poet she can ultimately be true to herself, to speak the truth "into a million images of the Sun, my God" (line 24). Thus, just as the wattle-tree is child of the Sun, the poet's truth is fruit of, and images that greater truth, her God who gives life.

Consequently, the wattle tree images its origin sun in several ways. First, in its participation in the universal work of continuing creation, the wattle combines the four basic elements of creation (earth, air fire and water) in one mysterious process of



assimilation and growth. Second, its blossom's prodigality reflects the sun's superabundance, "the tree trembled with its flood"(19). The Golden Wattle is distinctive for its blaze of colour and fresh aroma:

The brilliant yellow, fragrant flowers of Golden Wattle make it a popular garden plant. The [Golden Wattle's] specific name *pycnantha* from the Greek 'pyknos', meaning 'dense', and 'anthos', meaning 'a flower', refers to the dense clusters of flowers. In spring large fluffy golden-yellow flower heads with up to eighty minute sweetly scented flowers provide a vivid contrast with the foliage.<sup>207</sup>

Thus, golden wattle images or reflects the golden glory of its origin energy, the cascading light of the sun. It symbolizes the divine saviour's universal prodigality.

Third, Golden Wattle flowers have been used in perfume making and its seeds in cooking. Its pungent, natural aroma is instantly distinctive and appealing. In September, its aromatic perfume pervades the landscape, presaging the arrival of spring and identifying itself as its harbinger and emblem of rejuvenation. Fourth,

*Acacia pycnantha* regenerates freely after fires, which usually kill the parent plants but stimulates the germination of seeds stored in the soil if rain follows soon after. Regeneration may produce dense thickets in forests and woodlands and along roadsides.<sup>208</sup>

This power of unaided and resilient regeneration more generally images the forces of renewal in the universe. The wattle is an inspiring image of regeneration and renewal in the sunburnt country, and a recurring image of its natural salvation.

The poet successfully transfers these restorative processes to the poetic process as voicing truth in her poetry, when in her mature years she reflected she had followed the natural progression from experience to wisdom. The poet views her capacity to voice

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<sup>207</sup> Botanical description from the Australian National Botanic Gardens site [on-line] available: [www.anbg.gov.au/emblems/aust.emblem.html](http://www.anbg.gov.au/emblems/aust.emblem.html) [2003 May 08].

<sup>208</sup> Australian National Botanic Gardens website.

truth because poetry is a work of finding truth, of finding God. Similarly, as a meditation on the laws and beauty of the physical creation, poetry of nature is a path to read the mind of its Maker. In creation, God is imaged in some millionth degree in the aspirations of her poetry. “The Wattle Tree” finishes with a personal reflection, saying that like the wattle tree, in her song, in her voice as a poet, she “makes” her immortality. The wattle’s resilience and glorious beauty analogises all of Wright’s poetry.

As Wright shows, the wattle tree integrates continuity, nature and ecology in one wonderful symbol of glory. Both in its reliable regeneration after bushfire and its glorious prodigality suggest it is a powerful image of salvation for giving fresh identity. Its acerbic aroma denotes salvation’s cleansing finality. By contesting inadequate public policies and emblematising national unity in the wattle, Wright’s poem imaged survival and revival. She made a retrieval of integration, of salvation, seem possible in the Great South Land, despite what the sand mining, bulldozers and land developers had done to it thus far.

#### v. Simplicity, directionality and reverence

Salvation contests what is inadequate. Hence, ironic insights appear in her *Birds* anthology (1962). This distinctive collection features a range of images of hope, ranging from sympathetic anthropomorphisms, acute and acerbic observations, feminine sensitivity, whimsy, personal favour, and wonder and regret. These observations crystallised a turn towards feminine wisdom, “in a tremendous empowerment and resurgence of the feminine.”<sup>209</sup> Across many decades, Wright’s intelligent discontent

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<sup>209</sup> Tarnas explains: “It’s visible not only in feminism itself — in the empowerment of women and the new sense of the importance of feminine values in both men and women — but also in a whole new sensibility of the interconnectedness of all life — the ecological identity, the sense that my self is not me as a human being, but that I am rooted in a whole matrix that includes all

tested the nation's growing prosperity with a deeper wisdom about the earth's destiny born in a profound respect for nature. Wright's intelligent discontent about misguided commercial and industrial practices modelled humans living *in* nature and in essential relationship *with* her. Respecting nature in its fauna and flora is the mature vision Wright achieved in her *Birds* anthology.<sup>210</sup>

Wright saw that choices, decisions and consequences for the earth depend on prevailing views of nature. If we view the planet as a living organism needing nourishment, respect and time, as in Lovelock's *Gaia*,<sup>211</sup> any narrow-minded possessiveness good-for-the-few utilitarian choices entail win-loss consequences, whereas good-for-all decisions as co-tenants of the planet bring win-win outcomes. Without being grounded in this right relationship of respect, reading poems about the land and nature would be shallow romanticism misrepresenting, or worse, silently justifying exploitation.

To express this right relationship, Wright's bird poems have great appeal especially then when Australian fauna and flora was being celebrated at last in the nation's coming of age. In *Birds*, Wright shows the appeal and the value of the simplicity to be found in Australian fauna. In her world, nature is not all David Attenborough seriousness, showing nature raw in tooth and claw. Her inquiring and open-minded amusement, wonder, delight and ironic edge finds much beauty, simplicity and perpetual rejuvenation in nature to contest the foolish rush into what she portrayed as a denaturalised, dehumanising future in Australia's emerging cities. This anthology offers many images of salvation: resilience, serenity, fear, ambiguity, disconnectedness, the

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of nature, the planet, the cosmos itself." Scott London, *Understanding our moment in history: An interview with Richard Tarnas* [on-line] available: [www.scottlondon.com/interviews/tarnas.html](http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/tarnas.html) [2006 July 04].

<sup>210</sup> *C.P.*, 86.

<sup>211</sup> James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 1987), 9.

tragic in falling short, and the call for sympathy in society. Her attempts to whet the social conscience of the nation, and to reaffirm mystery and reverence for nature are primary attitudes for social redemptions.

For instance, the salutary virtue of the birds' lives is simplicity: they do not pretend or intend to be more than they are or can be. That is an insight of worth for humankind, as Wright shows in the prototypical poem, "Birds" (1953). The poem's propositional declaration in line 5: "all are what bird is and do not reach beyond the bird" is echoed again in line 10: "all these are as birds are and good for birds to do."<sup>212</sup> This lesson about the meaning of existence concludes with a wish, nay a prayer, for similar simplicity: "Be simple to myself as the bird is to the bird." A Christian reading concurs that salvation comes only in living within one's limits, having no more ambition than nature defines. Lest it be misunderstood, the poet wishes to be heard saying that truthful simplicity and clear recognition of limits in dealings with nature are virtues of salvation.

Like angels of mercy, her birds are emblematic of God's local action, favour and deliverance. Birds abound in our literary and religious culture. The Noah story celebrated the dove and the raven as harbingers of safety at the end of the Flood. The dove appeared at Jesus' Baptism as a sign of God's favour. Jesus' parables extolled the birds for even they are important to God; birds do not gather or store in barns, and birds are not anxious because they trust God. Keats' nightingale, Shelley's skylark and Coleridge's albatross are all powerful symbols of salvation and rescue, from loneliness, insensibility and death. Birds pose quite a challenge to a writer by their very otherness

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<sup>212</sup> "Birds" lines 5, 10, *C.P.*, 86, from *The Gateway* (1953).

and difference from humans.<sup>213</sup> Yet Wright evoked a shared imaginative response to them in her own land to value, conserve and learn from them.

Wright's poems on birds are probably the most important contribution she made to world literature. Her many birds demonstrate ethical relevance as creatures in their own right by demonstrating nature's amazing resilience and directionality. For birds do demonstrate an enviable logic in building their habitats and brooding young with an almost anthropological feeling and longing for life. Their variety and dispositions image salvation's superabundance and directionality.

The thirty poems in *Birds*<sup>214</sup> record many and various emotions: wonder, enchantment, embarrassment, insight, and at times irony. Wright finds delight when she relates to the natural species in their natural behaviours and in their lives' directionality. In "Peacock," she is critical of the absent aldermen who deny dignity to the ever-beautiful peacock in its dirty cage. Despite being trapped there for the idle entertainment of human eyes, ever-resistant and Phoenix-like, nature rises above it all, as she muses: "Love clothes him still, in spite of all."<sup>215</sup> Her anthropomorphism was not just idle whimsy or heavy-handed ethical mandating; her overall purpose was to whet a social conscience about the natural environment. In her passion for it, an ironic edge emerged at times to lend bite to her conservation agendas.

Her imaginary conversations with birds personalise this vision. Her address to the

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<sup>213</sup> ABC Radio National, *Features* [on-line] available: [www.abc.net.au/religion/features/birds.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/features/birds.htm) [2003 April 7].

<sup>214</sup> Wright, *C.P.*, 161-181.

<sup>215</sup> "Peacock" line 12, *C.P.* 161.

currawong, that “bold, cruel and melodious bird”<sup>216</sup> picks up the ambiguities of wonder and the attendant fear that wonder evokes. Her fear of treachery in the lore of the jungle among the forest’s “spirits of song” evokes the understandable prayer for the thornbills that,

Oh let no enemies  
drink the quick wine of blood  
that leaps in their pulse of praise.<sup>217</sup>

In her exercise of the authentic imagination, Wright found an enhanced awareness of self and remembered event in her addresses to the kite, egrets, and winter kestrel. Clear memories of observations fuse their locations and her identity in enduring poetic images.

The birds present guides for serenity, ambiguity, wonder, elegance and identity. Wright found sheer serenity in the contemplation of perfect birds eggs and in their productivity. Nature decrees that after embryonic peace comes the noisy, demanding younglings:

and perfect as the grey nest’s round  
three frail and powered eggs I found . . .  
the shapeless furies come to be  
from shape’s most pure serenity.<sup>218</sup>

The birds’ eggs’ parabolic elegance becomes a powerful image of the patterned human transfiguration into *imago Dei* mandating salvation. In anthropomorphising the lives of birds, readers sense hope and optimism, responsibility, accountability and fruition.

One unfortunate event shows the risks in finding salvation. Wright’s sympathetic eye

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<sup>216</sup> “Currawong” line 19, *C.P.*, 164.

<sup>217</sup> “Thornbills” lines 1-13, *C.P.*, 165.

<sup>218</sup> “Eggs and Nestlings” lines 7-8, 15-16, *C.P.* 162-3. The reader might well read Wright’s own account of the misunderstood phrase, the “folly of spring,” in her discussion of and admiration for John Shaw Neilson’s poetry in her own *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965), Ch viii, especially p. 123.

for tragedy appears to great effect when coming upon the “wreckage” of a migrant swift in its death throes. Having braved thousands of miles without food and in the wastage of its own body weight, it had apparently fallen to the earth with a snapped wing exhausted and cut out of life just as it was within sight of its rightful Eden:

He trusted all to air . . .  
 air’s creatures fed him.  
 once fallen, there’s no saving / . . . [In this wreckage his]  
 head still strove to rise  
 and turn towards the lost impossible spring.<sup>219</sup>

The migrant swift is a strong image of paradise lost, for falling short of its destiny through sheer exhaustion and misadventure. Here, Wright invokes the value of sympathy for the battler who has finally lost what he struggled to attain.

In “Migrant Swift,” her acute nostalgia for “the lost impossible spring,”<sup>220</sup> is a cameo of tenderness and empathy. In an era when she felt traditional values were being compromised, the birds’ amazing resilience and directionality offer ready models for human happiness because theirs was a natural pattern. By exploring this negative event, his simple poem images the risks in seeking fulfilment. By implication, Australia would be better off to be mindful of ethical constants for the sake of its own salvation. Human disconnectedness with our corporality and the natural world could be remedied if we learned why these birds’ sacrifice themselves for the lives of their brood.<sup>221</sup>

We learn much about salvation from Wright, to whom bird behaviour seemed to be

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<sup>219</sup> “Migrant Swift” lines 6, 7, 12, 13, *C.P.*, 167-8.

<sup>220</sup> “Migrant Swift” line 13, *C.P.*, 168.

<sup>221</sup> I edit this chapter in the hours following the execution of drug trafficker Van Nguyen in Singapore that raised so much publicity in Australia about capital punishment.

more self-possessed than human behaviour. Good news is dramatised in “Pelicans,”<sup>222</sup> where “pelicans rock together” in such a pithy image for survival, with the anachronistic pun. This bald observation clinches something of Wright’s humour, wit and ethical observations in the *Birds* anthology. Her irony reinforces the same point; human apostles bring good news, but Apostle-birds were not. Their “clannish”<sup>223</sup> behaviour elicited the wish, “we were glad when they flew away.”

On the other hand, despite all their greediness, the magpies’ carolling song is most welcome: “For each is born with such a throat / as thanks his God with every note.”<sup>224</sup> With its strong appealing rhyme, clear imagery and strong contrasts, this poem has understandably become a fixture in children’s anthologies. Her insights celebrate newness and non-violence. Les Murray’s later *Translations from the Natural World* (1992) continues these transpositions.

Lastly, salvation is an affair of conscience, an intuition of the compass heart, in a movement to mystery. Wright’s best word was reserved for the emblematic lyrebirds, those ultimate mimics and most elusive of the species. To them, she admitted her own omission in not seeking out these secret bower birds who were elusively further on over the range. Wisely, even religiously letting things be, she concludes that:

Some things ought to be left secret, alone;  
some things – birds like walking fables –  
ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart.<sup>225</sup>

As life is a journey from mystery to mystery, it deserves our reverence.

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<sup>222</sup> *C.P.*, 171.

<sup>223</sup> “Apostle-Birds” lines 16-17, *C.P.*, 168.

<sup>224</sup> “Magpies” lines 13-14, *C.P.*, 169.

<sup>225</sup> “Lyrebirds” lines 19-21, *C.P.*, 176.



Wright continued these connections with the rhythms of the land in her later anthology, *Alive* (1973). To demonstrate her insightful vulnerability, I read two poems from it in particular to close this discussion on respecting nature and the land, the very significant “Two Dreamtimes” and “Oriole, Oriole.” In the first, Wright pays tribute to her friend who later took the name Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Wright honours her as a friend and poet and her aboriginal people. She decries the demise of their two dreamtimes, to observe that, “we too have lost our dreaming”,<sup>226</sup> that is to say, that the European Australians too have lost any sense of connection with the land, less connected with her “dreaming blood”,<sup>227</sup> of the hot-blooded poet of earlier times. That earlier time was “the easy Eden-dreamtime then / in a country of birds and trees.”<sup>228</sup> Wright’s own now-faded dreamtime featured girl-like simple pleasures, free of current complexities. In honest vulnerability, she pictures herself imbibing the land’s scents and the call of the lonely plover in the moment of desire:

I riding the cleared hills,  
plucking blue leaves for their eucalyptus scent  
hearing the call of the plover.<sup>229</sup>

The call of the plover symbolises her simple, joyous connection with the land just as an aboriginal tracker would “read” the land and its seasons. That bird is a symbol of its ever-present fertility, its seemingly eternal regeneration and adaptation. At that time, she felt she was in tune with its rhythms, but now sadly that land is “raped by rum . . . and progress and economics.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> “Two Dreamtimes” line 30, *C.P.*, 316.

<sup>227</sup> “Woman to Child” line 5, *C.P.*, 28, *Woman to Man* anthology (1949).

<sup>228</sup> “Two Dreamtimes” lines 47-48, *C.P.*, 317.

<sup>229</sup> “Two Dreamtimes” lines 40-42, *C.P.*, 316.

<sup>230</sup> “Two Dreamtimes” lines 61-2, *C.P.*, 316, echoing the infamous colonial Rum Rebellion.

That same plaintive emotion emerges in drought when the familiar cry of the oriole is no longer heard. “Oriole, Oriole” sits immediately after “Two Dreamtimes” in the anthology sharing its elegiac mood of unassuaged thirst:

For twenty years long I stilled and heard  
in the blackbean tree that greenvoiced bird.  
Oriole is his singing name.<sup>231</sup>

Drought evokes pathetic fallacy with her own deep-seated concern for the apparent selling off of the nation’s assets to foreign interests. Wright laments in pastoral metre:

Oriole, oriole,  
I whistle you up, I wait to hear.  
No orioles sing to me this year.<sup>232</sup>

In that absence of integrity, in her dashed expectations over the nation’s blind dash for the short term gain, Wright perceives the grim realities of greed. The calls of the plover and the oriole are familiar beacons of hope, sirens from good times past. Now alas, they are mere memories of past happiness. The dream of Eden will not be recaptured it seems until the nation reconnects with nature. Being alive gives clear insight; grey survival merely leads blindly on.

In a similar synecdoche,<sup>233</sup> the cry of the dingo and the last sip of the silent, willy wagtail had appeared in “Drought Year” (1952) to betoken drought, loss and imminent death:

That time of drought the embered air / . . .  
The dingoes’ cry was strange to hear. / . . .  
I saw the wagtail take his fill  
Perching in the seething skull.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> “Oriole Oriole” lines 3-5, *C.P.*, 318.

<sup>232</sup> “Oriole, Oriole” lines 7-9.

<sup>233</sup> That part-whole gradient in synecdoche makes it a very useful pathway to understanding salvation.

<sup>234</sup> “Drought Year” lines, 1, 5, 8-9, *C.P.*, 82.

Brought down by drought, the now silent bird seeks liquid wherever it will, sucking up the last moisture even from a carcass. Such a mysterious silence broods over the real world,<sup>235</sup> felt when one reflects on salvation. The elements of this drought-ridden land image human contingency and an ever-present need for salvation. Relevantly, she writes of “the silence between word and word / in which the truth waits to be heard”,<sup>236</sup> to suggest the contesting of good and evil that winning salvation entails.

To summarise, a bird’s being true to its nature is a pertinent primary image of salvation’s neat fit with the natural world. Simply being within the natural limits of its species and environment is the divine plan. In the life of birds, nature’s directionality continues to re-enact the great drama of life in its seasonal transformations naturally and quite unaided. Her discursive shift towards the affirmative in these images supplies insightful images about human salvation, for inevitably western society spoils by excess, loses self-respect, loses wonder and mystery, and compromises the web of life by narrow-minded, species self-interest.

Wright found in nature’s mysteries and tragedies and in its miracle of self-repair, some readily recognisable natural templates for addressing society’s ills. She offered them as warnings so Australians would repair the emerging consumer society’s excesses. The nation could learn from its own birds’ simplicity and acceptance of limits in joyful obedience to the laws of their nature. Her bird poems suggest that human continuity and

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<sup>235</sup> Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch’s “infinite silent scream” in his signature work “The Scream” (1893) is expressing this melancholic truth about the transience and pain of life. As one of his haunting faces in “The Frieze of Life” exhibition in that year, it cut through the conventional, bourgeois silence to scream the gaping pain that is life. The painting could be said to express “the torment of conception when life shakes the hand of death” quoting Munch in the NRK and SR2 documentary, “Edvard Munch” SBS Australia 1982.

<sup>236</sup> “Silence” lines 6-7, *C.P.*, 121.

survival as a culture, and even as a species, depend on living simply, constraining greed and respecting nature. Her analogies coaxing the imagination towards the mystery that is salvation are even more pertinent and pressing today.

Clearly, any human progress (that I have identified as winning or incarnating salvation) is best achieved when it is modelled upon nature's true directionality and simplicity about being itself. People grow into salvation, and humans craft their own eternities ("these lives build eternity.")<sup>237</sup> It is wiser to model nature's patient simplicity. Humankind will continue to enjoy the earth's beauties and fertility lying in "the sleeping soil"<sup>238</sup> if only they act in accordance with her directionality.

#### vi. Vulnerability, mystery and wonder

The virtue of vulnerability is needed to win salvation. Such vulnerability seen in Murray's man weeping in public re-images Christ's saving kenosis. In her wonderful essay on an earlier Australian poet she much admired, John Shaw Neilson,<sup>239</sup> Wright praises this virtue of vulnerability in him:

I think this is Neilson's real secret – the unshieldedness of his inner eye . . . He was never a sentimentalist, not lacking 'a clear vision of the greed, spite and ignorance of the world.'<sup>240</sup>

Wright reported that in Neilson "the parable of life is guaranteed",<sup>241</sup> and that he sought

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<sup>237</sup> "Waiting" lines 31-32 *C.P.*, 10.

<sup>238</sup> "Old House" line 9, *C.P.* 81.

<sup>239</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 115-135.

<sup>240</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 120.

<sup>241</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 123.

“a different kind of truth,”<sup>242</sup> beyond everyday capacities. He had a distinctive “capacity to be naked to life.”<sup>243</sup> She noted how such “self-consciousness is a measure of capacity” in a poet.<sup>244</sup> Unlike so many public and important figures who engage in social hypocrisy, she admired Neilson as a man “without a mask and without an ego to be defended or to defend.”<sup>245</sup> She praised this vulnerability as his primary credential to write poetry.

Clearly, humans need some humility to access the mystery of nature and the cosmos. Indeed, the neglected truth of Genesis is that what God created was good and wonderful and worthy of preservation, that his work is an ornament, and the planet a worthy *cosmos* in itself. Its vulnerability projects an imperative, picked up in one couplet emblematic of Wright’s metaphysical celebration of life in this firmament:

a rhythm that dances  
and is not mine.<sup>246</sup>

Clear-sightedness, or the virtue of humility, yields to life’s rhythms that are beyond human control. That invisible, larger and wiser forces guide human lives is a profound insight for anticipating human fulfilment.

Vulnerability, mystery and wonder appear in one elegant argument on evolution and time in “The Nautilus.”<sup>247</sup> Here, Wright hooks into a betting culture<sup>248</sup> harking back to

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<sup>242</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*. 127.

<sup>243</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 118-9.

<sup>244</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 133.

<sup>245</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 119.

<sup>246</sup> “Five Senses” lines 19-20, from *Five Senses (The Forest)* (1963), *C.P.*, 186

<sup>247</sup> *C.P.*, 187.

the primeval bargain between the species:

This sweet completion puts a term to time  
and that, I take it, was the bargain (lines 23-34).

Reminiscent of Pascal's famous wager in theodicy,<sup>249</sup> this bargain with time declares that creatures have limited time, and the contract forecloses if salvation is not sought.

Again, the poem touches a metaphysical plane to observe that life is parcelled out in limited spans of time, and that even the sea-snail has an allotted fate. The poem analogises the sea snail's evolution into being a successful survivor as a worthy design for human lives, or as John Clare wrote: "Every trifle also has a lesson to bespeak the wisdom and forethought of the Deity."<sup>250</sup> Its life says: act honouring your nature now. Murray's "Mollusc"<sup>251</sup> in the next chapter takes up the same theme.

#### vii. Relationships, limits and transformation

The discussion now links "The Nautilus" with "Night" and "Camphor Laurel." Schillebeeckx's first anthropological constant proposes that our true worth as humans and our chances of survival as a human race will be found in the quality of our relationships with the natural environment, in respecting the land and connecting with

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<sup>248</sup> It is fair to say that Australians love a bet; they love to "have a go" and love the excitement of the risk. Two-up is a game allowed in unlicensed circumstances only on national days of celebration like Anzac Day.

<sup>249</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, in R. N. Gleason, S.J. ed., *The Essential Pascal*. (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1966), 90-92: "Reason can decide nothing. A vast gulf separates us, and across this infinite void a game is being played that depends upon the toss of a coin. What is your wager, heads or tails? . . . But in this case you *must* wager . . . Compare the two chances: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Don't hesitate then. Make a bet that God exists . . . The odds are even, and the certainty of the stake is equal to the non-certainty of the prize."

<sup>250</sup> John Clare, "Letters on natural history" (1825) excerpt in John Goss, ed., *The New Oxford Book of English Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 362.

<sup>251</sup> Murray, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 361.

its story. To understand the land and nature on their own terms, one must have a relationship with them that repudiates any possessiveness, or pretensions to control or exploit her absolutely. The first rule is to learn the limits. Wright urged a basic humility and an attitude of wonder, rather than the mistaken attitudes of ownership and exploitation. In her seminal essay, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), she begins with this premise that such a right relationship grounds ethical action. That is the “theorem / whose lines are lines of force / marking a limit.”<sup>252</sup> She writes:

Before one’s country can become an accepted background against which the poet’s and novelist’s imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures.<sup>253</sup>

Her love of the land emerges as an intense subjectivity underpinning any development of it. In that essay, Wright warns developers, “o’erstep not the modesty of nature” (*Hamlet* III.ii.18). Nature does not despoil itself by excess, like the eucalypt tree that “commits no excesses,”<sup>254</sup> Authentic transformations grow from knowing the limits. Avoiding conceits and hyperbole, the imagination absorbs the data of poetry as transformations promised in salvation.

Pertinently too, life’s forces must be allowed to reach their neat and “sweet completion,”<sup>255</sup> according to nature’s internal rhythms, designs and processes. In public thinking and policies, Wright found a profoundly recursive insight in that loss of connectedness with the natural environment and human nature. Oversight and limited vision may even be greater enemies than blind exploitation. Wright observed humans’

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<sup>252</sup> “Alive” lines 22-24, *C.P.*, 321.

<sup>253</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, xi.

<sup>254</sup> “The Eucalypt and the National Character (for Sir Otto Frankel)” line 17, *C.P.*, 362.

<sup>255</sup> “The Nautilus” line 23, *C.P.*, 187.

dysfunctional view of themselves:

The capacity to be naked to life, to meditate rather than judge, to respond rather than to choose is something from which in our noisy and dangerous civilization we recoil in anxiety.<sup>256</sup>

The constants say that survival and thus human salvation may be won only in a harmonious relationship with nature. Society needs to reassess its needs and accept the natural limitations. The nation's survival and salvation lie in respecting its natural environment.

Images of that vital connectedness for survival occur in "Night."<sup>257</sup> In psychologising time and space, the imaginative ability to grasp the scene is a first step to imagining some transformation for it. The poem offers insight for futurity in a recovery of the unity of purpose and connectedness lost at Eden:

Standing here in the night  
we are turned to a great tree,  
every leaf a star,  
its roots eternity.<sup>258</sup>

To dramatise further this lack of a spiritual connection with nature, Wright's poem "Camphor Laurel"<sup>259</sup> sets up an opposition between the foolishness of the late-arriving humans and the simple but persistent life of the old camphor laurel tree.

Under the house the roots go deep,  
down, down, while the sleepers sleep;  
splitting the rock where the house is set,  
cracking the paved and broken street,  
Old Tim turns and old Sam groans,  
"God be good to my breaking bones";  
and in the slack of tireless night  
the tree breathes honey and moonlight.

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<sup>256</sup> Judith Wright, *Preoccupations*, 119.

<sup>257</sup> *C.P.*, 49.

<sup>258</sup> Lines 1-4, *C.P.*, 49.

<sup>259</sup> Judith Wright, "Camphor Laurel" lines 13-20, *Woman to Man* (1949), *C.P.*, 35.



The camphor laurel is a very big, easily recognisable tree with a distinctive, pungent fragrance.<sup>260</sup> Its scent evokes the refreshment of disinfectant, suggesting a necessary critique of the gross and random evils of an uncaring society. This tree gives off "honey and moonlight" suggesting sweet fruition and inspiration. Its permanence and native honesty contrast strongly with man's short-term foolish, facile and unethical ways. As a symbol, this tree dramatises the tussle of mankind against nature, for even the stationary tree has its logic against the foolish greed and wilful injustice of the nation's environmental vandalism. Readers seeking salvation learn about limits from this tree's survival.

To review, salvation necessarily encompasses relating properly to the natural environment. To gain the meaningful continuities, Australians need to reconnect with life cycles in the great web of nature. This imperative is not a taming metaphor, nor Frost's "humanization of nature",<sup>261</sup> whereby nature's wayward branches are trimmed to size for an aesthetic perception. The all-too-common foreshortening of imagination in greed distorts our own human ability to find personal and collective transformations. More imaginative solutions are found by better connecting with nature's own cycles. It fruits in due season and stores in drought. The eucalypt and the camphor laurel teach about finding limits so humans may achieve salvation's authentic transformation.

#### viii. Intuition, the feminine, and integrity

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<sup>260</sup> It is now deemed a weed in Queensland. "Introduced to Australia as a park specimen, the camphor laurel (*cinnamomum camphora*) has spread explosively through the warmer and wetter parts of the eastern seaboard, particularly in northern New South Wales, where native subtropical rainforest has been cleared for grazing." nrg website [on-line] available: [www.camphorlaurel.com/](http://www.camphorlaurel.com/) [2005 November 26].

<sup>261</sup> Jan B. Gordon, "Robert Frost's Circle of Enchantment" in Jerome Mazzaro, (ed.), *Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism* (New York: David McKay, 1970), 61, 66.

That significant insight about limits is based on holistic knowledge. So the struggle for integrity, for salvation, is best begun in the feminine intuition. Logical analysis fails to take account of the more invisible aspects of life. Wright's commitment to feminism was a hallmark of her illustrious career. One celebrated dramatisation, "Eve to her Daughters"<sup>262</sup> is instantly recognisable as a classic affirmation of her feminism. Not only did it offer no lament for the collapse of Adam's outdated metaphysics, but the saving voice of intuition demonstrates an assertiveness of voice consistent with the new politics. That struggle for human rights and respect fires salvational poetics.

This poem "Eve to her Daughters" offers challenge, fascination, drama and humour in dramatising the fictional Eve's parental advice to her daughters. In reader-friendly diction, "Eve to Her Daughters" appears as a one-sided conversation, where the persona of Eve reviews events a lifetime's span after her expulsion from the Garden of Eden and lists its multiple effects on Adam and them both. Her Eve begins denying the traditional blame on her for original sin as being her own fault. Yet she does not blame Adam either; her resignation to her fate is a central theme in the poem. The poem explores the feminine point of view on the whole human condition, when time, pain and the reality of human faults in an imperfect world close any significant access to salvation.

The poem asserts the validity of the feminine intuition. The Eve voice muses that Adam has latterly found a flaw in himself and this naturally affects his attitude. She details the hardships of their life after Eden; and that making a new Eden entailed generating all the onerous complexity of life today with its hype, gadgets and fashions. She implies her acceptance of the evolutionary Principle of Increasing Complexity operative in Adam's life (and in everyone's) since he was wont to make discoveries through analysis,

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<sup>262</sup> *The Other Half* (1966), C.P. 232.

in contrast to her own feminine method of intuitions that more reliably prove to be correct.

Now by feminine intuition, Wright's Eve herself claims to know how life works - in short, that at the centre of the mystery of life, there is the mystery of human will. Like metaphysical realities, this too cannot be analysed and demonstrated. She concludes there are two roads in life - Man's Way: to be self centred, self contained, utterly free and foolish (like Adam had become), or Woman's Way: to take stock of one's reality, to come to terms with it, and to submit honestly and realistically to life's circumstances in all their complexity and uncertainty. The feminine principle is proposed as equally or even more reliable path for discerning wisdom.

Eve's advice to her daughters is to heed their intuitions. Adam's mechanical version of the world neglects the essential mystery "that cannot be demonstrated." Only a woman's intuition, she finds, understands that the spiritual side of life saves. As an intuitive thinker, Eve finds she has better access to emotional and spiritual truths. Man's blinding egotism that explains everything so neatly, so rationally, only massages his ego, only continues the fault and destroys life on earth.

In the pragmatic realism of her practical feminism, Eve knows that failure is the only certainty in their imperfect world. Indeed, although she and Adam had met both God and the Devil in the Garden of Eden in that past existence, now she finds that what really counts are faults, "at least they can be demonstrated." She is aware that her daughters may doubt her credentials as a moral teacher, for her own compliance with the snake was a sin. Yet she warns her daughters against repeating that *hubris* in their own lives. Her punch line for them (and for readers) then lies in the logic that since

"Adam had turned himself into God, who is faultless, and doesn't exist," he would never come to terms with life. Adam and his descendants (the whole human race) would forever fail to resist this temptation to pursue egotism.

The poem fuses many moods round its central argument. There is sarcasm when Eve rails against the expensive demands of life in the modern world. There is philosophical musing upon the biggest Questions of Existence: Why are we here? What is the point of Life? Eve shows a spousal sympathy for Adam in deferring to him and not criticising his foolishness. The poem depicts a strong sense of character, with her suffering, hardship and winning some control over life. Wright's Eve displays a larrikin humour in misapplying classic logic to show the non-existence of God. The poem offers the strong assertion of the woman's point of view as being more valuable, more useful and more realistic than the man's. Her feminine intuition supplies salvation's logic for her times.

The poem constructs a multi-layered meditation that has a universal appeal. The poem is crafted to be more like an unrehearsed conversation with its false starts, uncertainties and winsome half-jokes. Its reconstruction of a biblical setting is refreshing. Its validity lies in being deliberately antithetical to the linear argumentation of classical logic. It has a strong personal voice on the mystery of living. It tantalises for what it infers towards a feminist agendum. In its restraint, nuanced crafting of feeling, irregular form and spiralling argument, "Eve To Her Daughters" challenges and rewards re-readings. In effect, in being true to this instinctual wisdom, one could be said to be winning salvation, for that fragment of truth is a foretaste of the whole human destiny being won.

This further image of salvation then is a child of the previous: being true to oneself is to

be assertive of one's feminine wisdom. In Eve's love for her daughters, she hands on whatever wisdom she has learnt from her faults. Love is not too proud to self-correct, for it requires that we readers attend to our intuitions, which are truer sources of the divine will. Though life may grow complex, love's true compass is the mettle of the heart, for love is the only reliable guide to justify moral actions. To follow its guide in resisting injustice, one gains integrity, or in other words, wins salvation.

#### ix. Redress, responsibility and connectedness

Hope entails contesting its opposite, and redressing wrongs begins salvation. That hankering for salvation also draws attention to some barbaric practices like animal trapping. "Trapped Dingo" reviles entrenched cruelty and so it fairly claims to convey salvation's imperatives.<sup>263</sup> Typically, her sympathies are with the battler and the underdog.<sup>264</sup> Just as the Baptist cried, the right time is at hand to correct the mistakes of the past.

Prescribing redress, responsibility and connectedness, her "Trapped Dingo" is a nineteen-line ode reconstructing the death throes. The opening lines challenge and grate as the voice reveals the sight and smell of death in the sprung trap: "twisted in steel and spoiled in red". Hard dental sounds, for example, in "twisted steel", spare no relief. This horror is increased by the remoteness and emotional disinterest of the perpetrators. In the cowardly facelessness of "they crushed," this poem is an ode to all victims of horror.

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<sup>263</sup> It is useful to cross-reference this poem with Les Murray's "On the Present Slaughter of Feral Animals." *C.P. 1961-2002*, 407. To avoid deifying the dingo, I refer the reader to Les Murray's realism on catching rabbits in plague in pre-myxomatosis Australia: Les Murray, "Reading Group and Teachers' Notes" [on-line] available: [www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/TeachersNotes/notes/Murraytn.html](http://www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/TeachersNotes/notes/Murraytn.html) [2005 September 25], 17.

<sup>264</sup> Sixteen years later, Wright returns to this most Australian theme in her "Thornbills" (1962) lines 14 -16: "Wherever a trap is set / may they slip though the mesh of the net. / Nothing should do them wrong." *C.P.*, 165.

The poem's poetic voice personifies the trapped dingo as the "drinker of blood, the swift death bringer" in allusions to ancient Greek tragedy and Homer. The persona rehearses the tragedy and sets up a chorus and protagonist dialogue, juxtaposing the dingo as the poet and herself as its echo in pain: "I heard you, desperate poet". This dramatisation is quite experimental and reinforces the impression that poets best articulate such a suffering and death. Now rehearsing her own voice, the poet appeals: "Did you hear my silent voice take up the cry?" In her compassion, she empathises with the dingo in its drawn-out, gruelling death. Her wail seems to cry: Is there anyone who would right this wrong? The death of the eponymous dingo caught in a steel trap, "here, twisted in steel,"<sup>265</sup> gives her another occasion to focus on man's insane cruelty.

In one technical masterstroke, the tension of oxymoron draws out the full effect: the dingo's dying "silent voice" effectively conveys sympathy despite the interruption of time. The evocative, "terrible song," recalls the *deinos* of anger and revenge in ancient Greek drama, and "stealthy sun" bespeaks how optimism and life in the day brings betrayal and grief, while the natural beauty of "sunlight hide" has now become a bloodied pelt.

Like Hector's wife, Andromache insane with grief, the dingo's death prompts this paeon. The poem structures the desired response: with a sense of closure, the reader returns to the original focus, "so here..." brackets with "here you lie." We are called back from the poet's memories and allusions to revisit the reality of this horrible cruelty. Its finality is reiterated metaphorically: "death ends the verse you chanted." Being cruel and unnatural, the dingo's death compromises man's worth. Although

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<sup>265</sup> "Trapped Dingo" in *The Moving Image* (1946), C.P., 9.

Wright lived in the country and knew sheep needed protection from predators, she was not being sentimental. She seeks to redress this widespread cruel practice of the slow death caused by traps.

This dramatic poem galvanises sympathy for every trapped dingo, and levels well-earned criticism of this cruel trapping practice. Its multi-layered appeals to the feelings of loss, pity, love of literature, heroism, and even patriotism, do reach even city-slicker audiences. Its intermingling of images from love and death reach down into the very depths of the human psyche. A cross reference echoes here, in Les Murray's suppressed glee in cruelty when as a boy checking the rabbit traps, he found in the conquest of his unhurried killings a much darker satisfaction in his nature: "I found / a rabbit in my hands / and, in my mind, / an ancient thing. And it was quickly done."<sup>266</sup> Both Wright and Murray are poets of salvation for seeking to redress animal cruelty.

Hers was not advice to farmers only. Humans are more truly human (and so are pursuing salvation) when they redress such wrongs. More analogously, citizens as individuals do need to extend their responsibilities beyond their own personal spheres to address institutional evils. The poet is here pressing readers to grasp the ethical consequences of ordinary actions with a more critical eye. Yet, redressing the wrongs of the past requires courage to change the entrenched practices that vindicate them.

Redress, responsibility and connectedness also appear in "Eroded Hills,"<sup>267</sup> where Wright suggests retrieving ethical integrity (a major step to salvation) lies in righting the wrongs of the past:

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<sup>266</sup> Murray, "The Abomination" lines 28-30, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 21.

<sup>267</sup> *C.P.*, 81.

When the last leaf and bird go  
 Let my thoughts stand like trees here. (lines 11 –12)

Replanting trees repairs the eroded hills in an act of reparation for her grandfather's clearing his land for grazing. This poem seeks to make atonement, gained by replacing her grandfather's limited perspective that resulted in the eroded hills with a more environmentally conscious one. To reinforce this poignancy of self transformation, these saving words arise from the very same blood as the perpetrator.

Furthermore, this poem itself affirms the role of the poet as a transformer, for her poetic words endure beyond the life of the replanted trees. Indeed, the time is at hand to correct past errors. Besides tree-planting to redress the crime of the tree clearing, of her own craft she notes that one fortuitous additional outcome may well be the enduring wisdom (and salvation) imaged in her poetical words. Every poet would surely wish their words to have permanency, one greater than at least their own life spans. This is the artist's transcendence and a kind of salvation in words, to believe that one's artefact has a distinctively saving relevance, one more permanent than the writer has in the flesh. Her apologia for her great-grandfather's exploitative clearing of land and removal of its traditional owners thus becomes a word of salvation for contemporary readers arguing environmental conservation and Aboriginal reconciliation.

On the same theme of reparation, "Old House",<sup>268</sup> expresses regret for lost opportunity and a call to repair the wrongs of the past with a more enlightened attitude. Unfortunately for the poet, "my great-great-grandfather heard them with one part of his mind" (line 20). As a dominator, he had the blinkered view, the invader's and settler's

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<sup>268</sup> C.P., 81.



view in seeing the land as his sole possession. Now as a descendant of that same New England family, the poet expresses her regret that local Aborigines' rights were so trampled upon and their lives wasted. In making reparations for past injustices, Australians too may still obtain an important salvation. The dominant race needs to right wrongs, accept responsibility and re-establish connectedness with the original inhabitants.

Raised in a pastoral family, Wright had had a dream that Australia as a whole would identify with the pioneering spirit of the early pioneers and their love of the land. Now that some foreign corporations had by and large taken over "the man on the land," she finds her pastoralist dream is shattered. Both "Two Dreamtimes" and "For a Pastoral Family" reflect on the treatment of Aborigines by the early settlers and the Europeans' loss of any spiritual connectedness with the land. The same dynamic was now happening to the whole nation in the new globalised economy. Ironically, the pastoralists now found themselves in similar situation to the one the Aborigines faced at white colonisation. Ironically, the rural aristocracy were victims of government policies.

Furthermore, redress, responsibility and connectedness concern the soil itself. "For a Pastoral Family"<sup>269</sup> evaluates the views of the farmers and the establishment that allowed the ownership of stolen land. The farmers had inherited British colonization, and a legal system that justified their seizure and ownership. She regrets how:

We stepped  
on sure and conceded ground.  
A whole society  
extended a comforting cover of legality.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> From *Phantom Dwelling* (1985), *C.P.*, 406.

<sup>270</sup> "For a Pastoral Family" II, lines 2-5, *C.P.*, 407.

The pastoralists were allowed land that was not theirs and conceded by the dubious statute of *terra nullius*:

And after all,  
the previous owners put up little fight,  
did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human.<sup>271</sup>

Indeed, they had acted within the law:

For the good of the Old Country,  
the land was taken;  
Would any convict us?  
Our plea has been endorsed by every appropriate jury.<sup>272</sup>

Theirs was assent without hyperbole. The phrase, “every appropriate jury,” shows the poet’s irony about white legal precedent. The age of pastoralist superiority was an age of domination over the land, and with its demise comes the death of Wright’s childhood dreamtime. Yet pastoralists would still cling to their “field of reference”, their self-justifications even into the late twentieth century with conservative voting patterns:

Some actions of those you vote for stick in your throats.  
There are corruptions one cannot quite endorse;  
but if they are in our interests, then of course...<sup>273</sup>

Modern developments and local problems were eroding her dream. When the multinational corporations bought New England farms for mines, and fast food chains bought local cattle stations, the earth became tainted by “corruptions” in globalisation.

More broadly, the poem interrogates Australians at large. This same theme of the

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<sup>271</sup> “For a Pastoral Family” I, lines 14-16, *C.P.*, 406.

<sup>272</sup> Lines 13-16, *C.P.*, 407.

<sup>273</sup> Stanza 1, lines 6-8, *C.P.*, 406.

compromised dreamtime occurs in “Two Dreamtimes.”<sup>274</sup> In Wright’s childhood, she had believed her forefathers’ land was hers for life; now she realises it is stolen. The land is “poisoned now and crumbling” and “I mourn it as you mourn / the ripped length of the island beaches, / the drained paperbark swamps.”<sup>275</sup> The poet knew she had left the “easy Eden-Dreamtime.” She had irretrievably left that world of childhood innocence and realises she is “born of the conquerors,” who, as pioneers conquering the land, also conquered Aboriginal society.

Wright’s apology for her pastoralist heritage occurs at the beginning of the social movement towards Aboriginal reconciliation. “Two Dreamtimes” deals with a problem of cultural identity, with what Australians believed themselves to be as a nation. She accepts that the two Dreamtimes are lost; now the world of Aboriginal culture in its unspoilt beauty is gone and the pastoralists’ inheritance is “doomed by traders and stock exchanges” with the impact of big business. She laments this immoral seizure of the land and teaches the need for redress, responsibility and connectedness. Similarly, Murray’s concept of “convergence”<sup>276</sup> of Australia’s disparate cultures also strives to breach the gaps caused by European possession and colonialism.

As the conquerors, the nation must now redeem past wrongs to seek some salvation. “For a Pastoral Family” and “Two Dreamtimes” look forward to redeeming them so as to set Australia free. Now is still the right time to effect that redemption. This timely poem begins to redeem the invasion of our Great South Land and to undo the domination of its bloodied racism against traditional owners. Wright anticipated that the process of Aboriginal reconciliation would be both painful and yet intensely

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<sup>274</sup> From *Alive* (1973), *C.P.* 315.

<sup>275</sup> *C.P.*, 317.

<sup>276</sup> More is said of this elsewhere but Murray like Wright inherits the Jindyworobak movement of the 1930s and 1940s to integrate Aboriginal themes.

transforming of Australian society too. History shows the process of reconciliation is a long and painful process, yet a necessary imperative for national salvation.

In review, righting wrongs and the restoration of justice bring certain salvation for the nation. Repairing the short-sighted farming practices of the forefathers and effecting reconciliation with the indigenous peoples in land rights and reparations are still agenda towards Australia's salvation.

x. Thirsting, waiting and readiness

The progress of time is both a certainty and a parameter of salvation. St. Paul warned the early Christians about the wastefulness of a passive waiting that enervated their spirits and sapped their urgency to preach the Good News (1 Thess 4:11; 5:6; 2 Thess 3:11). Active waiting however involves expectation, a positive longing for the fulfilment of a promise. The discussion proceeds to read about waiting and readiness for salvation in the poems, "Waiting," "Dry Storm" and "Rain at Night."

The elegiac tone of "Waiting,"<sup>277</sup> decries the seduction that occurs in wasteful delay. This thirty-two-line poem appears in a traditional form of four regular verses of eight lines each. The contrapuntal rise and fall of the alternating iambic pentameter and trochaic tetrameter versification pattern lends a measured predictability to echo the pulsed, segmented experience of waiting. The stark Australian countryside is again Wright's *locus* for this meditation that becomes a warning. Verse one opens the scene where the barren, bare hills, the almost stationary, grazing sheep and the lazy smoke

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<sup>277</sup> From *The Moving Image* (1946), "Waiting" C.P., 9.

“from the houses on the hill”,<sup>278</sup> depict a broad and unchanging panorama familiar to most of her readers. Only the shrill call of coloured parrots breaks the seemingly solid, crystalline, transparent air of midday like crashing glass. Murray’s “Noonday Axeman” has this same tensive atmosphere.

Verse two cuts straight to the message with two animal images to show how mesmerising Time is. Both the mythical serpent’s grin which kills, and the spider weaving his web to kill his prey: “Time binds us helpless till his sting goes in” (9-10), powerfully image Time’s invincible seduction. The fragility of the present moment is deceptive, and yet in fact it offers the only real ambit in which to work out any salvation. Time’s delay blunts any hankering for acting immediately and responsibly.

Furthermore, the streaming babble (a Tower of Babel pun) from the radio possible on a lazy Saturday afternoon delays in its confusion of leisure time with apathy; it merely echoes the rise and fall of her body’s pulse, so familiar and meaningless is its chatter. Such a babble of confusion must be like the confused messages those in pain from a terminal disease must feel. The poem warns that the one real chance of salvation lies in responding to present time. Verse three begins with a prayer or plea that time be an illusion to numb bad news, so it will anaesthetise reality. Christian readers find her focus on the present in the urgent messages of Thessalonians.

With characteristic realism, the poet rebuts any heady escapism from the present, to remind her readers with urgency that humankind does indeed have the power to control the future: “we have the power to make us whole again” (22) and to repair past evils. For time itself is really a tool, an opportunity. Her poem urges the nation to use the time

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<sup>278</sup> Wright, “Waiting” line 5, *C.P.*, 9.

available to repair relationships, to mend seditious divisions, and to get on with the work of defending Australia from wartime attack. At the level of local or geographical time, it seems the local New England community ought to be better prepared for invasion in World War II. Readiness is a better attitude.

To underline her point, the poet sings that the proverb “Time will heal” is a lie. It seems that belief is merely a glitzy bauble of distraction, and in holding it, we become our own Judases betraying ourselves to subvert our own potentials for transformation. The poet urges her readers to admit that living needs not be treated like wasting a slow Saturday afternoon, for present time is a precious gift. That lie about time healing is an unacceptable passivity; individuals need to respond to the gift that present time offers. To me, the poem conveys growing frustration at the incremental rate of social change. Christian agents of social change feel such wasteful inertia intensely.

At a second level, the message to respond to the present time is justified from the body clock time of intuition. Emergencies alert us to act when delay is wasteful or dangerous. Her ironic call, “how can the sirens of danger pierce this air?” challenges the conventional excuse for Australians’ haphazard unpreparedness. Without hyperbole, her analogies use medical terminology, “pain”, “blood”, “surgeon”, “anaesthetized”, “cancer”, “cure”, “excised”, and “agony,” to suggest the intimate drama of a personal emergency. Rather than be seduced by the oh-so-familiar, placid silence of the rural landscape, readiness is needed. The poem concedes that danger and emergency arrive unannounced, and that people are seldom prepared for it. The same message appears in Murray’s “The Burning Truck.”

On a third level, I read a perennial, moral call to identify the profound possibilities of

present time: “the crystal hour of waiting / through which we travel.” Only in those immediate moments of existence do individuals and society win salvation. Thirsting, waiting and readiness lead to repairing wrongs and building human dignity. The past is gone and the future results from the present response. We humans will receive what we need (ultimately salvation) if we respond to the present positively and productively in simplicity:

past our prayers, we know only ourselves  
 have a choice or power to make us whole again;  
 time lifts no knives to heal or to destroy,  
 and did not cause, and cannot cure, our pain.<sup>279</sup>

To act responsibly, people need to be alert and ready, as the gospel parables warn.

In reality Australians were their own worst enemies as procrastinators. Rather, they are able to pursue their national survival (and indeed their integrity as humans) if they dare it. Unfortunately, some do not believe in their own power, and some forego the choice to make themselves whole again. Their chance for securing the nation, for winning some national salvation, would be lost in illusory attitudes. The warning is clear: salvation’s time is the present time. Apathy is a serious evil. Australians need to respond together to ensure the nation’s founding principles are honoured.

Another clear warning against delay and neglect is evident in “Dry Storm.”<sup>280</sup> This is an apostrophe to the storm, like a prayer for relief, from pain, even a cry for salvation:

O ease our restlessness, Wild wandering dark,  
 vague hurrying depths of storm, pause and be full,  
 and thrust your fullness into our desire  
 till time release us, till we sleep. And wake

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<sup>279</sup> “Waiting” lines 21-22, *C.P.* 9.

<sup>280</sup> Judith Wright, “Dry Storm” *C.P.*, 191.

to a cool sky and a soaked earth left bare  
to drink its light in peace. (17-22)

This poem plots a prayer, with its hopeful plea to the sky for the long needed relief of soaking rain. The poem personifies the long-awaited drenching, the fulfilment, that calms sexual restlessness. However, that restlessness is not destructive but is itself good and productive. The only realistic response is to wait in hope, and for Christian readers that means to thirst for salvation.

Appropriately, the poem begins with the elements then moves to the metaphoric. We survey the rock mountain boulders, the old forest, the green vines and thorns of the canopy. Causally, the drought drives the snake, moth, bird and lizard to hide in rock crevices. In the night sky, there is thunder and much lightning but no rain. The farmers' fear of the lightning igniting the dry grass is well founded. Analogously, their hearts are torn open in thirst and waiting. Caught it seems between wonder and irony, the poem's perception soon transfers to a more generalised view at a second level removed from just description or depiction, to seek the *why* of things.

This coda's petitionary form is couched in feminine enticements and sexual imagery, fusing lore and mystery in its plaintive appeals for relief. As if in a prenuptial, this process of relief is anticipated<sup>281</sup> before fulfilment is foreshadowed in joyful anticipation. Furthermore, the invocative plural petition identifies "our desire" as the collective voice of the local farming women, and indeed, the whole of humanity. The plaint has perennial application to anyone seeking relief from drought, and feeling

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<sup>281</sup> Reminiscent of the joyful liturgical text complete with singularly festive Alleluias, a veritable *hapax phenomenon* in Advent: "Rorate coeli de super, et nubes pluant iustum: aperiatur terra, et germinat Salvatorem," (*trans.* Skies, let the just One come forth / like the dew, let him descend from the clouds like the rain./ The earth will open up and give birth to our Saviour." Is 45:8, Ps 18. The Introit of the Fourth Sunday of Advent. *The Gregorian Missal for Sundays* (Solesmes, France: St. Peter's Abbey, 1990), 180.



despair in the dust. The poet's prayer for rain becomes a universal cry to quench thirst and assuage desire: "O ease our restlessness . . . pause and thrust your fullness into our desire." The prayer's hankering request is sensuously imagined. After the storm's drenching, "we may wake to a cool sky and a soaked earth." "Dry Storm" dramatises an intensive moment of universal thirst being assuaged like an elemental salvation.

Similarly, in "Rain at Night,"<sup>282</sup> the "undreamed-of rain" wonderfully links marriage, fertility and relief in rainfall. The wind's loose dust at the windowpane suggests the red dust of the deceiving heart, or a red ghost of despair. In the night rain, the thrones of cloud set the scene for the rites of rainfall so that like the first god, joy breaks through the clouds to bring life to creation. In the flowers, and then the fruits of that drenching, the seeds of love are woken into life. Such images feed faith's longing or thirst for God's salvation.

These poems, "Waiting," "Dry Storm" and "Rain at Night," show that waiting is both a necessary virtue and a path for achieving salvation. One's sense of time tests horizons about possible salvation. Unforeseen emergencies do catch people out while sometimes the only realistic response is to wait in hope. They address waiting and readiness.

Pertinent here is the idea of salvation bridging *deep* time<sup>283</sup> and shallow time. Shallow time is what we normally live in, the world of nature and history, of everyday fuss and process. However, salvation is that metaphor about a surplus containing and explaining shallow time. It serves to "articulate a future."<sup>284</sup> Deep time is time's mythic structures,

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<sup>282</sup> C.P., 89.

<sup>283</sup> John McPhee's term from *Basin and Range* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981), 128-9, and M. J. S. Ruswick *Scenes from Deep Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), in Stephen Happel *Metaphors for God's Time* 77, 83, 105. Shallow time is Happel's original term.

<sup>284</sup> Happel, *Metaphors for God's Time*, 152.

the timeless beyond and around the living that mystics penetrate. It permits the broadest possible parameters of imaginative possibilities like salvation. Deep time is like that desired situation when God is all in all, when good conquers evil and the reign of God prevails. It contains the far horizons within which believers live. Clearly, Wright's trope of the not-yet with its metaphoric surplus freshens ideas about salvation.

#### xi. Kenosis, integration and acceptance

A necessary part of our engagement with society and culture comes in resiling from the self, in what biblical language calls self-emptying or *kenosis*. Schillebeeckx's fourth constant teaches that human progress comes when individuals yield up selfish ambition for the welfare of the whole human family. To model this central Christian doctrine, the *Letter to the Philippians* (2:6-11) celebrates Christ's emptying of his divinity to become human out of love. Wright models this virtue in the sacrifice of the ego, in a resistance to colonize everything one encounters to one's own culture.

As evidence, "The Gateway",<sup>285</sup> is a complex meditation on kenosis, to say that the process of becoming whole entails sacrifice of the ego. In forty-one lines arranged in seven irregular stanzas of free verse, Wright dramatises this emptying of the mind and spirit so as to be able to receive renewal. Sacrificing the ego is like the new life after immersion in Lethe's waters along the journey after death across the River Styx. The short narrative celebrates forgotten wisdom. The traveller's voice reassures readers that the current horror of "the mind's nightmare," when all rational intellectual development far outstrips emotional and spiritual development, will inevitably pass into "the world's

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<sup>285</sup> C.P., 115.

sweet wellspring.”<sup>286</sup> However, that integration is won only in the sacrifice of ego.

To a Christian reader, the poem argues that the path of acceptance is best, but it entails surrender and dissolution of ego if one is to grow at all. Today’s readers may hear an echo of Buddhist doctrines of the non-self here. The poem’s dramatised traveller returning from the abode of forgetfulness conveys the wisdom that present time is not a home to luxuriate in, but that transformation, completion and salvation require some dissolution of the self. The traveller says he had to refute pride and all he had seen; he had to allow the journey to take a course he had not plotted out. In the Christian community too, salvation entails that radical sacrifice of the egotistical self. Accordingly, kenosis and acceptance are needed for final integration.

### xii. Remembrance, honour and accountability

Wright drew on the past for inspiration, whereas Murray merges it with the present. Wright infers that remembering the past will save modern people. Wright’s strong vision for Australian history is demonstrated in her poem, “Bullocky,”<sup>287</sup> the one rated by critic Vincent Buckley as probably her best so far in her emerging career.<sup>288</sup> In its ode-like tribute to our pioneers, Wright here evoked many iconic themes, and most pointedly reminded the Australian public in a time of rapid change that future generations’ prosperity is won at the cost of lives, that Australians would be saved as a people only when they acknowledged their debt to the pioneers.

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<sup>286</sup> “The Gateway” lines 39-40, *C.P.*, 116.

<sup>287</sup> Judith Wright, “Bullocky” in *The Moving Image* (1946), *C.P.*, 17. Text [on-line] available: [www.bushpoetry.com/LostPoetry/bullocky.htm](http://www.bushpoetry.com/LostPoetry/bullocky.htm) [2004 October 10].

<sup>288</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1957), 165. Wright refuted this heroic reading pointing out that the bullocky was in fact mad. Brady, *South of My Days* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1998), 133.

Salvation reinstates honour; so remembering the past is an important value for the future. In his reading, Buckley identifies three levels of significance in this poem:

The bullocky is representative of his class, he does the ordinary work of a bullocky; and in so doing, and he is laying the first supply lines of a nation. But his role is thus in some sense sacred. . . [The poet represents] three aspects of his life: his representative quality, the sacred character of his pioneering, and the hardships which it causes.<sup>289</sup>

Cinematically, “Bullocky” projects the concrete image of the large, weathered man beside his team. The focus quickly cuts to memory, and in particular his disoriented memory driven “widdershins” by the long months on the track. Colonial history echoes in etymology as well, for this “old and powerful,”<sup>290</sup> word, “widdershins,” means anticlockwise, wrong way round, or scrambled.<sup>291</sup> In verse three, we enter the bullocky's imaginary dream, as when cracking the whip over his team, he sees himself as Moses leading, correcting and guiding his recalcitrant people to the promised land. The biblical allusions serve a double purpose, to grant access to his dream and to remind us of an intellectual heritage shared even by the lowliest in society.

By his campfire at night, he shouts prayers and prophecies to the moon. For us his beneficiaries today, his labours did indeed bring forth a Promised Land, for through the grass that covers his tracks, a plough now unearths one of his bones. This pivotal biblical image of a vineyard in Australia analogises the nation's stability and prosperity derived from his sweat. The bullocky's labours honest toil and death brought material

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<sup>289</sup> Buckley, *Essays*, 167.

<sup>290</sup> Norman Talbot, “Plough strikes bone – an unearthing of Judith Wright's ‘Bullocky’” in N. Sims, (ed.), *Judith Wright: An appreciation* (The English Department, University of Waikato and Outrigger Publications, Hamilton, New Zealand, 1976), 19.

<sup>291</sup> By chance, I discovered that Auden uses this word in “New Year Letter” Part 3 (1940) verse 16, line 53 when describing the Ego as a witch “worshipping in obscene delight” in W.H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems* (London: Faber, 1974), 122. Also [on-line] available: [www.emule.com/2poetry/phorum/read.php?7,184081](http://www.emule.com/2poetry/phorum/read.php?7,184081) [2006 March 31]

salvation, both moral (honour) and actual (bones-vine). Remembering them is sacred.

Evoking tradition in its four-square iambic beat, "Bullocky" offers a lyric quality, an optimistic tone and traditional imagery to re-create the classic, demotic, colonial era. Despite its conventional form of seven verses of four lines, each in the rhyming scheme of ballads, its message and theme avoids any backward-looking rustic sentimentalism. Wright defies expectations with a deeper prophecy when the bullocky's dream conflates with our reality today blurring the boundaries between reality and dream. Product of a more believing age, this eccentric pioneering man believes he is safely surrounded by a divine aura inhabited by "fiends and angels." While the unknown lies beyond his "campfire's crimson ring," he is indeed safe, "cupped" in its eternal embrace, for "centuries of cattle bells" have worn a proven track. Traditional in its familiar form, the poem promotes a timely message in its monitory tone. Australia will be saved from materialism if it honours its pioneers. Such honouring brings them closer to salvation.

The poem presents a wonderful intersection of the visible body and its invisible meaning, in an insight about transcendence, picked up later in "'The Crab Feast'" discussion in Chapter 4. After over a century's settlement of the country, this landscape is no longer seen as implacably hostile in this poem but becomes an appropriate context for purposeful human activity. The bullocky's work is not an invasion into a foreign land but a suitable moral superstructure for modern life. While the poet suggests that her contemporaries ought to achieve a symbiotic interconnectedness with the ancient land, a hermeneutical reading suggests Australians need to act responsible stewards in it. Caring responsibility with accountability is the way to honourable prosperity (a material salvation). Material prosperity is honourable only when the nation remembers its pioneers with honour.

In a concluding apostrophe to that fertile vine, the poem urges readers to stick close to these worthy Australian traditions, "grow close upon that bone and hold it to your rooted hand" (75). The concluding couplet clinches the argument neatly, to suggest that modern values detach us from spiritual accountability.

### xiii. Gifts, costs and conditions

Although offered to all, salvation is a gift, which may be rejected and lost. Schillebeeckx's fourth anthropological constant prescribes that salvation is never assured but is conditional; one needs to want it. Wright's "Eli Eli" offers dramatic poetic imagery to demonstrate this constant. This poem was another opportunity for Wright to question the nation's policy directions. It dramatises salvation's costs and conditions.

While "Bullocky" showed that the nation's identity was conditional on remembering its history with honour, "Eli, Eli" reconstructs a biblical scene to show that eternal salvation is not automatic. Many do not receive Christ's redemption because they do not endure its costs. The poem's title, "Eli, Eli,"<sup>292</sup> evokes the Good Friday scenario. Wright's title immediately evokes pathos and is truncated from Mt 27:46, "*Eli, Eli lama sabachthani?*" that is, My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken me? The eeriness of that Aramaic cry and strangeness of those three Calvary hours offers richly nested settings, both physical, allegorical and religious, in which to develop a very dramatic meditation on the many apparent reversals enacted there that day.

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<sup>292</sup> From *Woman to Man* (1949). *C.P.*, 44.

Adopting the dramatic persona of Christ, the poet elaborates on some key paradoxes of seeming failure that His death presents, and also the more cosmic dimensions of its meaning. In nineteen lines of free verse, four stanzas of five lines each with the last of four, and with choric repetition of key ideas, Wright's character is given an interior voice of acute hurt and pain:

to see them go by drowning in the river- / . . ./  
that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him.

To hold the invisible wand and not to save them/ . . ./  
this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him.

To hold out love . . . and faith/  
and know they dared not take it/  
Thus they betrayed him. (1,5, 6, 10-12, 15)

In its muted anguish, the Christ character's interior monologue challenges those who would reject the salvation being won. The voice dramatises his situation of dying for the salvation of the world and yet seeing many fail to take up that offer to save themselves. It focuses on the central act of global salvation and its seeming irrelevance to those for whom it was done: "To hold out . . . all he could give, and there was none to take it" (14). The poem's pathos rivets home these very human aspects of Christ's dying for the salvation of the world. While redemption was won, it does not reach everyone, not by design but through apathy, neglect or sheer rejection. If Australian religious poetry has the purpose of eliciting insight, then this poem succeeds in demonstrating that salvation is indeed a precious gift that may be lost, that it is a gift offered and rejected, that it is still too often "a gift ungiven."<sup>293</sup>

The poem challenges the nation's complacent social limitations. As a man limited to the time and place of the cross and yet the divine saviour of the world, Jesus Christ "watched" powerless, and yet all-powerful, knowing yet all-knowing of his

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<sup>293</sup> Wright, "The Unborn" line 16, *C.P.*, 48.

executioners' fate. The poem suggests that twentieth century humans are masters of their own destiny as never before. However, they are not passively saved but must actively save themselves; they must give their *fiat* too: that "they themselves could save them." To win salvation, they need to recognise it is a conditional gift with costs.

The poem's serial argument rapidly changes the figurative scene to the punch line, "he knew there was no river." Just as Catholic doctrine teaches, salvation is not automatic, it is not enough to float along with the current of time or the political or religious *status quo*, but it is necessary to have both faith and to do good works. One must choose and pursue one's salvation. The poem images this element of risk in salvation's gift.

The pathos of "Eli, Eli " evokes an empathetic response. Wright's images show that any redemption already won universally has still to be applied individually in the concrete details of daily life, to be won through the proverbial pain, sweat and silent tears of personal transformation. That gift of salvation demands full personal assent to win salvation, and, unfortunately, some are unable to accept it. Christ's interior voice of acute hurt and pain achieves a supreme pathos.

Australia's cultural drift in values piqued Wright's finely attuned sense of justice. This poem sees Wright cautioning her victory-fêted generation. In this 1949 anthology, the poem appears between "The Flood"<sup>294</sup> and "The Builders" effectively bridging the faith of Noah with the simple courage of our pioneers. "Eli, Eli" decries mindless selfishness in the increasingly secular society that was bringing superficiality, passivity, derivativeness and apathy.

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<sup>294</sup> This work attempts "to translate ideas into images and language as we talked." *Half a Lifetime* , 210.



Half a century later, the poem addresses the nation's increasing apathy about religion in its pursuit of materialism. Today's newspaper images of genocide victims readily come to mind because they never got to live their lives. The cries of the victims of wars, torture, disaster, terrorism and genocide jangle our nerves and remind us of salvation's cost. Winning the gift of salvation entails contesting with evil. The gift of salvation is never automatic; that gift may be rejected, or worse, neglected.

xiv. Recovery, fruitfulness and love

Wright's poems, "Eden," "Lion" and "Woman to Man" could be summed up in one phrase: that salvation comes only with love. Human fulfilment or salvation is realised in human love. "Eden"<sup>295</sup> is a lament that the first perfect human love was ever split. Since Eden, our natures are despoiled. This poem offers a plea after despair, for a recovery of that irretrievable unity:

the lament of the flesh –  
that it must always contain  
the uncompleted heart,  
greedy of love and pain.

Here in life everything is not finally fixed. A complete salvation is impossible, is unreachable and still uncompleted. That hopeful image of "the uncompleted heart" is symbolic of a fractured universe, so much so that even if that unity is recovered temporarily, it is necessarily doomed to fragment again "in the pangs of life." Paradoxically, one must find love with that imperfect heart.

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<sup>295</sup> *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, 90.

The same message about the essential need for love occurs in “The Moving Image.”<sup>296</sup> Lamenting the sad fate of Tom of Bedlam from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the poet regrets that Tom had not experienced that love, nor had reached that crucial turning point typical in every life when love turns one’s life round and transforms experience into mystery. Circumstances denied him that crucial moment, for “in the unsailed sea of the heart of Poor Tom . . . passionate terrible love never ceased burning.”<sup>297</sup>

As a chillingly unfortunate counterpoint to the foolish Lear, Poor Tom’s tragedy was that he was never able to express the love hidden in his heart, unlike Lear who learned at last to express his to Cordelia. Unfortunately, Tom might have been transformed and engaged in a happier life where, “the straw of his prison [would break] into flowers of wonder.”<sup>298</sup> He might have been granted a well-deserved salvation, for indeed that miserable wretch did not find it. Had Poor Tom found expression of his innate capacity for love, he might not have suffered his bedlam.

Love also reveals the self. The poem “Lion,”<sup>299</sup> suggests that while a diamond’s only purpose is to transform the light it receives, the crystal prism reveals many of the facets of love. In the shining eyes of the lion, that “crystal glance of love”<sup>300</sup> reveals its divine origin. Love looks “beyond my flesh and sees that in it which never dies.” Receiving divine love is to share salvation.

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<sup>296</sup> Wright, *C.P.*, 3.

<sup>297</sup> “The Moving Image II” lines 46, 49 (inverted), *C.P.*, 5.

<sup>298</sup> Wright, “The Moving Image II” line 25, *C.P.*, 5.

<sup>299</sup> *C.P.*, 86.

<sup>300</sup> Wright. “Lion” line 17, *C.P.*, 87. Just as crystal reflects the light, the prism of love mentioned in “The Moving Image” “distils and diffracts love to test the very mettle of the lover. The optics motif appears again in “a sudden laser through the common day,” line 6 “Grace” *C.P.*, 331.

In a similar way, "Woman to Man" (Appendix 2),<sup>301</sup> is a highly crafted reflection on the reality, exigencies and prospects of love. In synthesising the tender emotions with the passage of time in her characteristic way here, Wright combines two themes distinctive of her work, time's passage and love's fruitfulness. This poem, "provided a new language for exploring the sacredness of sexual union, pregnancy and birth."<sup>302</sup> Brooks senses in this poem "a suspension between resurrected seed and the child."<sup>303</sup> Its diction may be remarkably simple but its nested messages are intense, personal and perennial:

The selfless, shapeless seed I hold  
Builds for its resurrection day-  
Silent and swift and deep from sight  
Foresees the unimagined light.

The poem's crafted structure plays out a profound insight about the fecundity of love and humankind's need for salvation. The analogical imagination readily translates this portrayal of natural birth as pursuing the mystery of salvation in love's excess.

While the poem is very accessible in form (four regular verses of five lines, each ending in a rhyming couplet to clinch the argument), its thrust is analytical, even philosophical.

The argument is staged on four distinct steps, one for each verse: love sees beyond itself, is transformative; love is both chase and goal (love is fruitful); love grows and

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<sup>301</sup> C.P., 27. David Brooks in 2000 still rated this poem "one of the classics of our poetry" in "A land without lendings: Judith Wright, Kenosis, and Australian Vision." *Southerly* 2000/2) 55. In the same vein, Herbert C Jaffa, in *Modern Australian Poetry, 1920-1970* (Book Tower, Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1979), 108, quotes Max Harris's review comment, that "Judith Wright had succeeded in creating [in this anthology] a satisfying fusion of passion and intellect,' and that "Woman to Man" is 'an historic poem in Australian literature.'" In 1961, Charles Higham rated it "her finest collection" in "Judith Wright's Vision." *Quadrant* 19 (1961), 40. Reprinted again in *Half a Lifetime*, (1999). 183. The listserv discussion at [www.emule.com/2poetry/phorum/read.php?6,15436](http://www.emule.com/2poetry/phorum/read.php?6,15436) reprints the poem.

<sup>302</sup> Gerard V. Hall, "Judith Wright (1915-2000): Australian poet & prophet," *National Outlook*. (November 2000) [on-line] available: [www.acu.edu.au/theology/Judith.htm](http://www.acu.edu.au/theology/Judith.htm) [2003 March 25].

<sup>303</sup> David Brooks, "A land without lendings: Judith Wright, kenosis, and Australian vision." *Southerly* 2000/2, 56.

has a natural course to run (is temporal); and love is as elusive as a blaze along a blade (it is metaphysical, mysterious, even subversive).

The life events of birth and death always have sacred significances. In a one-sided address to her lover, the feminine speaker reflects on the reality of the love they share. "like a sleepless labourer", the "shapeless seed" of their love is alive and growing within her body. Potentially transformative, powerful and irresistible, that love "builds for its resurrection day" and "foresees the unimagined light." This dynamic suggests that the as-yet eyeless love foresees a day when it will transform them both; it will not only bring forth a new life, but brings a new understanding to their lives. "Resurrection" aptly borrows from the available religious discourse to suggest love's staggeringly transformative power. In its transformative power, that love vectors towards a heaven on earth, "that unimagined life," that "happy day" of the spiritual, for it raises its participants beyond mere excitement into an adventure that changes them both.

In the second verse, salvation's paradoxes appear. Their love is found to be nameless; it defies definition, and yet it is intensely experiential, knowable, enjoyable and conscious. The love is fruitful, being both hunter and hunted. It is part of human nature to express love, yet it devours its adherents too. Love hurts its practitioners even to the same degree as they search for love. In this paradox, the lovers are suspended in a timeless dance.

The third verse develops the argument further to show that love has catalysts and dynamics; the man's physical power feeds it and the woman's alluring bodily outlines it. In the lovers, anticipation sparkles in the crystals of their eyes. In the crystal ball of fortune telling, their love plots the future course of the transformations it brings.

Furthermore, echoing its use in “Lion,” “crystal” suggests diffraction of light into its composite colours, as if to say that love will bring out love’s deeper knowledge, richness and variety with its razor sharp power to reveal truth.

The complementary image of the rose conveys the temporal course of love: love runs through stages. The poem’s nested paradoxes are revelatory: the rose is beautiful to behold, is alluringly perfumed, and yet is tender and fragile. Love bears a natural progress to fertility; it has a course to be “unfurled” from bud to full-blown maturity that cannot be resisted. Inevitably, love runs its biological course, and yet its psychological significance can be grasped by the conscious intelligence. In this paradox lies another secret of love: its growth lies in its creative dialectic.

The fourth verse brings the poem to a philosophical conclusion. Love is also an exchange in an ongoing conversation; it is creator and creature, active and passive; it suffuses its bearers and unites them too. It signifies more than what it is: “this is . . . this is . . .” Being so elusive, the love is also a two edged sword. That desire can also be blind and possibly foolish, both futile and frustrating is an observation picked up in the phallic and provocative, “head butting in the dark.” Her respected biographer Jennifer Strauss finds here a stunning compression of time into a single moment “in which the blind head butting at the dark is both the penis in intercourse and the child in birth.”<sup>304</sup> Such an honest display of sexual imagery was radical for her times. These images of fertility convey love’s crucially wonderfully energizing excesses, like the excesses in the gift of salvation.

This fourth verse and indeed the whole poem turns on the final compelling plea: “hold

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<sup>304</sup> Jennifer Strauss, *Oxford Australian Writers: Judith Wright* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), 79.

me for I am afraid,” to recover the feminine voice of insight and interiority after the masculine analysis. In the end, love is beyond words; it is humans in skin contact together; it is full of wonder and promise, both male and female, tangible and tenable, and wise and foolish.

This poem features moments of confession, regret and celebration. It appeals for employing a variety of images to imagine the intangible. It has poignancy, insight and a heart-felt optimism. It is a very polished elucidation of intimate experience. It articulates almost analytically the power, wonder and promise of abiding love between lovers, yet it resolves these dialectics in the affective embrace at the conclusion. Its honesty, positive tone and conscious self-awareness spell out a lived recognition of how salvation is glimpsed and experienced in its mystery. In the montage we are composing, these images add most richly to a fresh repertoire for understanding salvation better.

Any birth is a transformation and truly a resurrection, for it denotes a transfer from one world to another. Birth anticipates rebirth in natural order. This is a normative sequence. The mystery and wonder of life in the womb has its own directionality, its own imperative and certainty, emerging as life “from seed . . . to light.” Rebirth is the template for salvation, the directional compass to human fulfilment. Rebirth has this sequence too. Like birth, resurrection is transformation into light, waking to a salvation day of insight and delivery, when a new stage of awareness is reached, a new kind of existence begun. Transformation affirms that life naturally generates more life and transcends itself. That phrase in the liturgy, “born to everlasting life,” indicates this direction to say that salvation is the natural full flowering of a human life. Wright’s language offers a notable access to the logic of the heart, to Heidegger’s “unbounded

whole of the Open . . . and invisible region of the heart”<sup>305</sup> where truth is revealed. Recovery, fruitfulness and love certainly image salvation.

xvi. Addiction, despair and compassion

Inevitably, every word has its silence, every choice has its de-selection. Wright’s lament for lost love extends empathetically not only to those denied love but also to those who are unfortunately mistaken in love. Her “Metho Drinker”<sup>306</sup> (1949) is now standard in school anthologies so compassionate is her voice here.

In two brief stanzas of nine lines each, this unrhymed poem depicts an all too familiar unfortunate victim of addiction, not of alcohol, but the drink of the most destitute, methylated spirits. His inability to overcome his addiction is vivid: “the knives of light whose thrust I cannot turn” (5-6). Excluded, rejected by society, and unable to recover enough human dignity, he sleeps under leaves “safe in the house of Nothing” (9). In his despair, he lacks any salient salvation, comfort or redemption.

The second stanza only exacerbates her real concern as it dramatises his exclusive affair with his “white and burning girl.” She offers him no salvation, for this is a mortal match: “to melt away the flesh that hides the bone/ . . . / It was for Death he took her; death is but this” (17) in words of cruel parody of the marriage vows formula, “in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” The alliterative ‘t’ in “To eaT the nerve That Tethers him in Time” suggests a clock ticking steadily, representing the final hours of his now useless life. This downward spiral ends only in pain as he “winces from that acid of her desire,” truly destroyed by a false love. His is a false salvation, a fate not to

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<sup>305</sup> Heidegger, *Poets*, 128.

<sup>306</sup> “Metho Drinker” from *Woman to Man* (1949), *C.P.*, 51.

envy.

The poem's strong realist imagery, focus on metonymic detail, and punch line brevity seem to plead: Where is that superabundance of salvation now? Such graphic images of paradise lost offset the happy ones elsewhere in Wright's work, and give voice to that compassionate strain in her vision that distinguishes her in her own land. The poet seems to cry that even his most basic needs are not being met, seeming to plead: Who will rescue him from his mistaken love? How could society destroy its own people? Statistics cannot explain this away; our outrage must surely demand political action.

A vicarious response obviously does not satisfy. I like to believe Wright offers him some redemption in her next volume, *The Gateway* when she writes:

To go by the way he went, you find beneath you  
that last and faceless pool, and fall. And falling  
find beneath breath and death  
the sun by which you live.<sup>307</sup>

That short moment of realisation of identity is surely the critical one to resurrect his humanity. The self-destructive addiction is a false love that grants a false salvation. So salvation is a gift ungiven, lost in despair or addiction. A saving response is compassion.

xvii. Grace, transcendence and continuity

Furthermore, that salvation is a daily gift is messaged in "Grace,"<sup>308</sup> (Appendix 1) a twenty-line poem nestled within the similarly contextual "Reminiscence" and "Good

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<sup>307</sup> Judith Wright, "The Lost Man" lines 21-24, *Five Senses*, 84, sadly not included in *C.P.*

<sup>308</sup> *C.P.* 331, and Appendix 316.



News” in the anthology, *Alive*.<sup>309</sup> That title itself conveys an expectation and a context for anticipating a reaffirmation of the best available transcendence in human life. One reading of this poem’s controlled ambiguities affirms the gift of living begun in its very opening lines: “Living . . . is a daily bread / that’s worth the eating.” That statement of Wright’s typical realism is the premise for the argument, that while life is indeed experienced in segmented moments, yet a consideration of its whole meaning and direction brings transcendence.

The dance of verbal inversions brings the reader into the conceptual arena, suggesting a challenge that life might be reconceived in another way. The poem’s focus deftly shifts from life’s ordinariness, its “dailiness” to the poet’s own witness for its worth. To explain, grace “requires another element or dimension” and that element is beyond the material ones. Grace points to the unnamed but vitalising continuity of life’s meaning.

The poem’s opening turns on the daily bread of that central Christian prayer, the “Our Father.” It stresses “dailiness,”<sup>310</sup> that wondrous *cotidianum*, as one timely reminder that our survival is a daily event, that humans are essentially contingent and dependent. Life’s troubles do require our attention. Life’s elementals of food and drink are paired off in the opening lines to show that life is lived only within dualities, like bread and wine, survival and celebration, body and soul, and matter and spirit. Life is a mixed event; that major premise supplies a realistic basis for objective salvation. When the poet says she has “seen” an unmixed, transcendence over and above life’s dichotomies, her wisdom is that life’s jarring opposites are the very disjunctions needed for growth. Life grows only in the stimulus of dialectics; it could never be otherwise. Life’s

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<sup>309</sup> Judith Wright, *Alive: Poems 1971-72* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973).

<sup>310</sup> Lord’s Prayer: Give us today our daily bread: “Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie.” (Lk 11:3).

polarities ignite grace's action.

Mention of another wine, another "drunkenness that can't be spoken or sung / without betraying it" (3-4) brings an immediate transfer into secondary and symbolic meanings reminiscent of the Bread of Life passage in Jn 6, where Jesus confounds his hearers who complain: "How can he give us his body to eat?" This unspoken wine is "Far past Yours or Mine, even past Ours; it has nothing at all to say." Grace has a power, and a quality that is beyond words, our biological limits, our tender hopes and even beyond our imaginative expectations.

Furthermore, in its opportunistic action, grace "slants a sudden laser through the common day"(6). Transforming what has unfortunately become a regular routine, its laser-like action, evocative of hi-tech surgery, instant communications and "Star Wars" decisiveness, disturbs with its neat precision and mysterious purpose.

The sestet develops the action of grace. The still unnamed phenomenon's altruism is its badge of strength. That so-far unnamed reality holds not a grip on reality but offers a promise of opportunities for a richer vision of life. Its aliveness and intangibility are stressed: "Not contemplation brings it; it merely happens." It takes over the flesh, yet being neither here nor there, it "does not live nor die" (12). Sexual overtones are not lost on the reader: it is beyond intention, it brings/springs from instinct; it commands the flesh. It meets real needs, its action is felt, and its appearance is powerfully revelatory.

The poem focuses the applications of grace's dynamic, naming its ambit as being beyond time, its genesis beyond traditional polarities and its scope beyond human dreams. Even interim explanations are inadequate. Rather than arrive at a glib

explanation for an intangible mystery, not commas for parenthesis but a colon for explication yokes examples: “positives, negatives, what we hope and are.” Grace’s anonymity and pervasiveness suggest its universality and superabundance beyond one’s wildest hopes.

Grace reveals the transcendent dimension. Unexpected and announced, it strikes at the heart of experience and transforms it. Just as Simeon warned Mary “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:35), grace “plunges a sword from a dark star.” This echoes a biblical motif. Herod’s sword against the baby Innocents was evil (Mt 2:16). Peter raising his sword against Malchus was ill-considered (Jn 18:20). On Calvary, the centurion’s spear was an instrument of decisive testimony (Jn 19:34). The double-edged sword of the Scriptures is justice, extirpation and truth. This sword concomitantly and necessarily reveals futility, sordidness and evil from “a dark star,” and its source is alien to the true worth of humans. Clearly, grace struggles with evil to win salvation.

The tension of non-disclosure is relaxed in the final couplet: the stanza format of six lines, six lines, then four, then two narrows the focus and concentrates the laser beam away from any abstractions towards real outcomes. The final rhyming couplet “Maybe there was once a word for it. Call it grace. / I have seen it, once or twice, through a human face” clinches the argument to reveal this force or quality. Now in a very post-modern way, the poet does not hanker for a name; it seems “grace” will suffice, for it functions to bring transcendence to humans, and that counts. The conclusion to the argument is finally revealed to be a rare sense of quality, dignity, and worth in being alive, even gratitude for life’s spark. Through its inversions and metaphors that craft a new recognition, humans need grace, but they must learn to accept it.

Grace provides an affirmation of life's gift, in a wonderful image of the economy of salvation. Grace liberates us from science's positivism, yet it is a hidden presence, and that even appears "through" human faces. Grace is no ethereal, transcendent entity of dubious effect; grace is indeed the gift of life, that spark of being alive that underpins hope and joy. It is a laser bolt of power and vitality that privileges us humans to access "the inward eye" of self-consciousness to gain transcendence. Grace is indeed an agency of salvation for it coaxes the imagination into mystery.

Grace is also a sword of truth that empowers its adherents to face the terrors of the self and the horrors of existence. This poem dramatises the work of grace, with a demonstration of grace in action in its humanising effects, for grace makes living worthwhile by dignifying humans, giving us a home in our bodies and meaning in our world. It repairs the negatives and establishes transcendence over the unredeemed life.

Closer reading shows that this poem plots an event, just as grace is an event too – an effective relief or rescue. Grace fulfils what was so far incomplete. Grace ennobles, transforms, suffuses, vivifies and energises by its intensity, creativity and totality of effect. Grace is not a timed performance, neither rehearsed, anticipated, expected nor sequenced. Grace catches people out by its sheer unpredictability, as an act of will, of affirmation and re-assurance. Whereas grace comforts the traveller, salvation closes the journey. Grace fights the shadows; salvation reveals the truth about persons and things. Grace indicates the best direction yet salvation delivers that destination. Grace supports the present moment while salvation is decisively final. Grace directs yet salvation redefines forever. Grace repairs unpreparedness, neglect and despair. Grace delights but salvation awes.

Salvation is like grace: it is never fully understood until it arrives to show itself. It may be rumoured but is never quite anticipated. Grace paves the continuum towards salvation. Grace grants the insight, nobility, style, confirmation and transformation that salvation models. Like salvation, grace is never won, always given. Grace guarantees, and salvation is the reward of a guarantee. Grace grants transcendence and continuity. Grace, poetry and salvation are the unique trinity celebrated in this key poem.

#### xvii. Conclusions

The following ten conclusions compose the basis for the ten virtues for salvation that are the outcomes of this study elaborated in the final chapter.

First, salvation comes in righting wrongs. A change of ethical perspective would, for example, change cruel practices in trapping dingoes. Opening eyes to the pain humans inflict is an appeal to basic decency towards fellow sentient beings. Only by putting ourselves in their skins can we hear the “silent voice” of pain; only in a change of attitude may Europeans hear the silent tears of racial oppression. Only recognising our common humanity brings a change our heart to overturn the burning injustice that needs Aboriginal reconciliation. Because salvation “makes all whole,”<sup>311</sup> salvation’s turn comes only in actions to repair the degraded land and to make reparations to its traditional owners. Salvation is realised in truthful words of apology and in redressing past injustices. Salvation is won in accountable actions, repudiating indecision, delay, self-interest and doubt for the sake of justice and peace.

Second, transcendence names the fear and guilt of a colonizing people, so that

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<sup>311</sup> “For Precision” lines 13-18, *C.P.*, 129.

Australians could recover some vision, certainty and salvation. As a prophetic poet in her “exorcising verse”<sup>312</sup> and “capacity to be naked to life,”<sup>313</sup> Wright goaded the conscience of the nation. Hers was a public art. To remedy white man’s alienation from nature, her poetic images invite readers to reconnect with the natural environment. They generate moments of awareness and connectedness to overcome fear and build identity, compassion and peace. This is the work of the authentic imagination.

Third, salvation is found in love, for it is in that commitment to uncertainty, openness to growth and change that we ourselves will be saved despite having incomplete hearts. Love denied is salvation lost. Love’s power may anaesthetize its pain but also reveals our worth as people. Love is too often temporary but is also fruitful and mysterious, transformative and saving. People in love connect with that unimagined light and life, a state reached in human salvation. Wright’s images name it the “rhythm that dances” (“Five Senses”) the “pulse of praise” (“Thornbills”) “Nature’s sweet completion” (“The Nautilus”), “my dreaming blood” (“Woman to Child”), and the yearning of “the uncompleted heart” (“Eden”). To gain love is to gain some share in salvation. Wright’s celebration of vulnerability in human love must be her lasting legacy.

Fourth, salvation comes in righting wrongs, resisting injustices and building inclusive social structures. To demonstrate, Wright’s own feminine perspective emboldened many others to challenge social structures effectively. Eve’s experiential wisdom is more than compliance and wearing blame; all women may share in universal salvation when their rights are respected and their voices are heard on every day that “foresees the imagined light” (“Woman to Man”). Her poems show how the feminine perception and intuition validate alternative ways of regarding reality. Her insight brings the necessary

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<sup>312</sup> “The Histeridae” line 26, *C.P.*, 259.

<sup>313</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 118-9.

newness.

Fifth, salvation is a risk and a paradox. “Bullocky” urges Australians to see themselves as a people respecting their past with honour, sticking close to the worthy traditions of the soil that gives life. For salvation is missed, refused, lost or rejected, as she shows in the dramatisation of Christ on the Cross in “Eli, Eli.” Wright dwelt on the paradoxes in birth and love and time and death, for example, “love that knew not its beloved,”<sup>314</sup> “you shall escape and not escape”<sup>315</sup>, “Lion, / look upon my flesh and see / that in it which never dies”<sup>316</sup> and “open, green hand, and give / the dark gift you hold.”<sup>317</sup> Although the world needs his salvation, we humans hold a terrible power to reject what we most need. To be saved, they need to use freedom responsibly.

Sixth, salvation is won only in a harmonious relationship with our natural environment. It behoves everyone to reassess their needs and lifestyles in simple humility before the wonder and beauty of creation slips away. To be happy, we must restrain our false needs so as to live at one with nature, instance the eucalypt “she commits no excess” (“The Eucalypt and the National Character”). The rewards of material progress she warns (and Australia’s moral integrity, that is, national salvation) will come when Australians reverse injustices, live simply, revere love, resist injustice, respect their past, seek reconciliation, relate to the land and more fairly share their wealth. Fruition, will come only in social harmony and holistic policies.

Seventh, landscape images denote salvation’s struggle. Wright’s physical landscape was a real Australian one, consisting of “tree-frog and dingo, rainforest and sea coast, stark

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<sup>314</sup> “Woman to Child” line 10, *C.P.*, 28.

<sup>315</sup> “Woman to Child” line 13, *C.P.*, 28.

<sup>316</sup> “Lion” lines 3-4, *C.P.*, 86.

<sup>317</sup> “Dark Gift” lines 17-18, *C.P.*, 71.

cliffs and eroded hills, bushfire and flood, dust and drought, wind and rain, flame-tree and cicadas, gum tree and cyclone.”<sup>318</sup> Her visual and oral and aural images show an assimilated sensibility, an unselfconscious pride in being Australian, and “a sense at once of the fundamental community of common humanity to which we all belong.”<sup>319</sup> They endure in the cultural memory as emblematic of regenerative cycles, and remind us of its neglect and exploitation too. Our critical connection with the physical environment is further developed in Chapter 5 when reading a David Malouf poem.

I show how poetic images coax analogical meanings to denote salvation. Wright’s landscapes were imaged in her wordscapes and mindscapes, and thus her images bear multileveled meanings: the physical, the metaphorical and the metaphysical. For her images like “the compass heart”, “the exorcising verse”, “the undreamed-of rain”, “shape’s most pure serenity”, “an implacable heart”, and the “uncompleted heart” probe the mystery and vitality of the coherence that is salvation. The images extend and extrapolate associations in the mind of the believer. Wright helped overcome our hostility to the bush, for her metaphoric wordscapes transformed Lawson’s fiends in the bush<sup>320</sup> to the more positive and benign legends of history and spirits of place. The landscape profoundly images and shapes Australia’s salvation. That assimilated sensibility dreams transcendent opportunities for its inhabitants and initiates.

Eighth, salvation provides connectedness and continuities in the regenerative cycle of the seasons and inevitable birth and death. Wright’s metaphysical mindscape assumed some meaningful coherence towards some “sweet completion.” She was “arranging and

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<sup>318</sup> Gerard V. Hall, “Australian poet and prophet,” 26.

<sup>319</sup> R. F. Brissenden, “The Poetry of Judith Wright” *Meanjin* 54 (Spring 1953), 258.

<sup>320</sup> “It was a ghostly moonlight night. There’s no timber in the world so ghostly as the Australian Bush in moonlight – or just about daybreak” Henry Lawson “Brighten’s Sister-in-Law” in *Henry Lawson the Bush Undertaker and other stories* selected by Colin Roderick (North Ryde, NSW: Eden Paperbacks, 1989), 152, 157-9, 159 and other references.



rearranging bright scraps of experience into a new kind of unity and meaning.”<sup>321</sup> Wright gave random sense data a poetic coherence, or in her words, her poetry was “forming into one chord / what’s separate and distracted; / gives all a meaning, makes all whole.”<sup>322</sup> In her epistemology of the senses and logic of the heart, she offers saving insights in these images of non-violence.

Ninth, ideas about salvation point towards the mystery beyond words, in the intuitions that motivate, enliven and create images of salvation. Her career celebrates life’s recurring wholeness and fertility: “I sit here now intent / on poetry’s ancient vow to celebrate lovelong / life’s wholeness, spring’s return, the flesh’s tune.”<sup>323</sup> Her faith in the future was imaged in life’s fertility.

Tenth, salvation gives opportunities for practising a positive outlook, in defiance of passive inevitability, negative cynicism, and pessimism, anguish and regret. For Wright, being positive, orienting her readers’ lives to enhancing human dignity and seeking the sacred in nature’s cycles, is not merely a personal preference but the essential constant for survival and happiness, as a society and as the human race. Consequently, hope and optimism are sure pathways to salvation.

In review now, salvation offers exciting possibilities offered in teleological explanations, for example, in “the spring’s return.”<sup>324</sup> Nested inside that image is the promise of salvation being won, for it “makes all whole”<sup>325</sup> again. Wright’s images about salvation urge a better connectedness with the earth and nature. Wright’s strange

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<sup>321</sup> Wright, *Australian Poets: Judith Wright* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), vii.

<sup>322</sup> “For Precision” lines 13-18, from *The Two Fires* (1955), *C.P.*, 129.

<sup>323</sup> “Unpacking Books” line 24, *C.P.*, 388.

<sup>324</sup> Wright, “Unpacking Books” line 24, *C.P.*, 388.

<sup>325</sup> “For Precision” lines 13-18, *C.P.*, 129.

word about trees, in particular how the eucalypt “with the toughest care provides for seed and egg”<sup>326</sup> is that nature’s processes provide guidance for the care of the earth. Wright aches for human alignment to nature’s directionality, in an evolutionary teleology, as if to say, “Be in accord with her so that all creation will culminate in one harmonious chord.”<sup>327</sup> David Malouf similarly aches for ethical responsibility as the path to salvation for people and the planet.

The chapter’s discussion is now summarised in the following table. It groups insights about salvation from the poetic themes to distil ten virtues for salvation.

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<sup>326</sup> Wright, “The Eucalypt and the National Character” line 16, *C.P.*, 362.

<sup>327</sup> See “For Precision” line 13, in *The Two Fires* (1955), *C.P.*, 129.

Poetic themes	Salvation revealed as:	Virtues for salvation
Identity, death and rescue	Coherence	Authentic imagination
Ecology, renewal and reintegration	Transformation	Responsible freedom
Simplicity, directionality and reverence	Mystery and promise	Dream the transcendent
Vulnerability, mystery and wonder	An imperative	Insightful vulnerability
Relationships, limits and transformation	Purposive	Authentic imagination
Intuition, the feminine and integrity	Love	Seek newness
Redress, responsibility, and connectedness	Redress	Accountable actions
Thirsting, waiting, and readiness	End of suffering	Hope and optimism
Kenosis, integration, and acceptance	Reconciliation and wholeness	Faith in the saviour
Remembrance, honour and accountability	Retrieval of identity	Hope and optimism
Gifts, costs and conditions	A conditional	Clear-sightedness
Recovery, fruitfulness and love	Regeneration	Responsible freedom
Addiction, despair and compassion	Risk and paradox.	Non-violence
Grace, transcendence and continuity	Gift and coherence	Seek newness
14 themes	14 aspects	10 virtues

Table 3: Conclusions from Example 1: Reading Judith Wright

The table builds on the fourteen themes previously named in Table 2, and shows how the discussion in Example 1 refreshes the idea of salvation as coherence, transformation, mystery and promise, as an imperative, as purposive, as love revealed, as beginning in redress, as the end of suffering, as reconciliation and wholeness, as beginning in retrievals of identity, as a conditional, as regeneration of what the creator desired, as a risk and a paradox, and as the gift of integrity. The table plots how images gleaned in the poems generate themes distilling the ten virtues for salvation discussed in Chapter 6.

The discussion now moves to the second example reading poetry of Les A. Murray where the Christian interpretative approach practised there will be more self conscious. Murray aches to share his numinous coherences and continuities. Murray's primary data provide images of salvation in humankind's interactions with the landscape. Using the numinous insight, the noon day axeman, for instance, understands his place in the universe and his place in the line of his family's generations; the holiday-makers reconnect with familiar places in refreshing social events; and the much needed convergence of races is imaged in the two Mitchells boiling the billy. They represent incarnate salvation being achieved. All these aesthetic appreciations arouse a stronger sense of worth and direction, in short, a stronger sense of responsibility and purpose.



### Chapter 3: Example 2: Reading poems by Les A. Murray

#### i. Introduction

This third chapter continues reading images of salvation in “the golden depth of the ordinary,”<sup>328</sup> found in reading<sup>329</sup> poems by Les A. Murray. He occupies a distinctive place in the culture as Australia’s unofficial poet laureate.<sup>330</sup> A critical biographer Lawrence Bourke notes:

[Murray] has considerably enlarged and enriched Australian poetry while also gaining a reputation among readers beyond Australia as belonging among the most rewarding poets now writing in the English language. His work . . . has established itself as a literary presence that must be accounted for.<sup>331</sup>

<sup>328</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, 63.

<sup>329</sup> As already noted, this is a technical term to indicate a reading practice where the reader’s purpose is already foregrounded. This chapter originally appeared in the referred *Australian Ejournal of Theology* August 2004 Issue 3 [on-line] available: [dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_3/Smith.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_3/Smith.htm) [2006 July 13].

<sup>330</sup> Nicholas Birns notes: “beyond a doubt Australia’s leading poet today” in “Religions are poems” in Jamie S. Scott, ed., *And the birds began to sing: Religion and literature in post-colonial cultures*, 69-75, (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 59. In the 1980s, Murray was invited to write the Constitutional Preamble and to reword the national anthem. Biographer Alexander notes: “Murray had a national voice, and was prepared to use it.” *Les Murray: A life in progress*, 256. Critic, publisher and editor John Kinsella writes: “Murray’s influence on a generation of Australian poets has been incalculable. Few fail to recognise his linguistic brilliance, his intricate metaphysics, his ability to craft a poem and create a sense of place. Murray delights in the intricacy of nature and the endless variety of creation.” *Les Murray* [on-line] available: [www.johnkinsella.org/essays/murray.html](http://www.johnkinsella.org/essays/murray.html) [2005 September 27], 2. Poet John Tranter concurs: “His talent is clear and abundant. He has long been recognised as a master of the art of potent rhetoric and memorable images.” “A warrior poet living still at Anzac Cove: A review of *The Vernacular Republic, Selected Poems* by Les A. Murray” [on-line] available: [setis.library.usyd.edu.au/tranter/reviews-by/murray77a.html](http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/tranter/reviews-by/murray77a.html) [2005 September 27], 1. David Malouf writes: “Perhaps [Les Murray is] the most naturally gifted poet of his generation.” Carcanet website [on-line] available: [www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe.cgi?author=murray1&file=quotes.txt](http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe.cgi?author=murray1&file=quotes.txt) [2005 October 29]. NSW Premier Bob Carr writes: Murray is “the Ayers Rock of Australian literature – central, vast, immovable, contentious and yet changing with the colours of the day.” Quoted by Peter Charlton, “Colossus of words” *The Courier Mail* August 15, 1998. *The Complete Review* lists various opinions in his praise. [on-line] available: [www.complete-review.com/authors/murrayles.htm](http://www.complete-review.com/authors/murrayles.htm) [2005 September 25].

<sup>331</sup> Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State: Les Murray and Australian Poetry* (Kensington, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 1992), 3.

Murray's poetic imagery often shows a distinctive longing for radiance in a spiritless world, by envisaging more wonderful ways of being.

This chapter demonstrates how Les Murray's numinous dimension reveals salvation being won. Some of his poetry highlights some significant experiences of plenitude or directionality that image salvation. His numinous grasps of earthly happiness intimate religious salvation for the numinous insight telescopes present events with future destiny. In the numinous grasp, Murray's crying man in Martin Place beyond the pale of style and fashion incarnates non-religious realities like well being and fulfilment, or even "weal or woe,"<sup>332</sup> that readers know as religious terms like hope, transcendence and redemption.

While no one can grasp the whole reality that is salvation, authentic images in human experience may point to it. Murray's work is a serious attempt to perceive the import of "acts of moral imagination and redemptive yearning."<sup>333</sup> Murray satisfies Bloom's hopes for a new Blake to break the nexus between wealth and sublimity.<sup>334</sup> He refreshes salvation, for Murray reworks the pathetic fallacy to serious effect, rejecting the dominant society's ready identification of happiness with wealth and urban "Style." Murray's poems show how to find the possibility of sacredness in love and a profound sense of the sacred in the ordinary.

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<sup>332</sup> Geertje C. de Vries, "Learning to share shalom: Reflections on 'weal and woe' in a learning process" in R. Ruud Ganzevoort and Heye K. Heyen, eds., *Weal and Woe: Practical-theological explorations of salvation and evil in biography* (Münster: LIT, 2004), 104. Ganzevoort himself in "Yearning for Shalom" (same volume) justifies his choice of Shalom to encompass both domains: "Salvation denotes the act through which a person (or group) moves from a state of peril (or guilt) to a state of liberation. In the broader sense ('weal') it also describes the situation of fullness and flourishing." 59.

<sup>333</sup> Kinzie, "Introduction: The level of words," *The Cure of Poetry*, xii.

<sup>334</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer through Frost* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 306.

In ten sections, the discussion covers how images of ritual and critical choices reveal salvation being won, how images depict salvation's infinite possibilities, how salvation is a response to a gift, how salvation comes in the shared gift of oneself in service, and in images of holidays, in poetry's intensities, in significant silences, and in being "too merry with farms." The discussion begins showing how the numinous grasps radiant intensities at the intersections of sacred and mundane, for his numinous insights reveal paths to glory.

## ii. Accessing the numinous

Many of Murray's poems access the religious dimension in ordinary experience with its luminous significance. They find meaning in the numinous dimension, "this quietly perpetual thing, this ordinary ecstasy."<sup>335</sup> The numinous thrives in optimism about the fate of the world. Marilyn Knolder<sup>336</sup> notes Murray's perennial optimism especially in the second part of "The New Moreton Bay,"<sup>337</sup> about Australia's coming to terms with its convict past and its isolation and suffering by finding the grace of new life in a new land. Faith benefits enormously from using the numinous, yet unfortunately, our society's pervasive materialism prevents most people from accessing this religious dimension. Murray repairs the fracture that habitually misreads reality as unidimensional.

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<sup>335</sup> Les Murray, "Embodiment and Incarnation" *A Working Forest*, 316. See also Steven Matthews, *Les Murray*, 102.

<sup>336</sup> Marilyn Knolder, "The search for an authentic Australian spirituality: The poetry of James McAuley and Les Murray" *Compass Theology Review* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1993), 35-41.

<sup>337</sup> Les Murray, *Collected Poems 1961-2002* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2002), 170. Hereafter, *C.P. 1961-2002* so as not to be confused with Judith Wright *Collected Poems, C.P.*



In its Wholespeak language, the numinous grasps one's location in space and time<sup>338</sup> more properly as a journey to the Maker. Murray's operational concept of the numinous readily repairs loss of access to mystery, for the sacred contains both what is attractive and what is to be feared, both the fragile and the overwhelming forces. His authentic images of salvation express vulnerability such as in Rahner's words of the heart. They point towards wholeness and holiness like Heidegger's pursuit of Being. They access the sublime and they demonstrate the seven constants of Schillebeeckx. They pick up Rahner's "holy" dimension and Heidegger's *Dasein* moments.

Murray accesses the numinous as an act of the meditating mind. Usually, homiletic references to salvation raise its opposites, ill health, rejection, loss or damnation. These binaries are evident in Murray's poetry. However, as part of Christian anthropology, his images of hope, restoration and rescue transform these opposites; they reconnect readers positively to the natural events of the processes of living and dying. They communicate the basic faith view that the processes of life, both the fearful and the attractive, fall within the frame of the sacred plan.

Within salvation's coherence, the numinous perception relativises sickness, rejection and loss with their correlates, restoration, rescue and regeneration. Failing to value those processes imperils the balance of the person or community, as is shown in "The Burning Truck." His significant images reply to the very real risk of losing health, wholeness, or coherence as a community. Significantly, his images serve to redress the evils of extreme rationalism, alienation, ruptured relationships, woe, disaster, and the culture of violence.

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<sup>338</sup> Kinsella writes, in Murray, "there is a sense of moving through time and space, towards some metaphysical consciousness." John Kinsella, "Breaking Down the Barriers" [on-line] available: [www.johnkinsella.org/essays/breaking.html](http://www.johnkinsella.org/essays/breaking.html) [2005 September 27].

To explain, many of Murray's images gather up life narratives and so show how redemption is worked out in individual lives. Emanating from life narratives, his images of resolution like "the teapot of calm"<sup>339</sup> work differently from Wright's more philosophical ones. Although the several images examined in this chapter may not be necessarily connected in linear temporality, or even be very clearly delineated in themselves, the discussion proceeds to show how the intensity of some selected images occurring in Murray's poems justifies our attention. They demonstrate how the numinous grasps salvation being won along the road to glory.

Fusing poetical and religious visions, Murray's seminal idea of the numinous, as overwhelmingly attractive mystery interfacing the sacred and the mundane, adopts Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.<sup>340</sup> To fuse the experiential with the ideational, Otto devised his version of the numinous. Otto's concept of the numinous is an *a priori* concept like time or causality, "qualitatively different from anything that natural sense-perception is capable of giving us."<sup>341</sup> He was grounding religion not in morality but in a peculiar kind of experience. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) regarded metaphysical knowledge as an *a priori* concept, by using J. F. Fries' doctrine of the *Ahnung* (inkling, notion, surmise, foreknowledge) that permits one to access the holy or divine directly. So in the numinous grasp, salvation is perceived to be in action.

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<sup>339</sup> Murray, "Toward the Imminent Days" line 72, *C. P. 1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>340</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: In Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 9.

<sup>341</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 5. I correct Kane's German spelling in Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 187. Otto authority, Gregory D. Alles, in his review of Todd Gooch, "The Numinous and Modernity: An interpretation of Rudolf Otto's philosophy of religion" (New York: de Gruyter, 2000), notes: "Gooch points out how a proper understanding of Otto's claims requires the interpreter to be aware of the way Fries extended Kant's notion of *Erkenntnis* 'cognition', beyond the postulates of theoretical reason to include both ethics and aesthetics. Without that awareness, Otto's views on cognising the numinous will make little sense." *The Journal of Religion* 83.4 (October 2003), 654-656. For Murray's comments on *The Idea of the Holy*, see Peter Alexander, *A Life in Progress*, 92.

Pertinently for reading salvation in our times, commentator Gregory Alles observes that Otto does not limit numinous experience to Christianity. He sees it as present in all religions, and he “associates its earliest stages with the *tremendum*. For Otto religious experience [is] at heart irrational, incomprehensible, ineffable.”<sup>342</sup> In the numinous grasp, Murray conveys the sense of a wider framework explaining the whole cosmos; it is an interpretative framework for accessing hidden mystery. It challenges modernity’s claim to know and control the cosmos. It is not just an exercise of idealist impulses, but the unique form of engagement of a meditating mind. It enacts the intuition of faith to disclose the metaphysical source of humanity’s aches and yearnings.

While the poetic data do not say “salvation,” Murray describes it obliquely, in litotes as fulfilment of what is lacking:

Things lacking this radiance not wholly of light, this silence  
of momentous containment.<sup>343</sup>

While a reader is obviously free to focus on any indeterminacy in poems as a point of contact for any reading whether religious, artistic or otherwise, salvation is the central trope of religious sensibility. The numinous perception is the most relevant interpretative method for discerning this study’s religious focus that is salvation. As Pieterse and van der Ven note:

Just as human action is an interpretative category – we interpret behaviour (afterwards) as action – so is salvation. Without reflection there is no action,

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<sup>342</sup> Gregory D. Alles, “Towards a genealogy of the holy: Rudolf Otto and the apologetics of religion” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69.2 (June 2001), 323-342.

<sup>343</sup> Murray, “The Fire Autumn” lines 59-61, *Collected Poems* (1976) 1991:30.

without reflection there is no salvation. We interpret behaviour . . . or some actions, as salvation.<sup>344</sup>

Salvation is itself a learned category of interpretation.

The numinous is not group hysteria caught in the faith community. Within its interpretative framework, applying the numinous grasp is saving, for as he writes, “we are to be in the poem and live the impossible.”<sup>345</sup> Redmond notes how God, truth, presence and grace are recurring themes in his work.<sup>346</sup> To operationalise the numinous, Murray’s original Wholespeak-Otherworld<sup>347</sup> framework grants access to the necessary generality of its “blizzarding idea”<sup>348</sup> and the “blue dimensionlessness [of] an ideal.”<sup>349</sup> Murray names the ambit of the numinous as Wholespeak as distinct from the Narrowspeak of newspaper reporting for instance.<sup>350</sup> The numinous is best observed “ [as] an anomaly, [as] finite but inexhaustible,/ [and is] unaltered after analysis.”<sup>351</sup> The numinous grasps much more of reality. The numinous understanding better grants Wholespeak understanding in poetic images.

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<sup>344</sup> Hendrik J. C. Pieterse and Johannes van der Ven, “Human Rights: A Channel for Salvation?” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 16 (2003) 2, 55.

<sup>345</sup> “The Say-but-the-Word Centurion” lines 29-30, *New Selected Poems* (1998), 156.

<sup>346</sup> John Redmond, “Backing into the Outback” *Jacket* #1 1997, 3 [on-line] available: [jacketmagazine.com/01/redmond.html](http://jacketmagazine.com/01/redmond.html) [2003 April 03].

<sup>347</sup> See Les Murray, “Embodiment and Incarnation” especially 319-320 *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 309-325 and Paul Kane, “Les Murray and Poetry’s Otherworld” in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* 185-202 (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Jonny Baker (2000) puts it thus: “Les Murray contrasts the terms ‘narrowspeak’ and ‘wholespeak’ to elucidate his thinking on ways of talking about God. He suggests that in recent times (modernity) God talk has been severely reduced to narrowspeak, the voice of reason, rational and didactic ways of talking, the discourse of prose. It’s a language that has to make sense, be explained, and that everybody can understand. Wholespeak in contrast is a poetic discourse, mystical speech, a language which is ‘truly dreamed’.” Jonny Baker (2000) Labyrinth website [on-line] available: [web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/theorypage8.html](http://web.ukonline.co.uk/paradigm/theorypage8.html) [accessed 2005 September 19].

<sup>348</sup> Murray, “The Idyll Wheel” *C.P. 1961-2002*, 301.

<sup>349</sup> Murray, “The Idyll Wheel” *C.P. 1961-2002*, 300.

<sup>350</sup> “As well as [comprising] most of criticism, [narrowspeak is] most of the administrative language by which the world is ruled from day to day. Normal conversation isn’t quite narrowspeak because it contains far more remnants and echoes of poetic thinking and speech.” Les A. Murray, “Poemes and the mystery of embodiment” *Meanjin* 3 The Landscape Issue (1988), 519.

<sup>351</sup> Les Murray, “Satis Passio” lines 37-39, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 219.

Naturally then, because Wholespeak is “the immeasurable first step into Heaven,”<sup>352</sup> convergence, plenitude, fulfilment and harmony recur thematically in his work as powerful, relevant images of salvation. His images of liberation, transformation and rescue, such as “droving bees,”<sup>353</sup> “knee-deep in ferns,”<sup>354</sup> observing peppercorn puddles,<sup>355</sup> “growing a pumpkin by Christmas,”<sup>356</sup> surfing “applegreen blindness through the swells,”<sup>357</sup> and living the quality of sprawl,<sup>358</sup> depict humans gaining a harmonious relationship with their environment. So convergence, reconciliation, retrieval of identity and reverence are his major themes. This numinous/Wholespeak framework shows that, in the wider and divine domain beyond work and ideology, freedom, joy and faith are superbly and satisfyingly surprises in store for receptive humans.

This chapter presents readings of his poems as shown in Table 4. Seventeen poems chosen from ten anthologies yield ten themes. The themes comprise the ten virtues of salvation that frame this discussion. The chapter shows the power of these images to incite transformations, pursue their eschatological resonances, and strive to recapture their “original porosity between the divine and the human”<sup>359</sup> as numinous experience. In the images, numinous radiance shines through the ordinary.

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<sup>352</sup> Murray, “Satis Passio” lines 45-6, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 219.

<sup>353</sup> “Toward the Imminent Days” line 61, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>354</sup> Murray, “Noonday Axeman” line 63, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 5.

<sup>355</sup> “The Warm Rain” line 6, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 442.

<sup>356</sup> Murray, “Song Cycle” *C.P. 1961-2002*, 137.

<sup>357</sup> Murray, “Song Cycle” 12, line 1, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 144.

<sup>358</sup> *Learning Human* (2003), 42-43.

<sup>359</sup> William Desmond, “Religious imagination and the counterfeit doubles of God.” *Louvain Studies* 27.3 (Fall 2002), 290.

Name of poem and page number in Collected Poems 1961-2002	Source anthology	Thematic group	Virtue for salvation
“Animal Nativity” 374 “Mollusc” 361 “The Meaning of Existence” 551	<i>Translations from the Natural World</i> 1992 <i>Translations from the Natural World</i> 1992 <i>Poems the Size of Photographs</i> 2002	i. Salvation as glory in the natural world	Authentic imagination
“The Mitchells” 117 “The Euchre Game” 117	<i>Ethnic Radio</i> 1977 <i>Ethnic Radio</i> 1977	ii. Rituals reveal numinous realities	Seek non-violence
“An Immortal” 200 “The Powerline Incarnation” 122	<i>The People’s Other world</i> 1983	iii. Salvation involves critical choices	Hope and optimism
“Noonday Axeman” 3 “Recourse to the Wilderness” VR 21	<i>The Ilex Tree</i> 1965 <i>The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961-1981</i>	iv. Salvation supplies identity and continuity	Dream the transcendent
“Senryu” 31 “The Quality of Sprawl” 182-3	<i>The Weatherboard Cathedral</i> 1969 <i>The People’s Other world</i> 1983	v. Salvation denotes infinite possibilities	Bring newness
“Equanimity” 178 “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow” 28	<i>The People’s Other world</i> 1983 <i>The Weatherboard Cathedral</i> 1969	vi. Salvation is a shared gift	Insightful vulnerability
“The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle” 137-146	<i>Ethnic Radio</i> 1977	vii. Salvation imaged in holiday	Seek newness
“The Burning Truck” 1	<i>The Ilex Tree</i> 1965	viii. Salvation tests communal responses	Accountable actions
“Towards the Imminent Days” 39	<i>Poems against Economics</i> 1972	ix. Salvation imaged in promises	Responsible freedom
“The Warm Rain” 442	<i>Subhuman Redneck Poems</i> 1996	x. Salvation imaged in regeneration	Faith in the saviour
17 poems	From 10 anthologies	In 10 themes	10 virtues

Table 4: Outline for Chapter 3. Other Murray poems are quoted elsewhere.<sup>360</sup>

The discussion reads the poems in the first five themes to show salvation from an individual perspective, that (i) salvation is glory in the natural world, that (ii) rituals

<sup>360</sup> “The Broad-bean Sermon” is reproduced in Appendix 2.

presage future certainties, that (iii) salvation involves critical choices, that (iv) salvation supplies identity and continuity, and that (v) salvation denotes infinite possibilities.

### iii. Salvation as glory in the natural world

In one notable celebration of poetry's intensities about the ordinary, Murray has taken the Christmas crib scene for one celebration of glory. It shows the authentic imagination in action. His poem "Animal Nativity" (see Appendix 2) as part of the *Translations from the Natural World* (1992) anthology<sup>361</sup> celebrates that glory in the natural world at a crucial moment in its history. In five short verses of four lines each, the Bethlehem stable scene of the birth of the saviour is imaginatively revisited from the points of view of its participants. Even the non-human participants are given a voice, as in an Ignatian meditation.<sup>362</sup> These actors glimpse the numinous to perceive greater meanings that "shine through" an event and so intensify its radiance in the natural world. A wonderful demonstration of this perceptual shift occurs in his poem where all of nature is represented as rejoicing at the saviour's birth in that humble stable.

Key terms occur in each verse, highly metonymic in the Christian story: peace and girl (virgin), stable and manger, calf and lamb, snake and apple, crux and star.

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<sup>361</sup> Les Murray, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 374.

<sup>362</sup> In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius urges the exercitant to use the five senses to imagine even the finest details of the biblical scene, to imagine the realities of its time and circumstances, so as to feed the prayer. Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters including the text of The Spiritual Exercises* translated and introductions and notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996), for instance, pp. 305-8: "First Day: First Contemplation [106] Point 1: To see . . . [107], to hear . . . how they talk . . . and swear [112], to see with the eyes of the imagination [123], to hear [124], to smell and taste . . . [125], to touch."

Paradoxically, Jesus was no temporary “star” (in the sense of a self styled cynosure) yet he was the centre of attention, the reason for the event, the pivotal person, and the explanatory presence in that poor stable. Only the eyes of faith see the baby as its numinous explanation and inspiration, as the extraordinary significance in the not-so-ordinary event.

The poem relates that the Christian story grows its own Christian mythology, that is, a meta-text of this proto-event explaining all that precedes and follows it in history. Just as Homer’s *Iliad* was such a defining epic of the Greek society, so this manger scene is the beginning of the greatest story ever told. However, this event brings an “Iliad of peace” in contrast to that old Greek legend of war, violence and domination. To phrase it in Panikkar’s term, Murray’s theme at the saviour’s birth is a *cosmotheandric*<sup>363</sup> event, a divine-human-cosmic radiance where in this case all the animals, both great and small, were made to “feel vivid” as a result. Here is the divine-human harmony being realised: they do not react salamander-like to externals randomly but contemporaneously in a harmonious rhythm. The poem conveys that the salvation promised from of old is now guaranteed in the birth of this saviour. Its reality radiates (numenizes) even the non-human participants who witness it. Its radiance is its superabundance of meaning. In “The Fire Autumn,” he describes this intensity of radiance as a “momentous containment.”<sup>364</sup>

In this event of revelation to, and translation of the natural world, its participants pulse more truly to their natures, more truly as themselves – becoming more fisherly, more

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<sup>363</sup> Raimondo Panikkar’s term for that world-divine-human view of reality that integrates these three irreducible dimensions, which constitute the real. In *From Alienation to Atonement*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova: The Villanova University Press, 1977), 89, and Raimondo Panikkar, *Faith and Belief in Inter-Religious Dialogue: Some Principles*. (Mahwar, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1975), 83 and *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993).

<sup>364</sup> Murray, “The Fire Autumn” lines 60-61, *Collected Poems 1961-202*, 35.



goatily or more swallowly as a result of their participation. Like Chesterton's famed donkey humbled under the hosannas,<sup>365</sup> the creatures witnessing the saviour's nativity are granted appropriate perceptions about this youngling born in the stable before them, in terms appropriate to their own species. Swallows flit over a hatchling "turned human." Also true to their own natures, compliant cattle are content "that this calf must come in human form." Even Robert Bruce's famed spiders were not given the some high wisdom as these, enough to "discern a [fellow] water-walker." Normally restless "dogs crouch agog" when placed round the manger. Murray's religious imagination here is as serious as in medieval art. His poem conveys the miraculous and profound effects and significance of the Nativity; this advent of presence is indeed a translation of old into new. For now even mute nature is in adoration when its creator is set among his creatures. In radiating its effects to the non-human world, the animals' participant position permits Murray a unique surplus of signification.

The poem's voice explicates many numinous meanings. Since meaning is born in perception, humans are offered truth in revelatory events. These animals at the nativity however are (note the historic present re-enacts) more privileged to "sense" that this newborn babe is *the* lamb, the *Agnus Dei*, "He who frees from the old poem"(13). This child is identified as the deliverer, the Saviour, and the Lamb who would be slain for the salvation of the world. This is the one who perfects the Law, who rewrites the Sinai Covenant in his own blood. His birth and his life will "get death forgiven" and bring restoration of the original compact of Eden, "put the apple back." In short, he brings salvation<sup>366</sup> to life in an authentic exercise of the analogical imagination.

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<sup>365</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "The Donkey," in Pat Alexander, ed., *The Lion Book of Christian Poetry* (Sutherland, NSW: Lion Books, 1981), 84.

<sup>366</sup> "Salvation is understood to be whatever is considered to be the end, goal, destination, or destiny of human kind." Raimon Panikkar, *Faith and Belief* (1975), 83. Through its holistic complementarity within the whole of reality, these animals could be said to witness that salvation being realised in this Birth.

The poem's simple brevity belies its profound wisdom. "Animal Nativity," demonstrates how the ordinary mediates the numinous. This poem explicates theological meanings about the world's salvation. The viewpoint moves from creatures' perceptions to a more generalised, impersonal voice, so that this child's birth gives meaning to history. In it, the advent of his Presence translates old songs or themes into new ones. From manger to cross, sign to reality, from Star of Bethlehem to Son of God, this child's birth is "a crux of presence remembered as a star" (19-20). That crucial intersection of images in starving animals and human poverty becomes a public icon for Christian service. In stressing the particulars, this poetry affirms the general, to reveal underlying mystery in the ordinary. This poem provides a significant meditation upon a critical moment in the history of salvation.

The process of accessing the numinous, permitting readers to recognise salvation, is further demonstrated in "Mollusc"<sup>367</sup> (see Appendix 2). Here again, Murray celebrates the divine plan in ordinary processes as exemplified in the purposive activities of this tropical sea snail. Every rank of creation has its due role to play in the universe and that is how it was ordained; salvation is the design outcome of natural processes; it comes when each creature observes the law of its entitlement in the universe just as the mollusc does. Echoing this point elsewhere, Murray observes: "Birds in their title work freeholds of straw."<sup>368</sup> Unfortunately alone among creatures, humankind seems blind to this natural law of design and teleology.<sup>369</sup> Salvation implies that God is immanent in creation, and is sensed in the numinous. Pertinently, the mollusc's organic life

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<sup>367</sup> *C.P. 1961-2002*. 361.

<sup>368</sup> "Birds in their title work freeholds of straw" from *Poems against Economics* (1972). *C.P. 1961-2002*, 57.

<sup>369</sup> The mollusc's adaptations here strikingly parallel those in Goldsmith's "The Mole" "The eye is perfectly fitted to the animal situation. . . . It is wonderfully adapted by Nature" in "An history of the earth" (1774) excerpted in John Gross, ed., *The New Oxford Book of English Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257.

reflects its creator's evolutionary directionality. This is no boondoggle. Murray's analogy here adds to the fresh lexicon about salvation because it coaxes the imagination towards faith in that mystery.

This is no reworking of the argument from design; it applies it with poetic intensity. With five leading present participles, the silent work of this humble creature is affirmed and celebrated. The poet finds thirteen attributes in the mollusc to celebrate. Each is introduced litany-like by the same preposition, "by . . ." Its serenity in equipoise, its "toppling motion" is a "lifelong kiss", its passage over razor sharp edges is wondrous to behold, its place in a seemingly limitless evolutionary scale ("Oligocene" dates it from the third epoch of the Tertiary period of prehistory lasting fifteen million years) make it a living but silent witness to the wonder and endurance of life on Earth. The mollusc's organic life-cycle shares in the creator's gift and models evolutionary directionality. Its quite uncelebrated life is a model for patiently and surely attaining human salvation that comes in living true to one's nature.

To recapitulate, Murray crystallises the translations of glory into the natural world with a prayer to celebrate its activity: "May this and every snail sense itself an ornament [in the great] weave of presence." In its life and activity in the microcosmic world, this sea snail "ornaments" the macro, not as mere decoration for added variety but in the more profound sense of re-presenting within itself and its work the whole evolution of life on earth. For Christian readers, the mollusc's purposive activity radiates design and purpose by reflecting the activity of nature and the creative presence of the creator and sustainer of life.

Similarly again, in his poem “The Meaning of Existence,”<sup>370</sup> Murray interprets nature, or in his word, “translates” it, brings it to life, in an authentic exercise of the analogical imagination in this same way when he writes:

Trees, planets, rivers, time  
know nothing else. They express it [the meaning of existence]  
moment by moment as the universe” (lines 4 -5).

In this way, poetry provides the categories of interpretation for a reflection on salvation being available at every moment.

In exploring numinous experiences, Judith Wright and Les Murray agree. Nature’s amazing diversity must not delude us into overlooking its totality. Nature’s simplicity and interrelatedness must surely model our dispositions about ourselves and towards one another. Schillebeeckx’s constants apply: when humans recognise and comply with their corporeal nature, when humans find respect for themselves and one another as connected in the great web of life, they actually build salvation in harmony with nature. In this way, salvation may be accessed in an authentic exercise of the analogical imagination as glory in the natural world.

#### iv. Rituals reveal numinous realities

In celebrating eating rituals as numinous, Murray stresses the essentially social nature of humankind. For instance, in “The Mitchells”<sup>371</sup> (see Appendix 2), after digging a hole, two men have a bush lunch of billy tea and meat sandwiches. Their discussion is very sparse indeed but meaningful; the authorial voice observes, “Nearly everything they say

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<sup>370</sup> *C.P. 1961-2002*, 551.

<sup>371</sup> Murray, *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (hereafter AARP) 45, and *Collected Poems* 1976 (1991), 104, *New Selected Poems* (1998) 17, and *C.P 1961-2002*, 117.

is ritual” (lines 13-14). Two of the standard features of sacramental rituals are their sparseness and clear symbolism,<sup>372</sup> and so Murray’s use of the term, ritual, here is technical in that what they say and do is already understood and reaffirmed in its repetition: they share the unspoken understanding that both share the common blood and remembered history of the family of Mitchells. Their campfire meal ritual has Wholespeak dimensions: it affirms what is not said and presages some future certainties that salvation invites. Certainly, one of salvation’s realities is the fireside non-violence.

While being focused on a sacred icon in the Australian ethos, eating together in the bush round a campfire, this poem’s short fourteen lines speak beyond a local purpose to hallow the boons of family, belonging and keeping company. Critic Lawrence Bourke notes how its characters “become emblematic figures or ‘types’ in an historical, national and ultimate universal narrative”<sup>373</sup> in line with Murray’s desire to image unchanging patterns of behaviour and enduring character types. Their absolutely ordinary, ritual behaviour reveals the numinous, almost sacramental structure of their bonds, their blood relationships, and their shared sense of time. For the believing reader, the numinous perception “understands” the structures their reality, their space and time location, and interprets it. For Murray then, ritual works in everyday life to enormously productive and even saving effect. This poetic image shows how their easy ritual reveals the immediate and dynamic reality of salvation’s processes.

So rituals reveal the numinous realities. Murray’s usual pattern is to portray a slice of experience and then to suggest the numinous within it. For instance, in its mere sixteen

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<sup>372</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* trans. P. Madigan and M. Beaumont (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), Ch. 1 especially: Sacraments are: visible - are recognizable; distinctive in themselves; understandable; are corporeal - involve gesture, silence posture, participation; are perceptual - lead to new understandings generated; iconic to a symbolic world; and are social.

<sup>373</sup> Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 25.

lines, “The Euchre Game”<sup>374</sup> is not unlike “The Mitchells” for showing how a ritual engagement structures a social reality, in the way religion does. In such a positive framework, eventual justice is assured. The poem relates how some players believe their card game is sheer chance, but for others that chance must deliver justice to their benefit. The narrative fragment reaches a philosophical turn when the poetic voice pauses to observe: “Intelligence here / is interest and the refusal of relegation.”<sup>375</sup> In his prose writings further described below, Murray uses this term to describe any social exclusion especially racial exclusion. This turn in the poem celebrates the saving value of inclusivity in its denial of exclusivity, in its affirmation of a future where justice is attained, where everyone accepts his responsibilities in a non-violent vision of humanity.

The poem’s concluding line clinches the argument: “the game’s loosely sacred; luck is being worked at” as if to say that their trust in the justice of their cause for recognition of Aboriginal rights will be addressed in good time, but right now simple luck and skill at cards anticipate its benefits. In effect, the poem demonstrates how injustice distorts one’s shared humanity. In the players’ calm acquiescence and mutuality, they are celebrating their present reality as a foretaste of the justice that they all deserve. Rather than adopt a didactic tone however, this poem demonstrates its success in a particular embodiment. It very much ritualises that banquet of salvation by foreshadowing its eschatological consequences. Just as sacramental ritual makes present the eschatological conclusion to things, such social ritual reveals numinous meanings like non-violence.

#### v. Salvation involves critical choices

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<sup>374</sup> *AARP* 62, *C.P.* 1961-2002, 117.

<sup>375</sup> Lines 9-10. It is not possible to underrate the power of this key term “relegation” in Murray. It is the key to much of his fight against injustice. See his usage in the “Our Man in Bunyahh” column, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 75, 162, and Kane, *Romanticism and Negativity*, 195.

More philosophically, salvation depends on making critical choices. Murray's poem, "An Immortal",<sup>376</sup> asks many questions upon experience to reveal its numinous substructures, and in so doing, builds up a climactic meditation on life and death. I treat this twenty-one line, three-stanza poem in three stages: the accusation, the evidence and the verdict. First is the accusation where a graffiti image of youthful daring with death in all the seriousness seen of a comic superhero. It seems the boy is driven by one of the many immortals, or perennial drives in human life.<sup>377</sup> For this youth, daring is the positive drive for heightened experience, using speeding as the substitute for the ecstasy of heightened experience, substitutes for genuine hope and optimism.

This psychological drive is a universal and perennial yearning among humans. For some, it appears as a demand for satisfaction in the present, in self-indulgence and immediate satisfaction in *hubris* and foolishness.<sup>378</sup> But in others, it appears as the genius of creativity, in an impetus to serve and patiently remain open to any possibility of transformation. Some strive hard to grasp it and fail; some mistakenly claim it prematurely, while others fall away achieving only its shadow in the certainty of death. The poem presents conflict within its youthful character himself as "the battleground of salvation,"<sup>379</sup> when he is caught in the dialectics between salvation and damnation, in a raw battle of spirits, impulses, and appetites in that quest for transcendence outside the comfort of metaphysical coherences like genuine hope and optimism in a saviour.

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<sup>376</sup> AARP 67, C.P. 1961-2002, 200.

<sup>377</sup> Kevin Hart's words come to mind: "It's something I cannot control, some wild thing / Pawing inside me / A wolf and a lamb in one / hunts me from within." "The Beast" lines 2, 3, 10 *Flame Tree*, 59.

<sup>378</sup> Read this poem aware of an image of rural boredom: "a boy bored rigid / with farmwork sights along a noble light-draining / sword blade held at the level of his mouth" lines 34-36, "The Man with the Hoe" in David Impastato, ed., *Upholding Mystery: An anthology of contemporary Christian poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 119, surprisingly not in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*.

<sup>379</sup> I borrow Vincent Buckley's phrase in *Poetry and the Sacred*, 29.

In the course of the poem, this immortal, a perennial impulse, is first of all accused. Murray couches its ugly effects in references to Homeric tones and taunts as in classical literature to show that this drive has a long and deep historical precedence. He identifies this foolhardy drive in humans as a universal spirit incarnated when humans commit excesses, going beyond their assigned and mortal limits. Using the contrast approach above, it appears too often as “lord of the demi-suicides”. As bathos, “demi-suicides” incurs a special opprobrium.<sup>380</sup> This dramatic device powers the interrogatory, accusatory tone of the first stanza.

Further on, this drive to immortality is identified as death, that appears in the frantic screaming of a fatal motorcar crash that, “stills a screaming among the jagged images” (line 4). Death stills the blue haze raised high through daredevil skidding rubber on bitumen, and stills that foolhardy activity into deathly silence. This Grim Reaper suddenly stills a reckless drive with certain death. Immortal death is invisible yet ever-present and real for its impact and power. This immortal is felt in the effects it causes; impulse and addiction (“harness”) show his clutches to be fatal. This second immortal then is Death, an ever-present, perennial shadow over mankind, who is the invisible opposite to Life, the friend of humans.

Stanza two outlines the evidence of the work of these immortals in the universal but false drive to risk all: he is both destructive in excess and creative in his impulse. It appears both in greed and excess of power and also brings inspiration and creativity to artists. He even appears in the risk of love, mirrored in the eyes of “the Beholder.”

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<sup>380</sup> Murray: “I have always been fascinated by the question of how it is possible, even with the help of deadening stoicism or maniac laughter, to live with the darker aspects of human frightfulness.” *Killing the Black Dog* (Annandale, NSW: The Federation Press, 1997), 13.



Stanza three continues the adjudication to sift the evidence of the initial accusation to reach a verdict. This Warrior suppressed within humans, now incarnated in the lone venturer and the foolish daredevil, is the Will to Power within our natures. Once fascinated by the siren music of charms and illusions, mankind finds itself unable to find any sense of salvation. Once touched by his “wheeled blade” like the not-rod enthusiast, such people thus captured or “inflected by glory” and bedazzled by speed seem never able to retrieve what is their true worth as humans. Thus won over by this false Immortal, they lose the gift of salvation cut off forever beyond reprieve, reproach or return. This risky skidding is no kidding, for this kind of hubris is indeed the deadly serious dance of death. This intoxication with self and hubris, egotism and self-justification is necessarily closed and humourless. In this logic, infected by its lethal tonic, the wheeled aficionado necessarily becomes so headstrong he goes beyond the reach of salvation. He lacks genuine hope and optimism.

In ironic sonnet form, the poem’s final clinching couplet shows how, on idle evenings, the country townspeople “burn” in wonder and frustration, tantalised by the immortals’ particular incarnation in the youth spinning his car out of control in wheelies, daring death and risking immortal loss. Death is physical and final, serious and decisive. In such a lethal game, the youth is infected by his ego’s drive to go beyond his natural limits. On the other hand, it is implied, life is free, open to wider possibilities, is humorous, and indeed overall a better choice. The poem’s verdict falls against this immortal appetite.

This poem is a pertinent and complex meditation upon critical choices, exploring the evidence for death or for life, for physicality or for spirituality. The hammer-falling punch line phrase, “unbelief in joking” clinches a meditation upon critical attitudes and

choices. If people choose the false immortal in physicality and immediacy, they get death; but if they have the capacity to wait for mystery and with a tolerance for ambiguity, they transcend immediate certainties, predictabilities and answers to reach the more humane free space of creativity to glory. That solution, it is suggested, is a better state to be in, although “we will never find out, living” (15). Genuine hope and optimism overcome felt miseries.

Making a critical choice reveals the numinous truth, for its criticality accesses the very structures of reality. To help access numinous truths, poets might be said to mediate salvation, as unpaid volunteers, “conscripted to storm the house of meaning” (16). Their readers reach the people’s Otherworld, (a distinctive theme in Murray) quite probably because people enable poets to communicate in their own relevant intensities. As carriers of sacred truth, they “have stayed inside, with the music” (17), comforted and entranced, while others seeking fulfilments outside community remain self-interested, secretive, sequestered, indulged, self-limiting, addicted or entangled, still ignorant of their own potentials and unrealised possibilities. Accessing the numinous meaning about life in genuine hope and optimism yields the salvation for which everyone hungers.

Selecting salvation must inevitably deselect its opposites. This poem dramatises salvation’s opposites, evil, egotism, loss, and death. The youth’s possession by the spirit of the immortal is itself a contemporary alienation, an unfortunate self-inflicted damnation, or perhaps more radically, a critique of the materialist society that deceives him to accept its allurements. They deliver his death. The poem exemplifies consequences of excess as it is paraded in that dusty, rural, impromptu drag-racing futility. Its sheer familiarity provides the terror in this poem.

One useful way to understand this lesson in life choices is to see it as a fracture between life course and life story.<sup>381</sup> Life story and life events have a dialectic relationship as “life course presents the material for the life story as well as the arena where the life story is enacted.”<sup>382</sup> As the story-telling species, humans need to construe events in narrative. The telling of the life story has a performative<sup>383</sup> force in construing life’s meaning. When serious gaps appear between the emerging information of life events and the chosen story path, when there is a dialectical tension or cognitive dissonance between event and vision, this crack could be called a cultic “crack of doom.”<sup>384</sup> This poem centres round that flaw that lacks the saving awe of genuine hope and optimism.

For this poem’s young man, no longer the author of his destiny and unable to assume acceptable societal roles, life becomes a fragmented life story. Without the “narrative smoothing” of religious frameworks to provide personal identity, social place and coherence in his life, a psychologically harmful “distanciation from the world”<sup>385</sup> and from society occurs. Murray dramatises this evil that proves fatal. The young man seeking the immortal in the superhero impulse allows life course to overtake his life narrative. He foregoes the coherence that the chosen narrative of salvation supplies.

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<sup>381</sup> R. Ruard Ganzevoort, “A lifelong yearning for shalom: Narrative connections between life course and salvation.” In R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Heye K. Heyen, eds., *Weal and Woe: Practical-theological explorations of salvation and evil in biography* (Münster: LIT, 2004), 53.

<sup>382</sup> Ganzevoort, “Yearning for shalom,” 53.

<sup>383</sup> Ganzevoort, “Yearning for shalom,” 54.

<sup>384</sup> Ganzevoort, “Yearning for shalom,” 54 citing L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row Peterson, 1957), n.p.

<sup>385</sup> Ganzevoort, “Yearning for shalom,” 57, Ricoeur’s term for “that distance between a work of art and its authorial intention, from its initial situation and from its primitive audience.” David Stewart quoting Ricoeur, “Philosophy and religious language (1975) in “Ricoeur on Religious Language” in Lewis E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 436.

One of the many immortals examined in this poem, life's saviour, is referred to indirectly in the terms "the Beloved" and the "Warrior". Metaphysical questions about origins and destiny are usually the proper domain of philosophy, while life's numinous substructure is a suitable subject focus for religion. Murray's anthropology bridges that gulf: mankind has a drive to a fulfilling destiny but false agents restrict one's rightful freedom in choosing the right immortal to follow. The youth's idiot behaviour stems from his inability to find community, mutuality and satisfying fellowship. Unfortunately, such a critical choice to live in community decides one's salvation.

Murray investigates another critical moment of ordinary experience in "The Powerline Incarnation"<sup>386</sup> (reprinted in Appendix 2) where the poet narrates a simple event of rescue from near-electrocution after attempting to remove power lines that had fallen on the roof. In a split narration interweaving the conscious and rational with an unconscious and irrational dream in the throes of electric shock quite nearly fatal, the poet reconstructs a victim's last frantic thoughts, "a meaninglessness coming / over the circuits / the god's deserting me." Having had this near-death electrocution experience myself in May 1964, I relate to it readily, when the past and the present collide in a final fumble for breath. Quite easily, this image coaxes the imagination towards the mystery that is salvation.

Certainly the shock produces an ironic experience of fantasy about fame: "I make a hit in towns / I've never visited. I plough the face of Mozart / And Johnny Cash. " The whole unreal experience of being a celebrity tingles the ego and sings the body in an expressed realisation both of the individual's contingency and of the wondrous power of

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<sup>386</sup> AARP 83, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 122. Compare with Wright, "Power" *C.P.*, 222.

the electricity grid he accidentally got plugged into.<sup>387</sup> Being granted life again “jumped the graphs / transited the dreams / to sustain my jazz” is a regret that an ungraspable light glimpsed then is now beyond reach.

In an interweaving of the language of electricity and afterlife fulfilment, the poet concludes with an insight that the great white space in the sky sought by religious cults is no substitute for the real “Friend” of Christian faith whom he called upon in his distress. These two poems, “An Immortal” and “The Powerline Incarnation” stress the power of choice in choosing a life story over life course. Salvation is not assured; it is found best in a community’s narrative. This discussion shows that hope in a genuine saviour is a necessary virtue for probing the mystery that is salvation.

#### vi. Salvation supplies identity and continuity

Schillebeeckx’s sixth constant posits there is some ultimate perspective beyond our needs which inspires, and to which humankind should aspire. Clearly that dimension must be communal, the strongest bond of continuity in life. My readings upon “Recourse to the Wilderness” and “Noonday Axeman” show how the virtue of dreaming the transcendent saves identity and continuity in a life narrative.

For the poet, silence is not a negative state but a productive arena for realising salvation. An appreciation of the religious and para-religious consciousness occurs in the silence, such as in Murray’s “Recourse to the Wilderness,”<sup>388</sup> an obituary to his friend Peter

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<sup>387</sup> Bourke writes: “The electric shock offers an epiphany, a confrontation with the face of the god in the Machine [sic].” *A Vivid Steady State*, 92.

<sup>388</sup> Les Murray, “Recourse to the Wilderness: For Peter Barden” in *Collected Poems*, 21, and *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 24.

Baden.<sup>389</sup> Here the poet's memory revisits the wide Australian outback. In his own voice and penniless in Sydney, Murray muses about happier times since his university days when frivolous games "put spine into shapeless days" (27). In dreaming the transcendent, the poem celebrates Peter's simple innocence and their transformative friendship when he and Les met in the limitless time and space of the wide Australian Outback beyond Port Augusta where Peter worked as a mining engineer.

These recollections convey well the appeal and dynamism of the silent plains, the burnt mountains, the glittering sky, the blind grey scrub and the dust devil. This recollection of times together concludes to clinch the tribute to say that their games together "sustained me like water" in the desert. Such friendships recreate and sustain everyone, and their rituals bring images of the certainties of salvation through mediating such unconditional belonging. Being autobiographical, the poem becomes a statement of the poet's faith too. Wistful, nostalgic and even elegiac in mood, the poet connects his grief with cameo descriptions and happy memories of life with Peter Barden.

Murray here certainly reminds me of Hopkins celebrating the landscape and spirituality in "Pied Beauty" and "God's Grandeur"<sup>390</sup> with his neologisms, word play and philosophical musings. He resolves his grief on an optimistic note: the Outback offers a sense of the boundless in its infinite silence of sky and land. This silence also is creative. In his sixth stanza comes a one-line key to the reverie, that he was sustained by and fascinated with "the *is*-ful and the *ah!*-ness of things" (33).<sup>391</sup> Now in his dreaming

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<sup>389</sup> Murray, "The Human-Hair Thread" *Meanjin* 36.4 (December 1977), 553 and *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (London: Minerva, 1992), 92-3.

<sup>390</sup> *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, third edition, 855.

<sup>391</sup> This phrase could well sum up what I call Murray's metaphysics of radiance in things. Glover writes: "These poems seem to be shining lights from within. . . . He succeeds as a poet because he convinces us that the most ordinary things are in fact truly extraordinary: the 'is-full ah!-nesses of things' is a phrase of his which sums up that attitude." Michael Glover, "The

recollection, memories of their friendship still sustain him. His faith in the gifts of friendship and creation were morale-sustaining gifts. These memories save him.

Murray shows that silence is not a negative state but a productive arena for realising identity and continuity. Dreaming the transcendent is a virtue for attaining salvation. An appreciation of the religious and para-religious consciousness occurs in the silence celebrated in “Noonday Axeman”.<sup>392</sup> Here we hear the interior voice of the axeman, now the poet, working on his land and reflecting on its heritage and his own bonds with it. A longer poem in twenty-one four-line verses, this simple narration of felling trees is interspersed with weighty recollections specifically about the natural silence of leaf *surrusus*.

Silence is proposed here as a quality far superior to the clamour of city. The thematic words “silence” or “stillness” occur some twenty-five times in its mere eighty lines. First described is the benign silence or stillness of the bush itself, it then becomes the humanised silence of the land worked by those generations now passed on. As well as the strange and sudden noonday silence of most intense heat, there is the ever-present stillness after labour, a concept which is furthered to become “the presence of silence”, in fact “the silence of trees,” a natural state against which men foolishly fight. In 1977, Murray described such bush silence as “wild sound”: “the low, aggregate *surrusus* which emanates from living landscape. Nature is never wholly silent.”<sup>393</sup> In “The Fire Autumn,” he describes this silence as the numinous radiance, “this silence of

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metaphysics of a corned beef supper” Review of *New Collected Poems*, by Les Murray, *The Independent online edition* [on-line] [enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article122304.ece](http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article122304.ece)[3October2005]

<sup>392</sup> Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1965), 31, *CP 1961-2002*, 3. Compare with Wright’s “Silence” *C.P.*, 121.

<sup>393</sup> Murray, “The Human-Hair Thread” *Meanjin* 36.4 (December, 1977), 564.

momentous containment.”<sup>394</sup> Clearly this noon silence contains or radiates much meaning for the axeman: a silence in isolation and pristine beauty, a silence filled with memories of local history, and finally a metaphysical space beneath consciousness holding all dualities in primal tension. This caesura in work in forest silence saves by enabling recollections of his connectedness with ancestors and the creator.

This perception conflates to become a conception of a “dreaming silence” for locating the poet psychologically in the flow of time as well as geographically in his Bunyah valley. His pioneering forefathers are said to have necessarily made “a human breach in the silence” in life until they passed from this silence to “into great silence” after death. Their silence becomes a touchstone for the rural man; others, unable to bear it, rush back to the cities in retreat. In this access to the eternal silence, life is viewed as a sacred site. The almost animistic silence becomes metonymic of the central Still point of creation. Salvation as life, as social continuity and as coherence with nature is glimpsed in such simple experiences of the numinous. Those insightful moments signal that salvation time is at hand when dreaming the transcendent stillness.

Others read this poem as a trope of negativity,<sup>395</sup> arguing that negative theology is very wary of any ability to speak the true-to-life positive. The poem certainly accesses a description of a dearly felt conception, for clearly the bush even at noon rustles with its life. The poem successfully deals with the conditions of life, the quality of experience, and the horizon of sublimity. It might even be read as describing a deprivation of an ambient security that others need or as a qualitative waiting for fulfilment. Certainly, the silence the poet listens to is contiguous with the great silence his forefathers inhabit. That numinous perception grasps more of salvation’s plenitude.

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<sup>394</sup> Murray, “The Fire Autumn” lines 60-61, *Collected Poems 1961-202*, 35.

<sup>395</sup> Paul Kane, “Romanticism and Negativity,” 199.



Suggesting that this silence is highly desirable, the poem draws attention to the quality of silence in his homestead valley. To recapitulate, the poet images his preferred life, “walking knee-deep in ferns”(63), as freedom, connection with nature, and belonging to the earth. This observation has a simple, charming quality and appeal. This cameo image infers a rescue from idleness, man-made noise, confusion, senselessness and city impersonality. Walking in the ferns suggests it is possible for a man to enjoy a natural coherence with the natural environment, and to be honestly companionable with his environment. This salvational thinking asserts that life is best when enjoyed in such coherences. This image feeds a spirituality hungry for integrations of body and mind.

Walking knee-deep in ferns shows that dreaming the transcendent grants identity and continuity in real time. Poetry is timeless but poems reflect their times and speak to them. Judith Wright harked back to the colonial past in “Bullocky” to recover some national identity and a sense of the “fair go” that she felt was so lacking in the forties. For David Malouf, continuities<sup>396</sup> with the future are achieved by drawing on what is significant in the past. Malouf’s characters never seem daunted or terrified by the past. For instance, in *Remembering Babylon*, Gemmy’s whole purpose is to reject his “aboriginal” past now he has found a new present. Overall, Malouf seems to imply that, “What’s done can never hurt us.” In Murray’s “Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle,”<sup>397</sup> the past is as present as ever. The proper place names remain as they always have. Erosion, change and disappearance do not occur; change is just not a fact in this landscape. Stable memories give it some coherence.

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<sup>396</sup> David Malouf, “With breath just condensing on it” in Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch (eds.) *Conversations: Interviews with Australian Writers* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson Imprint, 1991), 178, 193.

<sup>397</sup> *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 137f.

In Murray's grasp, past time is ever present. His Boeotian sense of time especially influences the present. His past infuses the present. This is expressed well in "Noonday axeman" where it fits with a religious sense of salvation. While the numinous insight radiates meaning, it gathers meanings from the past to understand the phenomena of the present. The numinous forgets the clock in its everyday ecstasy, for it gathers learnt, perceived and radiant meanings into one intense perception.

In "Noonday Axeman," the depicted axeman listens to the same silence his forefathers inhabit. This poem images the quality of silence in Murray's homestead valley in an affirming way, approving of a final peace always possible in the present. The past's ever-present griefs reconcile perceptions of the present. Critic Andrew Taylor notes<sup>398</sup> how the past in Murray is "indwelling, co-present with and within the present." It seems Murray's past hurts, rejections, family ruptures and losses constantly impinge on his present life, and this is reflected in his poetry. Taylor argues that the imperfectness of the past needs Murray's present to complete it. He chooses to name his chapter on Murray by the grammatical name for a past tense that is continuous and unfinished (past imperfect). The past it seems is not simply done (simple past tense), nor is it completed and can be severed (past perfect) in linear time. Murray's past is continuous with the present, influencing, shaping and even conditioning it. The past is a pattern for the present. Consequently, the riches, the insights, the gains of the past cannot be dismissed without severe loss. Murray's past reckons with the present. The future is part of its cycle of causality.

In one key instance of dreaming transcendent possibilities, "convergence" describes the longed-for fusion of white and Aboriginal cultures proposed in "The Human-hair

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<sup>398</sup> Andrew Taylor, "The past imperfect of Les A. Murray" *Reading Australian Poetry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987), 154

Thread.”<sup>399</sup> Here Murray fuses time and memory to produce significant insights of meaning and worth for present time perceivers. This is the intensely significant benefit of his dreamtime thinking; it yields much more than the Narrowspeak, slice-of-time grasp of meaning others commonly have.

So what are the implications for salvation when dreaming of transcendent possibilities? Clearly, salvation is a present reality being won on a day to day basis. Some poetic images of salvation predict future boons and indicate inspirational certainties. Like Schillebeeckx’s constants, they offer only outlines or guidelines to better futures. The images fix significant moments in life narratives (warm rain, teapot, wedding vows, farms, sitting among ferns) to dream resolutions of conflicts. In that sense then they show salvation being won somewhere, in small ways. They help recompose the broken mirror of salvation from partial images. The images infuse present time circumstances with future possibilities. They offer inspirational force as moments of salvation being won, as encouragements to be courageous, creative, and coherent. Because transcendent dreaming initiates the numinous perception, these images narrate salvation.

vii. Salvation denotes infinite possibilities

Salvation denotes the pursuit of almost infinite possibilities in newness and creativity. Murray’s poem “Senryu”<sup>400</sup> offers a haiku-like joke about mankind’s longing for eternal life. “Senryu” is a creative exploration of the numinous. Just as youth pills are jokingly wished for, so someone would almost immediately overdose on eternal life pills if they were released. Here, the poet suggests longing for eternity (like the world’s thirst) is intrinsic to human nature. In such instinctive behaviour towards life, there

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<sup>399</sup> Murray, “The Human-hair Thread” *Meanjin* 36.4 (December 1977), 550-572.

<sup>400</sup> *AARP* 86, *C.P.* 1961-2002, 31.

resides a seed of the divine within humankind. Salvation denotes infinite possibilities for, like a compass needle being natural (in Wright's image of salvation), that instinct to seek newness is good and truth-revealing.

Salvation's mandates of relatedness and responsibility echo Schillebeeckx's anthropological constant about the social self in society. Just as Judith Wright fought to resist gender hierarchies, Murray recognises the very strong hold that society claims over its every member. His ode to newness appears in "The Quality of Sprawl"<sup>401</sup> (Appendix 2). For Murray, beliefs and feelings are qualitatively different from sense perception in their access to infinite possibilities. A bridge between them is symbolised in the grace of spontaneous generosity called sprawl. The poem challenges any pejorative preconceptions about this rather droll Australian behaviour. It touches the numinous with parallel evocations such as Shakespeare's, "the quality of mercy is not strain'd."<sup>402</sup> Murray's journal describes this virtue as "the spiritual quality I call sprawl."<sup>403</sup> This poem coaxes the imagination to consider mystery.

"The Quality of Sprawl" is a memorable fifty-one-line poem breaking out from five regular into three irregular verses.<sup>404</sup> There is a ridiculous element in sprawl, in overturning the neat, the tidy, the predictable and the rational. Murray takes the humour further to suggest it connotes larrikinism, intelligent daring, high farce or even the pursuit of infinite possibilities. The poem identifies sprawl as that quality in the man who dares to debunk the hallowed, totemic name of Rolls Royce by cutting one back to be a utility truck for hay, and the poem relates, sprawl is also what the company lacked when it tried to buy it back to "repair its image" (6). Sprawl rejects an

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<sup>401</sup> See also "The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever" *C. P. 1961-2002*, 233.

<sup>402</sup> Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice" IV.i.189-190.

<sup>403</sup> Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>404</sup> Les Murray, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 182-3.

all-too-precious protection of the self and any undue interference in the freedom of the individual in whatever he chooses. Other examples follow to illustrate this new-found, little-valued virtue: it is displayed when one herds sheep or cattle by aeroplane; it is “driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home.” Sprawl is the invention of considered forms of daring.

Evidently too, sprawl is a quality of generosity and spontaneity, a gift of regard for one’s rightful individuality. Yet it is not ostentatious, wasteful, crass, brutal, vulgar, violent, cheap or without regard for others’ human rights. Sprawl does not occur in expressions of adherence to “Society” or “Style.” It is not eccentricity or vulgar displays of misuse of wealth. Sprawl grants the baker’s dozen; it goes beyond expectations harmlessly, generously and unpredictably. Generosity is a sign of God; salvation is evidenced now in virtues like this.

As a human quality or even virtue the poem continues, sprawl appears in the arts, in history, in society, in politics, and is an image of the poet’s country, although not enough of it appears yet. Sprawl is the wink of knowing, undercutting the politics of high drama, the unfeigned directness in redressing injustice, while yet knowing the limits and relativities of the situation. Sprawl is not demonstrated in a brutal crusade, nor is it violent or cruel to persons, “not harming the official.” The poet even admits he has enough sprawl in him not to remember every factual detail of famous paintings. Sprawl is also forbearing of persons and freeing from demands to meet social, cultural, educational and societal expectations, and human standards and frames of reference.

Sprawl disregards and defies genre expectations, such as in reduplicating the octet-sestet structure of the standard sonnet by interleaving as many more lines again as one wishes. The regular six-line verses give way after the fifth, when the last three

comprise five, nine and seven lines respectively to convey in its own flexible format<sup>405</sup> the stretching legs of the poem's own freed, local and anecdotal language. Even the poem's form demonstrates sprawl.

Sprawl occurs in the unforeseen, even the unspeakable, the lateral, the imaginative, the subversive, and the debunking of sophistication, pretension, deceit, and categorizing style. Sprawl is serious comedy, instantly recognisable, verging on the tasteless, an uncategorisable excess of unconventionality pointing to man's scope for infinite possibilities of action, expression and development. Sprawl is innocently foolish at times but harmlessly so. Sprawl is an expression of one's basic humanity, that apparently anti-intellectual unconsciousness that allows others to be themselves and in so doing is unselfconsciously courageous and thus genuinely virtuous. The poet opines: if only it were "an image of my country!" Furthermore, sprawl is "loose-limbed in the mind," remarkably free of predetermined structure and convention conforming. In fact, it is not reactive but dynamic, a force that "leans on things", that tests the limits, looking for authenticity, honesty and the true self. In fact, sprawl is "roughly Christian," for it is open, available, upright, and non-foetal, opening up to newness through its thoughtfully disarming indifference.<sup>406</sup>

This poem honours Schillebeeckx's second anthropological constant.<sup>407</sup> For the quality of sprawl celebrates humankind's corporeal embodiment, in someone's easy at-onement, in an instinctive ability to bring his necessarily human corporeality into critical

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<sup>405</sup> Regarding the rhetoric in this poem, Bourke notes how the poem's "arcane fiction, its arresting metaphors, its play with expectations, its puns and aphorisms demonstrate that language is involved in the construction of 'realities.' This is the idealist argument that reality is what we perceive, and perception is conditioned by concepts." Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 145.

<sup>406</sup> Understood in the Ignatian sense of "disponability" in taking up an attitude like the compass needle, willing to accept whatever decision or outcome occurs.

<sup>407</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 735-40.

expression within his social environment. Sprawl critiques the individual's connection with social and institutional structures by reinstating the individual's freedom over their constricting and potentially deadening conformity. In its rejection of the pervasive conditioning of people and culture in time and space, the quality of sprawl celebrates the present, supersedes the past, and points to the infinite, in the very otherness of personality that derives from mankind's divine origin, status and destiny. It bespeaks Heidegger's Wholeness: "it is the rococo of being your own still centre."

The quality of sprawl reasserts the ethical priority of practice over theory in that ever-changing relationship between body and mind. It states that actions count, and flow from attitudes and abiding frames of mind. Being "roughly Christian," sprawl notionally reminds readers of the religious and para-religious consciousness of mankind; for in being close to simplicity, defying and rejecting pretentiousness, deceit, arbitrary style and stifling precociousness, sprawl expresses the virtue and value of pristine ingenuousness, childlike joy and liberating freedom that is born in everyone, but suppressed in most.

Sprawl expresses that irreducible synthesis in these several dimensions, for in its dynamism, creativity and difference, it foreshadows mankind's liberation. It symbolizes the pursuit of infinite possibilities. Sprawl's positive drive for heightened experience, that unique capacity of his imagination for innovation and creativity, affirms mankind's selection for immortality. That constant drive for the numinous "Otherworld" images salvation's otherness, for it is a vision for recovering our proper dignity as human beings. Sprawl is a wonderful image of salvation being won in the world today; unfortunately, there is still not yet enough of it.

Further, sprawl is a spiritual quality hinting at the human pursuit of possibilities, uncategorized by Society or Style. Like wry humour, it points in the people's proper otherworld, to mankind's divine destiny for salvation. This second constant reminds that human lives are essentially social, and that salvation arises only within those guidelines. Salvation resolves the intensive dialectic between individual and society by identifying those inherent drives that characterise human relationships as choices for imaging a transcendent destiny. Salvation will grow in sprawl's drive for newness.

Both "Senryu" and "The Quality of Sprawl" celebrate salvation's drive to newness. In their creative exploration of numinous possibilities they image salvation's infinite sublimity. In them, thirst, humour, non-violence and liberation image salvation.

In the next sections, I read poems by Murray to do with experiencing salvation in community. The hermeneutic shows that (viii) salvation is shared gift, that (ix) salvation is imaged in holidays, that (x) salvation tests communal responses, that (xi) salvation is imaged in promises, and that (xii) salvation appears in images of regeneration. The virtues that they yield are insightful vulnerability, seeking newness, accountable actions, responsible freedom, and faith in the saviour.

#### viii. Salvation in shared gift

Salvation is imaged in insightful vulnerability in the "grace that attends their nearly every movement" in "Equanimity"<sup>408</sup> (Appendix 2). This poem has achieved a considerable profile overseas; many consider this to be Murray's best crafted poem.

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<sup>408</sup> Lines 50-51, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 178.



This poem is a longer celebration of love and a berating of its substitutes. The first verse distinguishes love from will, an important determinant for what follows, for the discussion ranges over many natural and human situations where love comes in many guises. Love is signalled in the “droughty light . . . above carports” shining like the welcoming candle in the window. Love is missing in the “profoundly unwished / garble of a neighbours’ quarrel.” The argument runs that equanimity is best found in the cattleyards and gullies of blissful Boeotia.<sup>409</sup>

The poet sings how love is not found in the smog of daily news but is expressed in the eternal search for food by “hungry mountain birds, drifting in for food.” We are told there is no Acadia on earth, not even in a remote place of final happiness, for “there is only love.” Whatever the situation, guise or form, “human order has at heart / an equanimity.” This surely says that grace found in a trans-rational understanding of reality.<sup>410</sup> In this way, grace and salvation are reconceived by making its transcendent origin apparent and transcendent destiny possible.

Equanimity’s heals, for “it is a continuous recovering moment.” Equanimity is a *habitus* where remorse may grow to be creative, and where identity comes down off its high horse. With it, “peace beneath effort . . . comes [like] unpurchased lifelong plenishment.” The free gift of fulfilment comes with attaining equanimity. Love and equanimity cannot be purchased, are often substituted for, and bring most necessary healing for humans. Indeed equanimity is a most desirable salvation-on-earth, and, surprisingly, is “as attainable as gravity.” Thus, poetry’s intensities image salvation’s

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<sup>409</sup> Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 98: “It’s natural to the organic, the soil and the stars.”

<sup>410</sup> Echoing our postmodern distrust of rationalism as our only source of knowing, I prefer this term to show the continuing dynamic interrelation between natural and any ‘supernatural’. The term originates in Jeannine Thryreen-Mizingou, “Grace and Ethics in Contemporary American Poetry: Resituating the Other, the World and the Self.” *Religion and Literature* 32.1 (Spring 2000), 68.

transformations.

Equanimity's chiascuro combines perspectives, all foreground and all background, for it is "of infinite detailed extent / like God's attention." (58). Equanimity is a form of grace for it enables its initiates to glimpse "where nothing is diminished by perspective."<sup>411</sup> Christ spoke to people most often on its level, "all holiness springs from it," and it is a grace that attends every living movement. It is indivisible and scarcely willed. People sometimes grasp that it "lights us from the incommensurable." The paradox is that, being mysteriously pervasive and non-visual, humans seem unable to find its essential *locus*, the same salvation humans universally seek. In summary, equanimity is a form of grace for it enables its initiates to glimpse "where nothing is diminished by perspective." Its grace infuses destiny in this earthly life. Equanimity is both gift and response with infinite possibilities. Like sprawl, tears too beget immeasurable gifts.

Murray's numinous framework of an interface of the ordinary and the extraordinary, achieves a cultural highpoint in his famed "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow,"<sup>412</sup> (1969). I imagine its impetus lies in Wright's line: "They pause in the markets, the noise in the Stock Exchange / drops for a second."<sup>413</sup> Like salvation, the anonymous man's tears "have a compelling presence which challenges and confounds the conventions by which we make sense of daily life."<sup>414</sup> The character weeping in Martin Place becomes some kind of a prophet, but an absolutely ordinary kind of prophet.

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<sup>411</sup> "Equanimity" line 59, *C.P.1961-2002*, 180. This 'grace' could be defined as a celebration of an event, or an enactment to assist the experience of salvation. Grace is found in glimpses of the imagination and it expands potentials and expectations. Hence, we might ask: To what extent does poetry create contexts for and stimulate the experience of salvation? Clearly if it is celebratory and insightful, poetry is a salvational locus and impulse in this sense.

<sup>412</sup> *C.P.1961-2002*, 28. Full text appears at Poemhunter.com [on-line] available: [www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=8748&poem=69048](http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=8748&poem=69048)

<sup>413</sup> Wright, "The Flood I" lines 18-19, *C.P.*, 41.

<sup>414</sup> Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 152.

It soon becomes clear that the tears of this man weeping in Martin Place are cleansing tears, not tears of regret or despair. Only tears such as these can break the drought of self-sufficiency.<sup>415</sup> This enactment of the “sacrament of tears”<sup>416</sup> obviously brings healing, for its tears bring a reconciliation so that, with the dignity of one who has wept, the man gets up and walks off down Pitt Street, renewed, done with it and cathartically-cleansed. Tears are regenerative, are transformative, for they enable people to dispense with the previous stage and surmount what seems impossible. I disagree with Pollnitz, for to be so absolutely ordinary is in a different order of everyday life, more ideally essentially human like Schillebeeckx’s *humanum* (the model of dignified humanity). Tears speak of salvation because they mark significant experiences.

This anonymous man is totally unhindered, liberated and free, enjoying the gifts of salvation even in this present life. His insightful vulnerability saves him. Saints prayed for the gift of tears so they could more palpably join with Our Lord in his passion. As spirituality, this gift focuses on the person and the humanity of Christ. Alternatively, James Tulip<sup>417</sup> remarks how Murray resists any glib identifications with religious sentiment, noting how, “evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street” because messengers of salvation do not need to be religious personages.<sup>418</sup> Tulip is right to be kenotic here, because in its presentation of the ordinary, the poem’s clear resistance to metaphor refuses any extraneous explanation via recourse to metaphoric discourses. That view better demonstrates finding numinous meaning in the ordinariness of events.

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<sup>415</sup> Read Murray’s “A Deployment of Fashion” about Lindy Chamberlain’s apparent inability to weep as expected. She was satirized, “for a defect in weeping: / she hasn’t wept on cue / or she won’t weep correctly” lines 8-10, *Conscious and Verbal*, 29.

<sup>416</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, “The Bardic Pose - A Survey of Les A. Murray’s Poetry” *Southerly* 40.4 (1980), 382.

<sup>417</sup> James Tulip, “Religious models in modern Australian poetry” in Victor C. Hayes, ed., *Toward Theology in an Australian Context*. (Bedford Park, S.A.: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1979), 65.

<sup>418</sup> Angels come and go suddenly, for example, Lk 2:13, 24;4 and Acts 12:7.

This poem dramatises the hunger for enchantment apparent in emergent spiritualities. The unnamed man's weeping evokes a wide range of positive and negative responses, to assert that freedom is often more beyond reach than often thought. That range of responses critiques society's conventional attitudes, and drives a clear divide between the sophisticated and the instinctive, the truly human and the veneer of style expected by society. For this weeping man resists, even negates contemporary, urban culture in the place of its greatest density. The weeper challenges the conventional repression of instinctive (and thus pristine) humanity, and achieves an equanimity truly surpassing what the ersatz offerings of commerce and finance can ever achieve.

This poem is an excellent demonstration of a numinous grasp of the ordinary. This nameless weeping man's actions are prophetic for expressing radical freedom, and indeed it becomes sacramental of the structure of the more real that is founded in vulnerability. Just as the weeping man in the poem creates a space of serenity, the poem grants a space to explore tensions in an absolutely ordinary space where personal and public, sacred and secular meet. The poem supports considerations of salvation as being won in radical freedom, in resolving situations and in vulnerability. I read it as a discourse upon the failure of language, for he is "speaking with a pure voice."<sup>419</sup> The poem deconstructs utilitarianism, determinism, consumerism and violence that are not constants for salvation. It says there should be no terror in expressing timeless human feelings. Radical freedom vectors to the sacred, that is, Heidegger's wholeness of being.

My hermeneutical readings of "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" and "Equanimity"

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<sup>419</sup> Wright, "For Precision" line 15, *C.P.*, 129.

show that salvation is an endlessly shared gift. Prejudice, bias and convention blind people to the open, clear possibilities that salvation denotes. Its surprising arrival will inevitably rearrange all previous priorities. Unabashed vulnerability storms all bastions.

In its meditation on the mystery in the ordinary, these poems clearly evidence Schillebeeckx's fourth anthropological constant. For salvation occurs in a social setting as the "conditioning of people and culture by time and space." This constant reflects upon the bonds the human family shares, the forces that shape us, and the ever-present chance to reassess life's directions. The facts of a mortal life are that societies and individuals are located in particular space and time coordinates, and to pine for a lost past or to languish in waiting for an unattainable future is misguided, unrealistic and wasteful. Active service must address present needs. This poem celebrates renewal and cleansing through the ordinary events in present time. Its public setting intensifies that win on the journey to salvation.

The next section sings of these conditions of our existence: time's limited span, of rituals, annual cycles, and our cultural and environmental heritage. My reading of Murray's "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" shows salvation is imaged in seeking the newness of holiday refreshment.

#### ix. Salvation imaged in holiday

One restoration realised in Murray's poetic imagery is the time of holiday when families are at harmony in another space and time. Murray is quite sensitive to the tensions and dialectics across different outlooks in society. Yet on holidays, people

restore damaged relationships. Holidays repair and save relationships. Salvation is excellently well imaged in the theme of holiday.

Towards this goal, his sympathetic translation of Aboriginal culture reaches a peak in his long poem, “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle”<sup>420</sup> (Appendix 2), recovering the genre of an Aboriginal songline. To ritualize the translations and transformations that holidays bring, Murray wrote it in the genre of the song cycle he admired in Ronald M. Berndt’s translations of the Wonguri-Mandjikai Moon-Bone Cycle of poems from Arnhem Land.<sup>421</sup> It depicts people coming together on holiday, in those “blessed moments when power and ideology are absent.”<sup>422</sup> It celebrates the power of history and memory for constructing a convergence to save society from seriousness.

When people are on holiday, they are most truly themselves, at liberty to do what pleases, feasting and socialising outside the constrictions of ordinary life. Holiday is extraordinary time, earned time, a long awaited-for time for rest, refreshment and relaxation. It is often a time for reassessment of the self and one’s path through life. Our holidays pre-echo the one great holiday of heaven. On holiday, surrounded by one’s family and friends banqueting at leisure, people are at one with the environment. When on holiday, one more truly appreciates the freedom and pleasure to “walk knee deep in ferns”<sup>423</sup> or, as he puts it in this poem, at ease “sitting down near ferns.”<sup>424</sup> Murray’s poem then celebrates all that holiday suggests and achieves in a kind of unacknowledged spiritual walkabout, or as Murray put it, people “looking for their country in order to draw sustenance from it, or newcomers looking for the real

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<sup>420</sup> Murray, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 137f.

<sup>421</sup> Alexander, *A Life in Progress*, 176.

<sup>422</sup> Murray, *Persistence in Folly* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984), 24.

<sup>423</sup> Murray, “Noonday Axeman” line 63, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 5.

<sup>424</sup> Verse 1, line 13, *C.P.* 123.

Australia.”<sup>425</sup> Holiday is a powerful image of salvation.

This poem images the optimal destiny. It celebrates the realisations achieved in the recovery of “convergence,” Murray’s word<sup>426</sup> for a hoped-for integration or fusion of Australia’s three main cultures: the Aboriginal, the rural and the urban. To show convergence for Australia’s three cultures, the poem appears in thirteen sections, the same number as in the Moon-Bone cycle despite the inevitable accusations of cultural arrogance, disrespect or sheer ignorance of Aboriginal cultural sensitivities. This poem shows Murray’s refusal to accept cultural apartheid, in his ready appropriation of an already existing literary form to new purposes, for the term “holiday” shifts seamlessly to the theological reference. Metaphorically, the poem recapitulates the search back to ancestral sites and more broadly, to the universal search for life’s meaning.

The poem’s thirteen verses, each of about thirteen lines, plot the advent, progress and effects of holiday on people in a rural landscape. Not surprisingly, that landscape centres on Murray’s own valley at Bunyah on the central north coast of New South Wales and the region round the Manning River. Each verse has a focus: people eating and anticipating the holiday with recollections of local matters to do with their destination; the queue of cars with “fumes of fun” crawling through the landscape; their arrival and checking for changes; the birds “always out there” and always interesting; the ritual pilgrimage to the graves of the family members; the activities of snakes, dogs and toddlers; the children innocently at play; the singing mosquitoes with humans who dance to their song; the world of surfers at play like warriors; the foraging ibises; the abandoned “fruit trees of the Grandmothers” reminiscent of the pristine

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<sup>425</sup> Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 176.

<sup>426</sup> A longed-for fusion the poet discusses in Les Murray, “The Human-Hair Thread” *Meanjin* 36.4 (December 1977), 566. See also Peter Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, 177 and Paul Kane, *Romanticism and Negativity*, 194-5.

Garden; the sun and the storm, and finally the evanescent stars invoke some intimations of overarching continuity and immortality. Full of variety, stimulating word play and consistent optimism, the poem celebrates the details of real holidays, and shadows their significance for holidaymakers and for the poet.

The poem assumes a universal relevance in its Dylan Thomas-like celebration of variety and local particulars. The calls of children at play, the fun-filled cries of the rosellas, heron, and magpie, the “little socket noises” of the ibises, and the purificatory deluge of an afternoon storm are some aural images of a landscape reminiscent of an Australian Eden. The setting is tactile, vibrant, lively and intensely happy. It is an enhanced environment, as occurred to him on a visit to Anzac Cove, where it seemed the scent of salvation is rosemary, for remembrance:

The Day of our peace will need a native  
herb that out-savours rosemary.<sup>427</sup>

This song cycle depicts variety, plenty and abundance, the ordered workings of a natural landscape, and more significantly, peace among families. In telescoping real and ideal, Bourke correctly interprets that the poem, “takes as its ideal the pre-industrial vision of human unity with nature.”<sup>428</sup> The poem is a wonderful celebration of an Australian icon, the annual holiday, and wonderfully details salvation’s impact.

In its rehearsal of convergence, “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle” features many proper name references, tying its theme to a familiar locality. This naming device in capitalised substantives suggests “a sort of affectionate, quasi-totemic empathy, a

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<sup>427</sup> Verse 15, lines 3-4 of “Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication” in *Collected Poems* (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991), 108.

<sup>428</sup> Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 90.



kind of casual sacredness in well-known things.”<sup>429</sup> Pollnitz<sup>430</sup> helpfully suggests:

Murray is anxious to demonstrate that Australian toponymy can regain something of its original significance, that the power of giving name is recoverable. . . . [For] a people who have lost the impulse to name creatively have lost their vision of the spirit of place.

To name is to have identity and location.<sup>431</sup> The poem celebrates Legge’s Lake, the Old Timber Wharf, Pitt Street, the Myall river, the North Coast, O’Sullivan’s Gap, Wootton, Coolongolook, Wang Wauk, the Wallamba dam, the town of Napiac, the forests of Kiwarrak, Tuncurry and Forster, Wingham, Taree, Waukivory and the Manning River. Familiarity is engendered with references and associations recalled in Deer’s Hill, Rail Fence, the place of Slab Chimney, Dingo Trap, the place of the Cowbails, the Broadwater along the lake, the place of the Seagrass, and the Steep Country. Sleeper Dump, Tallowwoods, the places of the Stinging Tree and Staghorn Fern, the paddocks round Darawank, and the Boolambayte pasture flat are filled with associations as are the poet’s own little Germany, Firefly Creek and Bunyah.

Connecting with the land as Murray himself notes, is “simply knowing the meaning of place names, knowing what happened where, is an important part of belonging to a district or nation,”<sup>432</sup> and elsewhere notes,<sup>433</sup> “the centre of Boeotia is every place held sacred.” Local places bear their significance in memory. Geographical features like Burrell Creek, the place of Coal Oil Creek and the Crockery, the Old Bar, Manning

<sup>429</sup> Les A. Murray, “The Human-Hair Thread” *Meanjin* 36.4 (December 1977), 567.

<sup>430</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, “A survey of Les A. Murray’s poetry - III” *Southerly* 41.2 (1981), 190.

<sup>431</sup> Continuity and identity are themes in Malouf’s sublime discourse in his celebrated prose: “In my own land I too am the keeper of something: of the great book of words of my tongue. No, not mine, my people’s, which they have made over centuries, up there in our part of the world, and in which, if you have an ear for these things and a nose for the particular fragrance of a landscape, you may glimpse forests, lakes, great snow-peaks that hang over our land like the wings of birds. It is all there in our mouths. In the odd names of our villages, in the pet-names we give to pigs or cows, and to our children too. . . . We recapture on our tongue . . . the same word in the mouths of our long dead fathers, whose blood we move in and whose blood still moves in us. Language *is* that blood.” David Malouf, “The only speaker of his tongue” *Antipodes* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1985), 69.

<sup>432</sup> Les Murray, *The Peasant Mandarin* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 46.

<sup>433</sup> Murray, “Porter’s Boeotia,” *The Paperbark Tree*, 64.

Point, Middle Brother, Cape Hawke, Seal Rocks, Mounts George, Tipperary, Krambach, and Bulby mark the coordinates of local history, shared pleasure and evocative remembrance. This string of place names adds a mythical ring to the poem, as it does in the *Iliad*. They hold local sacred associations for the holidaymakers returning to ancestral lands. The spirits of place are alive and strong in this song cycle, as they are in the Moon-Bone original it imitates.

Celebrations “in the time of the Watermelons, and of the Holiday” are also significant for the fourth constant. They are tied to connections with place. Memory builds on place and time, as happy events of ritual significance need these coordinates’ veracity. The poem’s texture is rich in themes for recognising the initial grace of the gift of creation, for disposing the holidaymakers in the abundant summer environment towards change,<sup>434</sup> and for invoking justification and renewal of their inner selves as they peel off the old year’s dialectics and put on transformation. The summer cycle triggers transformation in each and every element both human and organic within the seasonal movement of the whole. Heidegger’s Whole is evidenced here.

This song-cycle, generates new meanings, honours annual rituals, and conveys transformations in relationships. Resistant to stasis and stagnation, the holidaymakers in their willing submission to annual change could be said to image Christian believers, the leaven in humanity, who are primed for transformation. For, in that search for *salus* (health) metonymic of the eternal holiday, like the holiday-makers Christians respond to its *kairos* (opportunity) in the hope of the *eschaton* (the last days). God’s righteousness is thus operative *in* the world and confronting it. In “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle” then, grace, redemption and salvation are dramatised as

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<sup>434</sup> Following the traditional stages of salvation as outlined by A. J. Maas in “Salvation” in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia Volume XIII* (Robert Appleton Company, 1912) [on-line] available: [www.newadvent.org/cathen/13407a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13407a.htm) [2003 June 27].

being accessible and operative in life's ordinary rituals, and indeed says they are effective for bringing about that most desirable convergence in Australia.

Because salvation has a necessary connection with cultures and societies, it invites a meditation on its mediation of the culture's symbols and rituals. Schillebeeckx's constant states that salvation arises when cultures and societies respond to present possibilities and actually reach out for transformations. Wright reminds us that securing justice is never sure. Responding is quite urgent. Further, cultures that honour their histories and honour their pioneers are more cohesive ones.<sup>435</sup> Similarly, Murray offers the insight that the desired convergence of the three sectors of society can be imaged in poetry in the national pastime of the annual ritual of holiday. As a foretaste of eternal happiness, holiday is an enduring image of salvation, for it demonstrates families being in harmony in real time and place.

Stress and a loss of purpose are notable signs of how seriously time and place govern our lives in the modern technological society. When people are freed from time and place constraints, as occurs on holiday, the results are decisive. Thus, holiday images salvation as a return to the Garden, as a restoration of what is lost, in freedom from strife, fear and worry in present time, a veritable *kairos*. The poem renews hope to work for universal harmony, peace and contentment. This poem conveys cultural understandings of salvation in the links between feasting and holiday and reconciliation. Malouf's crab feast echoes the same ebullience.

The poem reminds that people's location in time and space conditions their capacity for receiving salvation. As Schillebeeckx's constant notes, dealing with our

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<sup>435</sup> I refer to Wright, "Trapped Dingo," "Bora Ring" and "Bullocky" in particular.

conditioning in time and space is an important aspect of the process of achieving salvation. Like non-violence and hope, social harmony is a virtue for salvation.

x. Salvation tests communal beliefs

Salvation shapes actions to be accountable. Sometimes poets show groups responding or failing to respond suitably to events in ways conditioned by their past and assumptions. Dealing with the unpredictable is the test of a community's nerve, for hope is tested in responding to the unknown. Murray's "The Burning Truck"<sup>436</sup> (Appendix 2) appears as a description of a real or at least a likely to-have-been-real event in an unspecified but familiar streetscape. While strafing coastal sandbars and the poet's town without warning, some warplanes set a truck alight and send it careering out of control through the streets into the night. Significantly, Murray placed this poem first in his 1986 anthology of religious poetry for its religious pertinence. Clearly, such a critical event like the unpredictable or the sacred tests the structures of social life and reveals its deficits, and indeed the categories of perception by which that imaginary community lives.<sup>437</sup> In that sense, as a record of a particular imagined event, the poem reveals hidden structures of belief.

The poem's more prosaic description describes a simple experience without poetical paradoxes or devices. There is no high sounding rallying call, philosophic reflection or social criticism here. It records a moment of tension felt by a community of residents when the burning truck would not stop, when each was "begging that truck between

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<sup>436</sup> Murray, C. P. 1961-2002, 1.

<sup>437</sup> See Murray's own reply to an interpretation of it by a victim of the Blitz, in Les Murray, "Reading Group and Teachers' Notes" [on-line] available: [www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/TeachersNotes/notes/Murraytn.html](http://www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/TeachersNotes/notes/Murraytn.html) [2005 September 25], 12. No doubt this focus is the key to its interpretation: "The reader's interest becomes centred on the community's response rather than on the catalyst, the truck itself which leaves the poem, withholding any explanation." Lawrence Bourke, *A Vivid Steady State*, 77.

our teeth to halt" (line 21). That critical event reveals their social and perceptual structures.

For dealing with the extraordinary in the ordinary, poetic devices are minimised. The open prose-like narrative proceeds in five stanzas each of six lines, without rhymes. Poignantly, the poem lacks a climactic ending, but uses an editorialising voice-over. The poem defies easy conventional interpretations and denies readers the comforting satisfaction of happy conclusions expected in narratives.

For universal applicability, the poem fails to supply any satisfactory geographical or cultural context for the reader, or any stated meaning for the participants, or for the poet. Its light-handed, almost whimsical treatment of the event is just like a fleeting memory recalled: something happened, is remembered but no special significance is applied. Reading this poem is like reading the newspaper without any headlines. In it, no earth-shattering drama changes lives, and few applications are made. An event occurs; now it seems, the reader must grow the meanings and associations. This openness for readers to finish the idea, to construct an intertextual interpretation and apply it, trusts them in the post-modern style.

The poem demonstrates that salvation is about horizons, for narrow horizons deny the possibility of any fusion of human dreams with divine possibilities. The poem presents a powerful image of salvation not in the sense of a trick of reversal or irony, but for presenting what cannot be portrayed as clearly in the expository mode. It points to conventional unknowing in the face of the unexplainable. This poem shows the poetic imagination dreaming farther horizons and testing communal beliefs.

This is poetry for our times, poetry for the ordinary bloke. The poet plays a joke on the city-wise *literati* and their conventions, for the ballad-like form raises narrative expectations that are only partially met. The poem lacks a resolution of any significance by reversing the traditional vector to a tragic punch line. Even the ordinariness of the event teases, tantalizes and denies readers any specifics that tie it down to a particular time and place or attribute of relevance. This poem demonstrates predictable responses to the unknown to suggest much about human limitations.

Every poem needs the reader to finish it. Certainly, any attempts to tie this poem down, to give it sense as arising in an historical context would “unpoeticise” the poem into something conventional. Readers should do no more than let it be what it is - a simple moment in time when disorder disordered a coastal community's ordered life. The metaphor of the burning truck challenges the reader to reflect on untested abilities to deal with the unpredictable.<sup>438</sup> In effect, it says that ambiguity, uncertainty, ignorance and the dilemma of the unexplained are part of life's mysterious journey towards salvation. One might suggest that the poem highlights the need to be ready for salvation, so unannounced, surprising and unexplainable is it. Only its rather foolish “disciples” recognise it and run after it into the night. Accountable actions count in fact.

#### xi. Salvation imaged in solemn promises

Just as salvation tests communal beliefs, the most sacred bonds in community test a community's resolve. As a singularly successful celebration of plenitude, a wedding is a powerful and accessible image of salvation. In pledging their troth, the bride and groom

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<sup>438</sup> Of course in the new age of terrorism, the poem attains even greater relevance.

image the eternal covenant Yahweh made with his chosen people. In their solemn promise, they give themselves selflessly and singularly to one another in fidelity as a free gift of their love. The wedding day itself bears forth the beauty and romance of their love in a prelude and model of the marriage through the years to follow, as Judith Wright wrote: “[where] all futures step from their stone / and pasts come into flower.”<sup>439</sup> A wedding promises structure, something stable about the future, for better or for worse for over some fifty years to follow.<sup>440</sup> In its responsible freedom, it is a more wonderful way of being.

The marriage vows affirm the pattern of two lives as an image of God’s eternity of love. As the basis of the contract for the duration of the partners’ lives, marriage locates love’s centrality and heralds its superiority as the primary image and powerful model for society as a whole. For this reason alone, it is sufficient that their wedding promise has the divine blessing upon it. “The Wedding at Berrico,”<sup>441</sup> describes the best wedding gifts:

life, landscape. Unfraught love. Some poetry.  
risk  
poise for whatever may come  
Sound genetics, delight,  
the sight of great-grandchildren, a joint sense of home.

Among these boons, he celebrates the vows “that move you to the centre of life” (38).

Salvation is imaged in solemn promises and wedding vows are gifts of salvation.

Appropriately, Murray’s poem “Toward the Imminent Days”<sup>442</sup> (Appendix 2) is an

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<sup>439</sup> Judith Wright, “In Praise of Marriages” in *Five Senses: Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), 118, and *CP*, 152.

<sup>440</sup> I wrote this appreciation after singing at a wedding at the historic St. Mary’s Kangaroo Point on 5 July 2003, and acknowledge this comment from the pastor’s address to the couple.

<sup>441</sup> Murray, “The Wedding at Berrico” lines 12-17, *C.P.1961-2002*, 380.

<sup>442</sup> Murray, *C.P.1961-2002*, 37-43.

epithalamium<sup>443</sup> where he celebrates his friends' marriage and wishes them recurring images of joy. It becomes a prayer to pour out blessings plenteously upon them. The poem becomes an occasion for a wonderful celebration of farming life and faith, liberty and hope, and an ever-fertile nature in the mid North Coast countryside. Appropriately, it concludes with his gift: "For your wedding I wish you the frequent image of farms" (183). This should not be understood as a mandate to acquire many farming properties, but that he wishes his friends Geoff and Sally Lehmann<sup>444</sup> the myriad joys of country life. It is the constant joy he celebrates here, for he is himself "too merry with farms" (65).

In seven rather extended verses running to 183 lines, Murray's voice reflects on the evoked range of emotions: the meaning of the wedding day itself, the seasonal gossip at the advent of spring, dancing and singing, the rich dark earth and the soil's promise, and happiness itself: "I am deep in butter-thick native broom / wading, sky-happy, a cotton-bright drover of bees" (61-62). The voice discourses upon the significance and beneficence of marriage; the won serenity of country life in "the teapot of calm" (72); a wish to instil hope in youth; a happy ending in a typical day's work of taming a Jersey bull; the continuity of marriages and families into eternity, "the voyage of families . . . into Paradise continually" (169-170); and the consolations of memory, "the heavenly faculty" (174). Rich in local history, rural imagery and Christian hope, this song in praise of marriage, family and country life must stand loud and strong as a powerful testament to the worth of Murray's own chosen life-style there. Very many strong images of salvation's boon appear in this poem.

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<sup>443</sup> Although Edmund Spenser's celebrated "Epithalamion" (1595), written to celebrate his own marriage (a 'wedding song' of wedding joy and rustic solace) runs to 433 lines, Murray's poem echoes rustic sentiments and broadly follows the same poetic form. In Allison, Burrows and Blake *et al.*, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* third edition, (New York and London: W.M.Norton, 1983), 138-146, especially 110-128.

<sup>444</sup> Alexander notes it was written in July 1969 upon Lehmann's marriage to Sally McInerney, in Peter Alexander, *A Life in Progress*, 151.



The image of “a drover of bees” demands attention. It has the Australian flavour and the bush feel of life at Bunyah. It conveys a wonderful freedom and safety. Happy bees do not sting. Having been the monastery’s apiarist myself, I know it pays to read the temperature, the wind and mood of the hive before opening it. On sunny days with low wind and in the right seasons, bees are happy collecting pollen, doing what they are born for. They are harmless, task-directed, and doing what is natural. Australian native bees are even more placid. Metaphorically possible, droving bees, however, is a physical impossibility. One may drove cattle but never control the wild creatures of the hive.

The image of Murray walking through the long grass or a ripening crop or among flowering garden beds and accidentally disturbing the bees at work is a wonderfully liberating image.<sup>445</sup> It conveys early summer productivity, at-one-ness with nature, freedom, risk and equanimity, even the self-awareness of the poet discovering a new experience. The image has all the elements of an image of salvation. It is a chance experience, public and democratic, almost impossible, possibly dangerous, utterly liberating and quite Boeotian (rustic, ordinary, unrehearsed, unsophisticated, critically timed, and divinely out of this world). It tests society’s agendas. This image is a polaroid moment, incisive and inciting, freighted with religious overtones of anticipatory states, one of those beautiful moments of release, playfulness and enhanced identity presaging that salvation<sup>446</sup> for which we all long.

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<sup>445</sup> “Accidentally” suggests the respectful attitude of “We must love and bypass them, like Nature” line 19 “The Swarm” in *CP 1961- 2002*, 146.

<sup>446</sup> It meets my criteria outlined in Chapter 1: “The image (1) is perceptually stable with applications to enhance human dignity, (2) is positive and points towards peace, justice and non-violence, (3) is creative, dialectical or critical pointing to a goal not yet fully attained, and (4) enhances the narratives of human lives.

The poem's key image of the serenity of country life, "We've reached the teapot of calm" (72) also demands attention as a very significant image of salvation. It is another fragment of a narrative on the farm, and a celebration of its Boeotian bliss. It is an Australian custom "to put on a cuppa." It is always a gesture of welcome, a resort in crisis, or to celebrate continuity when all is well. To boil the kettle for tea is a reassertion of continuity over a gulf of misunderstanding, done in the shock of bad news, or just to celebrate community. Like the drovers in "The Mitchells" boiling the billy and saying very little (as discussed earlier), this ritual round the teapot betokens calm and balm. Catalano's discussion of Murray's motif in fragile crockery and kitchens<sup>447</sup> as the milieu to typify a fulfilling way of life is relevant. The teapot is immediately evocative and familiar to everyone in Australia. To wait together is identify with others, but to drink together is to commune. Gathering round the teapot is a powerful image of resolution, home, continuity and salvation. Similarly, "the family roast" and "having Christmas together" immediately evoke powerful emotions. That free gathering in domestic peace analogises and glimpses the far eons of life's possibilities. "Reaching the teapot of calm" imaginatively elaborates the virtue of responsible freedom that images salvation.

Significantly, the occasion of his friends' marriage prompts the poet to think of the progress of time and how it shapes the future:

I think of a day too great for the calendar numbers  
that, faintest in winter, grows like a buried moon,

a radiant season swelling through the horizons  
beyond September. (lines 27-30)

Such a season beyond spring must be compellingly fulfilling indeed. The wedding images their future life together into "the imminent days" (title, 48, 49). He prays that

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<sup>447</sup> Gary Catalano, "Les Murray's Ark" *Meanjin* 62.10 (2003), 10-18 especially 12, 14.

their marriage will grow to flourish, from crescent to full moon in its due course “beyond September” (30). The continuity and optimism of the institution of marriage, he suggests, addresses the ills of present times: for example, of his aunt and uncle’s marriage he observes; “The depth of this marriage will heal the twentieth century” (96). In fact, he surmises, our work does shape the future, for farming is a fruit of marriage wherein the fathoms of fields hold “our human mark” the longest, and will sustain “the crystal centuries to come” (60). These are poetic images of a community’s survival, and indeed of its salvation in responsible freedom.

Finally the poet leaves the festivities very happy, “full of a lasting complicity about the life of this world” (181), no doubt now even more surely reassured of his faith-filled vision for life’s betterment and eventual happiness for sharing this secret about finding happiness in marriage. For overcoming life’s *longeurs* and despair, bringing certainty in its contract of unconditional love, and healing the temporary breaches of everyday life, marriage comes to be a primary image of salvation.

Since family ties bind farmers into dynasties or “Houses” in the country, Murray praises his hosts for being “blood relations that you choose” (5). Like the indissoluble marriage bond, friendship is the ultimate security in life. On this point, he suggests the institution of marriage saves youth from their restless, wasteful daring, and that incidentally it also keeps them on the land by preventing them being called up in the national conscription for Vietnam then in progress:

young men leap rivers and / long for a splendid alert  
Only marriage will save them. (40-42)

Marriage saves by bringing satisfaction of the deepest ache, for it is a unique rescue as

a reliable fixed point in the superficial flux and foolishness of the modern world.

It seems that a tall bush story is a better deterrent to an enquiry than the painful experience of city reality. In stanza 5, the poet is at a loss to find a suitable salutary anecdote to deflect the hired boy's hopeful enquiries about city life, where life needs a "merciless cunning" in contrast to the country where health and freedom are granted everywhere. Children are naturally curious about what is beyond them, but he muses their youth is better focused on the farm than wasted in the city. In an echo of Jesus' injunction, "Consider the lilies of the field!" (Mt 8:28) and its message of simplicity and trust, the poet's voice recalls a simple story of caution, for city society today requires more than the boy can quickly learn to survive there. Stanza 6 supplies such a wild bush narrative to defuse his enquiries; its happy ending is that man and bull return home linked "supporting one another." (155).

The poem's culminating last verse reflects on "the voyage of families" through the years and how the remotest generations influence the present. The life of this world is indeed rich in meaning and significance, once one is very aware of one's time and place coordinates within interlocking marriages and histories. Surely, it is inferred, farm-rich knowledge should not to be missed or despised. Living in a valley farmed by generations, in the trusting embrace of a living community of farmers, and subsisting on the work of human hands and the produce of one's own fields, one cannot but be "too merry with farms." No wonder then that his marriage gift to Sally and Geoffrey Lehmann is his on-going wish that they enjoy "the frequent images of farms." Vows and blood ties are understandable images of salvation.

Truly, salvation is imaged in solemn promises. In "The Wedding at Berrico" and

“Towards the Imminent Days,” Murray celebrates his preferred life, “walking knee-deep in ferns,”<sup>448</sup> as freedom, connection with nature, and belonging to the earth. He presages happiness itself: “I am deep in butter-thick native broom / wading, sky-happy, a . . . drover of bees.”<sup>449</sup> Such rich images of equanimity infer a rescue from idle, and man-made noise, confusion, senselessness, violence and impersonality.

### xii. Salvation imaged in regeneration

While procreation ensures continuity, regeneration builds community. “The Warm Rain,”<sup>450</sup> (Appendix 2) must surely be regarded as a wonderful celebration of salvation in its patterning of images of refreshment and natural fulfilment. The poet describes the arrival and effects of a fall of plenteous warm rain on the farm with joy.<sup>451</sup> The poem reports more than a casual event or an afternoon’s literary entertainment; its genius lies in retelling a miracle. It is structured as a series of perceptions supporting one central insight, the numinous perception. In eight verses of thirty-nine lines, the poet narrates the wonderful refreshment of rain’s affecting everything, from the farm’s family life to the farming community’s hopes.

Through a plural voice, the poet and his family view the developing scene through their window as through a sepia-like frame of a still picture. They are emotionally involved in the developing drama of regeneration, as that rain is their farm’s life-blood. Apparent first as “A subtle slant locating the light in air,” this summer rain brings far greater effects, in fact, their economic and social salvation. Various signs of its arrival structure

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<sup>448</sup> Murray, “Noonday Axeman” line 63, *C. P. 1961-2002*, 5.

<sup>449</sup> “Toward the Imminent Days” lines 61-62, *C.P.1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>450</sup> Les Murray, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 93, *C.P.1961-2002*, 442.

<sup>451</sup> A similar delight occurs in “Spring Hail” (*C.P.1961-2002*, 8) where the poet thrills in the newly fallen hail “still bore the taste of sky” (16). The images of leaning into spring (45) and “fresh-minted hills” (9) there are very evocative of salvation.

the opening perceptions. The “subtle slant locating the light in air” prepares readers for the more complex devices to follow. The next sign is the knotting of pepper-white dust into peppercorn puddles. The rain darkens leaves to lustre, and the forest’s canopy is gradually saturated until its leaves’ dullness grows into sheen with vibrant colour as the rain does its cleansing work.

The rain regenerates ordinary life. An air of normality and reliable predictability guides the reader / TV viewer to plot the course of the subsequent few hours. References to road traffic vitalise the descriptions with sibilants and everyday imagery: the rain dissolves “the race way of rocket smoke behind cars,” and the refreshing wetness makes lorries whiz, so much so that planned football “fixtures get cancelled.” Finally, emergency workers are called out to shovel away its welcome excesses of hail. Rain is the expected life-blood of the farm and the community, and the nation too. They hunger for saving rain; it is a salvation desired, welcomed, and widely embraced. After it, mankind and nature regenerate in symphony: “Tiny firetail finches, quiet in our climber rose, agree to it like early humans.”

Rain saturates and swells everyone and everything. In the following night’s TV reports, meteorological maps link this local fall with the nation’s overall weather, in patterns “like the Crab nebula.” Their “borders swell over the continent and they compress the other / nations of the weather.” The falls saturate everything: “crepe-myrtle trees heel”, “every country dam brews” and “air and paddocks are swollen.” In sympathetic fallacy, the ocean too pumps up and “explode around the lighthouses in gigantic cloak sleeves” (31), as “the whole book of foam” opens disclosing the very sea’s foundations. Nature roars in joy and exultation at the coming of warm rain.

In the warm rain, man and nature coalesce and decisively agree. The poem images the warm rain and the sea exulting together, echoing surely the lion and the lamb in repose in Isaiah. “Tiny firetail two finches agree” to the warm rain “like early humans. Cattle agree harder.” Similarly, the rain and the ocean as one explode round “the lighthouses in gigantic cloak sleeves.” This image is saving. This felicitous conjunction of “lighthouses” and “cloaks” doubles the protection from danger. Inferentially, the rain’s regeneration suggests the saviour who makes it possible.

Overjoyed by rain’s abundant superfluity, humans are reminded that they are but insignificant “chirpings” in nature’s grand plan. They are but thoroughly contingent upon it; their words cause nothing, their science is merely descriptive, and they are participant spectators if partial beneficiaries for being there by chance. Worse, watching the rain has no effect upon mere observers or on the rain’s capacity to progress the season’s growth. The life cycles go on nonetheless: “grey trees strip bright salmon,” and after rain things are intensely enriched: “butter clearings spread and resume glare.” Merely viewing does not save with an ethical dimension, whereas it refreshes those with numinous insight with more beautiful ways of being.

Mere spectators might take the rain for granted thus losing a precious moment for insight and thanks that the warm rain should evoke by “hiding the warm rain back inside our clothes.” However, with the numinous insight, “immortality is real and may be expressed in our mortal life as a quality we evoke and embody in symbols, where it will persist as long as their referent objects do.”<sup>452</sup> Again the poem reminds that events have numinous significances to convey religious significances.

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<sup>452</sup> Les Murray, “One poet’s view of the republic” *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996), 31.

Rain is like this; for those seeing events numinously (as in Wholespeak ideas), rain betokens family unity, local community continuity and it embodies spirituality; for the lucky ones, like the poet's family viewing it together within an economic framework, the rain's life-giving plenitude replaces notional possibility with sure continuity. Now with morale reaffirmed and attuned to its mystery, they gain a wonderful humility and respect for its natural cycles. Murray's image of regeneration here reveals optimism, hope, fulfilment, rescue, transcendence and in turn, salvation.

The metaphor of rain has a religious multivalence. Unfortunately however, salvation lies in one's reception of it. For just as the forty days and forty nights of Noah's flood were a lesson to those faithfully aboard the ark, and the destruction for the wicked world focused on sinning, readers without the religious insight do fail to learn from the rain's cleansing and regenerative action.

### xiii. Review

This chapter's discussion reads fourteen poems: "Animal Nativity," "Mollusc," "The Meaning of Existence," "The Mitchells," "The Euchre Game," "An Immortal," "The Powerline Incarnation," "Senryu," "The Quality of Sprawl," "The Burning Truck," "Equanimity," "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle," "Noonday Axeman," "Towards the Imminent Days" and "The Warm Rain." This chapter's ten headings elaborate salvation in particulars: salvation is glimpsed in experiences of the numinous, ritual reflects its structures, salvation involves critical choices, it denotes infinite possibilities, it comes in responding to the unknown, it is a shared gift, it is imaged in holiday, is recollected in forest silences, is guaranteed in wedding vows and is felt in being merry with farms. The following table overviews the chapter's key findings.



Poem and source	Theme	Reference to salvation
“Mollusc” from <i>Presence: Translations from the Natural World</i> (1992) <i>Collected Poems</i> 2002, 361.	In its life and activity in the microcosm, the mollusc ornaments the macro not in mere decoration but in the more profound sense of bearing the structures of all life, and in presenting the immediacy of evolution in its humble achievements.	Organic life shares in the creator’s gift and models evolution’s directionality; salvation comes in living true to one’s nature.
“Animal Nativity” <i>Presence: Translations from the natural World</i> (1992) <i>C.P.</i> 2002, 374.	Rather than a slide into the surreal, this poem pricks the balloon of fantasy to reveal the realities of divine presence in translations from old to new, in movements from nature to transcendence.	Salvation is promised with the birth of the Saviour. All of creation will dance with life at its advent.
“The Mitchells” <i>Ethnic Radio</i> (1977), <i>C.P.</i> 2002, 117.	Significant communication occurs in family rituals. Some foreshadowing of convergence or Aboriginal reconciliation is envisaged Murray asks what if one of the Mitchells is Aboriginal? “The Human-Hair Thread” <i>The Paperbark Tree</i> 83.	Salvation may be envisaged in poetry offering greater perceptions about everyday events, in “the little sacraments of daily living.” (Malouf).
“Noonday Axeman” <i>The Ilex Tree</i> (1965) <i>C.P.</i> 2002, 3.	Like in theologies of negativity, this poem perceives unseen dimensions in time and place. It relates significant remembering and contact in a moment of time.	Salvation may be glimpsed in life’s simple experiences. It values qualitative waiting.
“Recourse to the Wilderness” from <i>The Weatherboard Cathedral</i> (1969) <i>CP</i> 2002 24.	The Outback offers limitless scope for a discovery of the fullness in life. The poet is fascinated with “the is-full and ah!-ness of things.” Creation is infused with grace and presence, potentialities, directionality and optimism.	Memory enriches the rich friendships that sustain and anticipate salvation. Some rituals identify and bind in decisive ways.
“The Quality of Sprawl” from <i>The People’s Otherworld</i> (1983) <i>C.P.</i> 2002, 182-3.	Sprawl is spontaneity grown in generosity and optimism.	Salvation is being won in virtues like this.
“Equanimity” from <i>The People’s Otherworld</i> (1983) <i>CP</i> 2002, 178.	Whatever the situation, guise or form, “human order has at heart / an equanimity” (line 24).	Some transcendence and grasp of life can be reached in the numinous insight. In that view, life is a sacred journey with a resolution has moments of anticipation.
“An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow” from <i>The Weatherboard Cathedral</i> (1969) <i>C.P.</i> 2002 28.	The tears of the man weeping in public cleanse him and those who share them. Such tears break the drought of self-sufficiency with healing.	Salvation begins in healing; some suffering is necessary for salvation.

<p>“The Burning Truck” from <i>The Ilex Tree</i> (1965) <i>C.P.</i> 2002, 1.</p>	<p>Its ballad-like structure raises expectations of narrative resolution but they are not resolved. Unexpected events catch a town unprepared, tantalised and powerless. Divine significances grow out of such unknown and mysterious events.</p>	<p>Suffering, uncertainty, ambiguity, the unexplained, and the inbreak of the unknown are part of the journey to salvation. Crisis reveals and tests our readiness for grace.</p>
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Table 5: Samples from reading Les Murray in Chapter 3

Discoursing upon what is begun here, the final chapter distils ten virtues for salvation in the authentic imagination, seeking non-violence, hope and optimism, dreaming the transcendent, seeking newness, insightful vulnerability, clear sightedness, authentic imagination, accountable actions, responsible freedom and faith in the saviour.

To review at this point, these readings of Wright and Murray demonstrate how righting wrongs is a necessary part of moving forward into salvation. Repenting of human-caused erosion by over-farming and returning the land to its traditional owners are restitutions that should not be delayed any longer. Murray’s work critiquing his society shows how right relationships engender trust, and that they in turn, deliver the peace, justice and harmony for which humans ache.

In reading Murray’s poems, I have touched on salvation as transcendence, hopes for salvation, narratives of salvation, and messengers of salvation. Salvation is liberating recovery, it has critical timing, and people are in various stages of readiness for it. Salvation stretches hope’s horizons much further and that salvation grows on earth in its gifts, scents and in knowledge of grace and redemption. The discussion now moves to a third example of applying this hermeneutical purpose in reading works by David Malouf whose images suggest the human race would find happiness in respecting the other species on the planet.

#### <sup>453</sup>Chapter 4: Example 3: Reading poetry and prose by David Malouf

This fourth chapter seeks to explore political intensities recorded in new poetry now on the public record. This chapter tests the chosen hermeneutic in several ways: it moves beyond the safe confines of Catholic anthropology in Murray and a predominately Christian framework in Wright to read works outside that pale. It moves from the relative safety of bush romanticism, to issues in the environment and the plangently political. Since my thread is salvation as it is being won in this world, this chapter first reads “The Crab Feast” by David Malouf where the discussion shows salvation by reading for a consciousness of an ethical identity. The purpose here is again to show the pertinence of reading poems from within the perspective of the Christian community. This third poet suggests a profound shift of attitude to bring about the longed for transcendence.

##### **i.**           Salvation in life narratives

The idea of salvation draws attention to and points towards the beyond. It constructs a so-far unimagined future state of resolution of the human story, quite impossible to reconcile with the flux of the present. Because these images of salvation contain kernels of life narratives giving meaning and purpose to believers’ lives, poetic images depicting salvation could be said to present pieces of heaven. Like the life experiences themselves, aesthetic impulses about salvation offer embodied appreciations of it. They coax the imagination to grapple with salvation’s mysteries.

Salvation contests contingency, mortality, transience, suffering, oppression, alienation and violence. It answers the limit issues of any religious quest.<sup>454</sup> Keith Ward makes the point that nature is imperfect and so can be improved. He emphasises human responsibilities:

Nature, however astonishingly rational and beautiful, is morally neutral and it is not perfect – it can be improved and much suffering and pain can be eliminated. So humans have a more creative and responsible part to play in the improvement of nature than many traditional believers had thought.<sup>455</sup>

Humans cannot live by an outmoded model about the world's ability to find new balances for survival. Our species' overwhelming dominance is overtaking that outcome. However, Malouf's poem does enable readers to undertake such retrievals for some coherence about the giftedness of creation. For the poem does seek to deal with life and death, transience and trust, with a view to ameliorating the suffering of other species at the hands of humans. In seeking to build a new trust, the poem resists indiscriminate human consumption at a time of alienation between species. That trust mediates freedom and responsibility. It finishes with a reflection on the limited and ambiguous nature of language for embodying ecological ethics.<sup>456</sup> The poem plots the struggle involved in *metanoia* to gain the liberation of all species. That ethical journey is a narrative towards salvation.

Relevantly here, Brother Wayne Teasdale outlines our Christian mandate to become sensitive to the rights of other species:

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<sup>454</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics: Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 86.

<sup>455</sup> Keith Ward, *Pascal's Fire* (2006), 27.

<sup>456</sup> Permit me one alliterative neologism describing respect in the interaction of bodies and operation of a grounded ethic that goes beyond a formal adherence.

As a species, we are a failure in terms of our stewardship of this planet and our relationship to other species. We have harmed them. We have dominated them.<sup>457</sup>

Moments of salvation occur in such ethical awarenesses of self, nature and others. They save because they alert us to greater responsibilities about one's coordinates in time and place, and our privilege to care for the earth and one another. Earth stories and life stories need to concur in responsibility.

Such moments can indeed become experiences of reaching and crossing thresholds with greater courage than has been attempted previously. Writers and poets serve by reminding us of these moments in poetic insights. Malouf refers to inciting this moral imagination in the power of memory:

Resurrecting things in memory and making them present and alive again is in fact one of the things that is an essentially human activity, and that that's what a lot of writing is about.<sup>458</sup>

For being altruistic, these moments bring a pull to the sublime, aching for a sense of Heidegger's Whole, of the bigger picture that transcends and explains the ordinary. They effectively challenge ingrained attitudes and unredeemed practices that disqualify humans from the gifts of the earth and sea.<sup>459</sup>

Pertinently too, in his novel, *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf's character Ovid projects a

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<sup>457</sup> Brother W. Teasdale, "The heart of meditation" in Michael Tobias, Jane Morrison and Bettina Gray, *A Parliament of Souls: Conversations with 28 spiritual leaders from around the world* (San Francisco: KQED Books 1995), 146.

<sup>458</sup> David Malouf, ABC Radio National *Books and Writing* interview with Ramona Koval 5/1/2001 [on-line] available: [www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s225573.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s225573.htm) [2005 October 4].

<sup>459</sup> The same tragic and critical tone occurs in Les Murray's "On the Present Slaughter of Feral Animals" *C.P.1961-2002*, 407 especially in the line, "luxury massacre on landscapes" line 21. This crab feast is the massacre of luxury on seascapes surely.

wonderful vision of fulfilment that develops the ethical responses. It features the most desirable reintegration that defines a final destiny for humankind:

Slowly I begin the final metamorphosis. I must drive out myself and let the universe in. The creatures will come creeping back – not as gods transmogrified, but as themselves. Beaked, furred, fanged, tusked, clawed, hooved, snouted, they will settle in us, re-entering their old lives deep in our consciousness. And after them, the plants, also themselves. Then we shall begin to take back into ourselves the lakes, the rivers, the oceans of the earth, its plains, its forested crags with their leaps of snow. Then little by little, the firmament. The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole.

Only in respecting all life do we have some vision of our true body as men.<sup>460</sup>

I name such moments “inciting moments,” for they incite the yearning for epiphanies.<sup>461</sup> Believers know these ethical aches are cues for the transcendence of salvation, because they shift the frame of reference beyond their own interests, pursuits and experiences. They shape experience towards personal and social transformation. For the voice in the poem, the meal is an inciting incident. My reading of it centres round a key phrase, “the tug to immortality.” This term crystallises the sacred and ethical impulse for salvation. That destiny discloses salvation in life narratives.

## ii. Elegy for a species

This hermeneutical reading of Malouf’s poem “The Crab Feast” (1980) (Appendix 3) brings to bear the twin dimensions of annual neighbourly banqueting and the universal hope for salvation where the poet sings of a moment of ethical pertinence. One could call it a moment of retrieval of hope for being an intense realisation of his shared

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<sup>460</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 96. Furthermore poetry and the imagination will reveal that destiny: “Our further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree. We have only to find the spring and release it.” *An Imaginary Life*, 64.

<sup>461</sup> Such a cycle is well known: incident, yearning and epiphany to satisfy it.

mortality with the creatures of the sea. This reading<sup>462</sup> is an honest attempt to contemplate poetical images from the point of view of religious experience and insight. This journey builds a three-way intertextuality between the discourse of salvation, the texts of our lives and the poetic texts. The following discussion shows how the narrative of salvation suitably contextualizes Malouf's elegy is a re-enacted discovery.

Communing with David Malouf in the special love feast brings new knowledge, new states of awareness and new imperatives, as the poem says: "I look through into / your life. Its mysteries disarm me." The idea of communing with a poet in my title suggests seeking - or having found - higher understanding or heightened receptivity. It is said that kindred souls commune through their inspired artistic creations: through writings, art, and shared acts of kindness. I claim no possession of this gift but I do seek to read sympathetically with an aspiration to deal with mortality. The hermeneutic swings on the seafood meal described in this poem. To Christian readers, communing suggests intimacy, insight and some ethical resonances in the eucharistic feast, that unique sacrament of salvation. For the poem focuses on a critical moment in the universal struggle to reconcile appetite and love.<sup>463</sup>

In "The Crab Feast," a reappraisal of the dominance of humans over nature produces a decisive turn in responsibility that becomes an ecological mandate to halt exploitation and bring about rescue in the natural world. There is a dreary silence in the

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<sup>462</sup> These comments first appeared as a paper, Greg Smith, "Communing with David Malouf: Considerations upon Salvation" at the *Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion and Culture: "On The Good, Goods And The Good Life"* Catholic Institute, Sydney 2 October 2004, now published in the referred *Australian Ejournal of Theology* February 2005 Issue 4 "Communing with David Malouf; Considerations upon Salvation" [on-line] available: [dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_4/gregsmith.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_4/gregsmith.htm) See James Tulip's reflection on the poem in "David Malouf as Humane Allegorist" (1981) on July 11 2006, quite some time after writing this paper. I do not read seeing it as allegory for eucharist.

<sup>463</sup> For an interesting cross reference, see Murray's poem, "To Me You'll Always be Spat" lines 1, 4-6: "Baby oyster, / little living gravel / I'm the human you need / the one who won't eat you." *Conscious and Verbal*, 33.

disappearance of species. Being the most evolved, the most complex, the most knowing of species, we humans urgently need to be responsive and responsible about our actions upon Mother Earth. The arrogance of our species renders us blind; yet all creatures breathe the same air, and bleed the same blood. A sensitive reading of this poem brings one to the threshold of awareness, to a portal for increased responsibility by envisioning what could be done better in a responsible ethical framework for preserving the diversity of life on earth. In elegiac mood, the poem offers a requiem for species.

Reading this poem provides the opportunity for a focused look at “the stuff of the world’s redemption.”<sup>464</sup> Of course, mine is an alternative reading; I do not seek to discern what Malouf himself intends to say,<sup>465</sup> but the poem’s voice envisions a greater good for the human community. Indeed, his key insights bring new and irrevocable stages of awareness. One critical insight turns a life around, brings a whole new spotlight to bear on present reality, and indicates a new path into the future. Such singularly creative insights lie at the basis of major scientific discoveries. In a real sense, a significant insight images salvation for the race. Yet that saving outcome is not certain; the dice can roll either way. Humans risk a biological catastrophe in refusing to coexist with other species in the planet’s ecosystem. This poem evokes a second, hard look at our consumption practices in the light of the world’s survival. Our survival as a race depends on re-establishing right relationships with one another and with the physical world we inhabit. The crab metonymises all life on earth such as whales. The poet offers an engaged perspective that critiques fishing practices as a way forward to a more harmonious complementarity with species. The poet’s insight transforms the stuff of creation into instruments of salvation.

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<sup>464</sup> Phrase borrowed from George Weigel, “Holy Land Pilgrimage: A Diary” in Philip Zaleski, ed., *The Best Spiritual Writing 2001* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 223.

<sup>465</sup> My reading is hermeneutical, a really different approach from Tulip’s: “Malouf is expressing” (394), “Malouf is trying to define and demonstrate” (393), “he speaks directly and positively in his own voice” (398). Tulip, “Humane Allegorist,” 1981.



### iii. Salvation imaged conserving ecology

Of course, the definitive salvation comes with the Word that is Jesus. I am saying that this poem shares some of that revelation and finality by achieving a new state of awareness, by embedding an urgent ethical mandate. When the poet discovers that both he and his food become one flesh, have coexisted in the same temporality, and face the same fate subject to the same laws of existence, he arrives at a unique and irrevocable insight. Thus, he sees his love feast as a momentous transgression.<sup>466</sup>

Now twenty-five years after its publication, today's mainstream Australian readers seek a re-enchantment with the sacred in an ecological theology. So in this reading, I rather eschew the popular reading of this poem as an erotic fancy<sup>467</sup> as happened in the World Poetry Congress in Sydney in 2001 in favour of an interpretation valid from within the community of believers. Luke Ferretter<sup>468</sup> builds on Stanley Fish's concept of interpretative communities to validate the Christian view as an identifiable perspective on public data. A Christian literary theory "is but a special instance of the way in which all interpretation has to proceed as a matter of course."<sup>469</sup> This interpretative community is the community of the Christian church.

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<sup>466</sup> Inspired by Daphne Merkin's transgression in her "wilderness of disaffection" in eating a non-kosher hot dog as an adolescent experimentation in liberation from her Orthodox Jewry, in "Trouble in the tribe" in Philip Zaleski, ed., *The Best Spiritual Writing 2001* (HarperSanFrancisco 2001), 179.

<sup>467</sup> Martin Langford, "Poetry, Biology, Peace" *World Congress of Poets Sydney 2001* [on-line] available: [members.tripod.com/worldpoets/PapersWorldCongress2001.htm](http://members.tripod.com/worldpoets/PapersWorldCongress2001.htm) [2004 September 9].

<sup>468</sup> Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003). In summary: Christian literary theory is no less legitimate than any of its rivals for being cultivated by a community of believers in a framework of tradition and theological authority. A Christian reading should be seen as a special instance of the way in which all interpretation has to proceed as a matter of course.

<sup>469</sup> Wojciech Jajdelski, review of Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* in *Literature & Theology* 17.3 (2003), 343-345.

As an experience of transcendence, salvation thus imaged resolves ambiguities and indifference in a determination to face reality when it is perceived in a new way. What I call moments of salvation occur in a acute awareness of self and nature and others. Such moments bring significantly heightened meaning in a wider perspective about one's coordinates in time and place, and mankind's duty to care for the earth. Such moments become experiences of liminality, of reaching and crossing thresholds with greater courage than has been attempted previously. These moments bring a pull to the sublime, bringing a sense of the broader vision, of the bigger picture, that transcends and explains the ordinary. This sense of the sacred, like "the tug to immortality" (Malouf), engenders altruism.

To begin the journey to salvation, such a moment of critical insight resolves the crisis of inactivity, ambiguity, indifference and ignorance. It closes apprehensions and opens a new comprehension. Listeners are never the same after such a gift of revelation. Pertinently, Seger observes that in Malouf transcendence is "a reception not a grasping."<sup>470</sup> It is a movement of the imagination embodied in the present and the world, in a "dialogue between the specific and the inaccessible."<sup>471</sup> In the same sense that Murray seeks translations, this moment of rapture, rupturing reality's conventionalities, which translates "the invisible to the tangible and specific [and] is the most rewarding job of poetry, and music."<sup>472</sup> So this poem's intense moment of wholeness in a consideration upon species-survival uses linguistic, semiotic, hermeneutical, and performative capacities to explore continuity as transcendence.

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<sup>470</sup> Natalie Seger, "Imagining transcendence: The poetry of David Malouf" *Australian Literary Studies* 22.2 (October, 2005), 147.

<sup>471</sup> Seger, "Imagining transcendence," 151.

<sup>472</sup> Seger, "Imagining transcendence," 154.

## iv. Ethical insight begins salvation

Romancing the metaphor of a banquet, the poem reviews excessive consumption practices but also dramatises a symbolic meeting point at a transgression. Just as Eve's transgression led to new knowledge, this poet's seafood meal yields an ethical insight of social significance. In this portrayal, the poet's act of eating becomes a moment of revelation, becoming so strong a transgression upon species that it profoundly effects changes in the poet's worldview about what really matters. The poem re-enacts a singular moment of insight at a portal of salvation (in the sense of a comprehensive gateway of contact to greater riches, goods and possibilities).

The imagined crab feast opens a new pathway to a final statement about the state of the world, where the poet becomes a brother to creation, a citizen of the earth, a responsible human inhabitant, an enlightened poet, and even a reconstructed male. The voice captures here a moment of spiritual awakening, when a gift is granted, a rescue is won, and where a menu for the body becomes a mandate for the soul: "knowing the ways / we differ I'd come to think we must be one." In its performative modality, the poem grants access to the interconnectedness of life of earth.

In effect I am saying that readers experience this poem as a significant *locus* for imaging salvation. In describing that dynamic, Coulson observes that, "imagination safeguards us from fixation."<sup>473</sup> Stories in literature image reaching moments of self-consciousness and even personal transformations that change lives. In its "enlargement of consciousness" (Coulson), the imagination re-envision reality differently, where new life-changing insights progress heard guarantees about theological truths.

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<sup>473</sup> Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*, 158.

Employing the sacralising imagination, my reading plots the real struggle involved in *metanoia*, for ethical insight begins the journey to salvation. This poem coaxes the imagination to appreciate that mystery. Transformative self-consciousness works through the praxis of the imagination, because both poetry and theology engage the imagination, to envisage a better reality. Because poetry and faith both engage the imagination, even insights in fiction save. In that sense then because the poem reports reaching an irrevocable and irrefutable state of new awareness, its ethical critique of appetite presages emancipation, rescue, redemption, and liberation in a decisive change of practice. Accordingly, it images salvation.

“The Crab Feast” plots just such a significant moment of realisation about the exploitation of one species, so that it comes to save the poet from past ignorance for the sake of the future. Their transformed lives beat in synergy: “[You have] prepared a new habitat under the coral reef of my ribs.” Both the believer and the poet seek remedies for the common good. Indeed, when they find crossovers on common concerns, religious readings become public mandates.

His discovery is not a private revelation. This poet’s intimations upon mortality are not private fodder but vital fare, essential good food for the community of his literary readers and for faith community readers too. I find “The Crab Feast” breaks open surprising challenges, to be found in what Auden called “the privilege and panic of mortality.”<sup>474</sup> In the poem’s revelation of their common mortality, the public share the poet’s intense subjectivity so as to transform their social worlds. Because ideas impact upon lives and insights change practices, in that sense then poetry saves humans.

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<sup>474</sup> Quoted in Veronica Brady, “Making connections: Art, Life and some recent novels” *Westerly* 25. 2 (June 1980), 63.

Malouf's imagined seafood feast has the local relevance and the social conscience of liberation theology. Its insight about environmental ethics is irreversible because it is sourced in primary elements (like the unprocessed food from the sea) and natural processes (the universal act of eating). It is presented as no artifice that can be misunderstood and equivocated upon. The mangroves, the broken shell, the salt sea, the raw crab flesh, and the man's saliva compose empirical basics in a repeatable recipe for discovering salvation. The poem draws an essential and irrefutable groundedness in sensual reality. The poem presents a wonderful intersection of the visible body and its invisible meaning, in an insight about transcending present practices.

Our contemporaries may well read the poet here as a gourmand performing the high rites of the dining table. Yet, humans are reckless harvesters, consumers and exploiters, misunderstanding their place in the web of nature. The ironic paradox is that the way forward is to realise that reconciliation begins in transforming basic practices, transforming less savoury practices of thoughtless greed and habitual ignorance. Malouf makes unthinkable cosmic harmony look possible. The overheard monologue in this poem focuses upon a key intersection of aesthetic, social, political, ecological and religious concerns.

#### v. Intimacy images salvation

To close these prefacing comments, let me briefly consider intimacy that is the central datum in this poem, for as the first line reads: "there is no getting closer than this." It is true that intimacies are chosen or presented, pursued or discovered, as when someone reveals their hidden love or when a distant relative reminds us of a family secret long

forgotten. Intimacies embarrass when presented at the wrong time as unwelcome or unexpected. Further, there is a greater thrill in a new intimacy than in a restored intimacy.

There are always degrees of intimacy across physical, psychological or social boundaries. Sexual intimacy is not the only or best example of an intimacy, but of course it is understandable to almost everybody. Intimacy is a social construction. Degrees of intimacy mark out one's place in the scale of things, locate one's social coordinates, one's relative place, class and role in the social life of society. Intimacy best expresses our human selves as social creatures.

Intimacies sum up histories and identities. For instance, the Christian life is proposed as a journey of increasing intimacy. Of all human activities, the moment of intimacy and the feeling of intimacy are the best and most desired of good times. Intimacies express a heartfelt reality as no other communication does. Intimacies require and deserve subtlety and demand genuine responses. Having an intimacy is a fact to recognise and celebrate: "When the shell / cracked there was nothing [more] / between us" [separating us]. Possession of an intimacy entails special responsibilities. For that reason, a refusal or denial of an intimacy can be very painful indeed. Private meals express very great intimacy.

Accepting an intimacy affirms the choice of the other towards oneself. It is an affirmation of freedom and individuality in the other party. Intimacy never expresses a power relationship such as between an inferior and a superior. Intimacy denotes equality, close identification and respects individuality. It denies any merging of identities or fusion of personalities but affirms equal separateness. Intimacy comes in

knowledge (as in a secret), in experience (as fire fighters feel), in shared subjectivity (as between lovers) or in facing a fate together (as on a sinking Titanic). Moments of crisis test the limits of intimacies. This crab meal intimacy reveals the need for some steps towards salvation.

This poem explores the strangely intimate connection between hunter and prey, and between feaster and his food as the central metaphor in the intimacy of a meal. Its central insight, “We were horizons / of each other’s consciousness” is that intimacies about death are at the very crux of time and eternity. Because this closest intimacy is identified and accepted, salvation is found in that life-changing insight.

The persona discovers an unknown intimacy at an unexpected moment. In preparing his crab meal, he finds there is so much he has unknowingly already shared with the crab. So the consummation of the meal, the consumption of the crab’s good flesh, transforms his transgressive communion into a love feast. For in the death of the crab he discovers their shared fate. This intimacy between hunter and prey yields an insight of ethical significance. The poem affirms the insight that individuals are larger than their bodies, that human greed suffuses all creation, and that that insight entails responsibilities for all life on earth.

#### vi. Transformed attitudes risk transcendence

The poem successfully intimates the universally longed-for unity of nature. This is no mere neo-romanticism but an ethical discovery of contemporary import. This theme of a connectedness with nature in poems like “The Crab Feast” appears also in Malouf’s fictional characters’ benevolent relationships with their immediate physical

environments. For example, in *Remembering Babylon*, his characters desire the “taste of the world [in] its greenness”<sup>475</sup> and Gemmy Fairley finds “the land up there was his mother.”<sup>476</sup> These spiritual and metaphysical intimations about reality offer strong cogencies for today’s readers.

Unashamedly, Malouf provides self-transforming epiphanies as remedies for his characters who are enmeshed in the languid boredom of constrained lives, so that like Janet McIvor at the bee hives, they too are “drawn into the process and mystery of things”<sup>477</sup> so they can be at home in their circumstances, at home in the wide living universe. Insightfully, Noel Rowe notes how memory saves us:

Trusting in the transformative and unitive powers of the imagination, he [Malouf] invites us to recover a naivety of belief and an extraordinary reverence for the hieróphanous nature of ordinary objects. [He] Malouf argues the need to ‘redeem’ the unknown dimensions of consciousness and being.<sup>478</sup>

In this reading of the poem, the enriching life of the imaginative memory his characters achieve transformation and “re-establish the continuity in their lives.”<sup>479</sup> Such a message of promise occurs as this poem’s transforming insight.

In his passion for valuing the gift of being alive, Malouf offers readers a belief in a second chance, a kind of secular grace as a genuine, interim salvation. In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Michael Adair’s final reconciliation with his own history is dramatically satisfying if somewhat melodramatic. In these fictional but

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<sup>475</sup> David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Vintage, 1994), 193.

<sup>476</sup> Malouf, *Babylon*, 118.

<sup>477</sup> Malouf, *Babylon*, 143.

<sup>478</sup> Noel Rowe, “Religious intuitions in the work of David Malouf” private student notes (Sydney University, 30/4/1985), p. 1.

<sup>479</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 187.



basically optimistic frameworks, Malouf's characters are able to find direction and make progress with their lives. Pertinently, poet Kevin Hart notes how Malouf could be said to strive "to keep open the risk of transcendence."<sup>480</sup> For that openness to the possibilities for transformations, I regard Malouf as a poet of redemption.

The universal ache for salvation is imaged in this poem. This poem plots that moment of decisive insight, of transformed attitudes, that envisages the survival and dignity of humankind as beginning with respect for the ecology of this earth.

#### vii. Feasting on crab meat

A short search shows that the annual summer event of a crab feast is indeed a celebration of the good life in the USA. For the wonderful white meat, hard won from the crusty shells of this "brute blue," *Callinectes sapidus*, native crustacean of the Chesapeake Bay area is highly prized and celebrated as a distinctive Maryland delicacy. Its power to bring cohesion to local communities is celebrated in advertising.

A crab feast has become a social ritual for many. Tasting that luscious, white meat is a gourmet indulgence on special occasions in summer for eating among US work colleagues, friends and neighbours in clubs and neighbourhoods. The term has become a powerful icon for Americans more broadly to reconnect with their neighbours and to celebrate their common humanity. In this casual banqueting on the very finest fruit of the sea, the nation seems to be retrieving what it can before that precious resource runs out. For already Mississippi crab products are suspected of food poisoning as a result of environmental degradation.

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<sup>480</sup> Kevin Hart, "Francis Webb: Unsaying Transcendence" *Southerly* 2/ 2000, 18.

My meditation on “The Crab Feast”<sup>481</sup> is a reading that brings to bear these twin dimensions of annual neighbourly banqueting and universal hope for salvation. No other fish on Friday could have such meaning as this.

#### viii. Thematic analysis

“The Crab Feast” appears in verses of either three or four lines each, in ten numbered sections or scenes of about equal length, with each section running to about thirty lines. In 253 lines, this is a substantial poem in Malouf’s anthologies and the centrepiece in my opinion of this rich and short anthology entitled “First Things Last.” For it does pick up the anthology’s title as a meditation upon the impact of last things, or as we would hear in Christian doctrine, the “four last things:” death, heaven, hell and purgatory. Indeed, an eschatological vision would put these four last things first as the most basic determinants of meaning in the life of the Christian, both spiritual and social.

Malouf’s title “First Things Last” critiques our procrastinating habit of putting the important things, especially ultimate truths like the four last things, last beyond our immediate attention. The poetic monologue in this seafood meal, when two fleshs become one, does affirm their shared mortality and is a reflection upon their share in the rhythm of life. The poem suggests eschatological resonances.

To anticipate my reading, I summarise the poem as a monologue stressing intimacy with his seafood platter, a crab now become meat for his meal. As the poet begins to eat

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<sup>481</sup> David Malouf, “The Crab Feast” in *First Things Last: Poems by David Malouf* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 28, also in “*Selected Poems 1991*” in the Angus and Robertson paperback edition, Sydney: 1992, also *Parabola* 6:2 “The Dream of Progress” (1981), 31.

the crab meat, he reflects upon the bargain between the species, where one is hunter and one is prey, in a battle of the species. In this “compact between us” (line 187), the speaker realises how species have been assigned places in the eco-system. He learns too that the object of his appetite in fact eats up himself as its lover too. Appetite and desire consume both the desirer and the desired. Counter-intuitively, he asserts that humankind assumes “a dangerous clawhold” when it claims the right to dominate all other species on the earth. Finally he notes how language cannot express the unspoken agreements, the “terrible privacies” that make possible the battles between the species. That moment of reflection, that is an exercise of the “creative capacity to grasp a single apprehension of the unity of things,”<sup>482</sup> generates a rich reflection upon both their shared mortality in a shared communion. He comes to realise this one communion is a transgression upon species diversity. Finally and realistically, the poet surmises how his reflection is still only a fruitful product of the world of words, still anticipating those worthy ethical actions it envisages.

Such an intensive recollection has many theological references and applications. I suggest that the poem espouses intimations of mortality and, as he puts it, invokes a tug towards immortality. The poem plots the movement from puzzlement to insight, dissolving security into challenge, and transforming self-referentiality into a responsible awareness of life on earth. Poems with such interior communication take on the character of what I call whispers of the sacred or as Murray would say, they heighten meaning via access to the *numinous*. For bringing access to the meaning of being alive, and in stressing their shared mortality as man and beast in a critical instance of its processes, the poem constructs an inter-subjectivity about all life on Earth. It overturns the currently exploitative objectivity of the western domination of nature. Both hunter

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<sup>482</sup> Rowe, “Religious intuitions,” 7.

and hunted lose: "This hunt / is ritual, all the parties to it lost." This is an unredeemed ritual.

As a performative experience, this poem is a very pertinent harbinger of ecological salvation. In my reading, salvation is realised in an identification of such moments of intense experience, which foretell a greater awareness of self and of others in relationship with oneself. Such rare moments come as significant ethical tugs to immortality. These aches for wholeness reveal an identification of impulses with a pull to the sublime.<sup>483</sup> The poem particulars crystallise some ethical universals in the Christian life.

The poem's hints of salvation shift the frame of reference beyond a focus on an individual's own interests, pursuits and experiences to broach broader, more socially meaningful ones. Reviewing his transgressions inspires the poet (and subject to degrees of identification, the reader also) to envision salient impulses for a better world. In this sense the poet's whispers of the sacred engender altruism. Stanza by stanza, through frame by frame of insight, the human plot to live by consumption off other species is here unravelled. Feeling framed by his society's exploitative practices, the poem's persona strives to accept the crustacean's accusation, and addresses his conscience in a dramatic monologue of contending metaphors. In its attempt to erase the entrenched, historical process, the poem enriches and complicates reflection on environmental themes. The result must go beyond colonizing the sea and possession for gain. This dialogue in an alien territory mirrors the universal struggle for ethical transcendence.

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<sup>483</sup> This word seems to be conspicuously absent in all of Malouf, but his use of the literary form of 'sublime discourse' is discussed in David Buckridge, "The functions of sublime discourse in David Malouf's fiction" as confusion, dialectic, subjectivity and physical self-consciousness. In Amanda Nettelbeck, ed. *Provisional Maps* (Centre for Studies in Australian Literature: University of Western Australia, 1994), 163-182.

Only accountable actions and dreaming the transcendent in honest vulnerability will realise this transcendent dream for newness and responsible freedom.

x.        Discovered in critical experience

Table 6 espaliers Malouf's "The Crab Feast" featuring the speaker's key "I" phrases as interpretive keys to the progress of its revelation. The poem's 253 lines appear in ten sections of about equal length. Like a magnetic field, the central apprehension is recounted though ten connected perceptions, recollections, conversations and conclusions. The 'I' statements compose a thin narrative thread round that central spiralling datum line representing the persona dissolving in the environment.

Section	Key phrases	Focus	Virtues for salvation
I.	I know all now; I took you to me.	Encounter	Seek newness
II.	I liked our variant selves; I wanted the whole of you	Desire and deception	Hope and optimism
III.	I come back nightly to find the place	Reconnaissance	Dream the transcendent
IV.	You scared me and I hunted you.	The hunt	Accountable actions
V.	I watch and am shut out; I observe the rules; I look into your life.	Watching you	Authentic imagination
VI.	I crossed the limits; I go down in the dark.	Sparring partners	Responsible freedom
VII.	We belong to different orders; I approach bearing a death.	Kinship	Clear sightedness
VIII.	I will be broken after you; I play my part.	Vulnerability	Insightful vulnerability
IX.	I've dreamed you once too often; I feel night harden over; I go out in silence . . . to die true to my kind.	Learning to die	Faith in a saviour
X.	I am not ashamed of our likeness; I am caught with a whole life on my hands; I am ready.	Resolution/ Identification	Non-violence

Table 6: Interpretative guide for reading “The Crab Feast”

The reader might note that the relentless shifts in the persona's functions indicate instability in that persona. Isolating the “I” voice in this interpretative grid is a useful focalising device for the writer and reader. For this persona, “increasingly allows his agenda to be defined by his environment.”<sup>484</sup> The central voice fails to maintain executive control in a poignant dramatisation of some dissolution of the self. This poem is not a retrieval of the environment for purposes of its representation in literature, but a powerful imaginative shift of internal migration from the human self as an interesting subject of study to see the world from the perspective of the crab. As an elegy of species in alterity, the poem plots a salvation discovered in critical experience.

<sup>484</sup> Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1995), 169.

“Malouf” here meets Buell’s request that “environment writing imagine nonhuman agents as *bona fide* partners.”<sup>485</sup> Unfortunately, most literature always leads away from the physical world, never back to it. The poem signals a retrieval of worth to reverse that historical movement, for he is standing up for nature by straying into its alien domain, in a discourse that is not a homily wrapped in the guise of an autobiographical narrative. The poem cuts down the inherited claim that the human has more ontological priority to live than the crab. The poem shows aesthetics mediating a decisive force for an environmental change of attitude and practice.

Powerfully, the poet sings about how a moment of insight brings an intense realisation of his personal mortality, that one could fairly call a moment of salvation. This apprehension of death within the whole unity of things becomes productive, for it charts promises of limitless development. Its central metaphor, “the tug of immortality” points to an abundance of greater potentialities:

It was always like this: each an open universe  
expanding beyond us, the tug of immortality.<sup>486</sup>

In other words, in recognising and responding to this felt tug of immortality, the poet realises more about his own freedom to respond to other possible choices. Within this newly realised framework, reconciliation with nature makes sense when some order arises out of the painful chaos. Malouf’s phrase, the “tug of immortality,” becomes an experiential vector towards personal transformation, in an ethical identification with the creatures of the sea. This imaginative shift, typical in Malouf, recharting the past points to a better future where the authentic imagination begets ethics.

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<sup>485</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 179.

<sup>486</sup> Malouf, “The Crab Feast” lines 182-3, *First Things Last*, 34.

The crab's death, and more generally any death, necessarily closes off the inherent possibilities and potentialities that being alive offers. Yet while the poem's *persona* seems to suggest an evolutionary futility with the inevitability of both their deaths, he intimates that a greater meaning could have been attained for "an open universe [was always] expanding beyond us."<sup>487</sup> Death's inevitability then requires salvation.

Section 1 begins the poem on a note of rare intimacy, that there is "no getting closer/ than this" (lines 1-2). Breaking open its shell has revealed all secrets, and having the most impact was the taste of the meat, described as "moonlight transformed into flesh" (8-9). In this most intimate contact, the crab being broken open reveals the paradox that its meat, born of lowliness and sewage under the mangroves, yields this most exquisite fruit of (Moreton) Bay. That observation elicits a revealing admission from the poet, that "[if] I knew you existed / I could also enter it." In other words, trust kills fear.

This reference has a double effect, to elicit an admission of aversion or misunderstanding previously held, and to describe the salt water of the bay as an "alien domain," the place of its proper otherness, alien to man, as the border conditioning doubt and encounter. That littoral place symbolises entry into intimacy. The poetic voice says he has invaded both that abode of coolness, mystery and growth that the crab had occupied as its natural habitat, and now indeed invades its shell. Both invasions of domain and crab shell bring death. This tension between alien and familiar places sets up the poetical bridge between the poet's present unfavourable circumstances and a superior place of sublime immortality he imagines the crab has already entered through death.

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<sup>487</sup> Malouf, "The Crab Feast" line 16 episode VIII, *First Things Last*, 34.



The language of desire occurs again when he is describing the merging of actors in the drama of life (we “must be one”) to offset his observations about the “ways we differ.” This sets up an eschatological vector in the monologue. The poet imagines fulfilment in the act of eating as nurturance and communion, wherein the crab meat assumes a new habitat to give life again “under the coral /reef of my ribs.” So this act of eating has begun some reflections on identities and commonalities. In a series of interpretative modalities, the poet frames up a sustained meditation on sharing life in one ecological system and its possibilities for the future.

Section II flashbacks to earlier events when the poet had gone fishing, when the noonday light did not in fact “reveal us as we were” as one would expect, but that the noonday light had in fact deflected attention and disguised identities. That was the period of their “variant selves” when outward appearances, with sensitive perception in “stalk eye a periscope” and polished, dexterous “Doulton claws,” alienated each from the other in their stylised presentations of themselves.

Yet while those differences kept them apart, the poet now admits his own appetite drew them together: “I wanted the whole of you” as “raw poundage.” Readers may well hear echoes here of how desiring the fruit of the Garden of Eden led to Eve’s shame. The poet notes how this desire brings him shame for his transgression. The section’s concluding imagery of the kiss or communion meal “on my palm, on my tongue” further analogises the unitive associations of food and communion developing and structuring this most intense meditation.

In Section III, the poet recounts some time and place perspectives before the feast. Fragments of narrative merge with impressions, as the poet exorcises his past

perceptions, of sand and light and dark and spaces. Echoing the mystic's language of *via negativa*, the poet tries to account for the elusive presence that the crab offered, while he had not grasped it. Despite drawing breath in the very same world as the crab did in life, now he realises his own ignorance. With greater clear sightedness, he realises he was innocently unknowing, was not conscious of the crab's nearness, in what he now realises is a parallel existence beyond view. This new awareness is saving.

The voice here reports how his false perspectives deceived; how he had been foolishly hunting the "spaces in a net," among the "chunks of solid midnight" for illusions like "star-knots in their mesh." Ignorant that they were in fact both connected in life, he now realises they are actually connected with each other in overlapping appetites. Whether from blindness, or wilful ignorance or biologically determined, he realises the deed of hunting the crab to death was unfortunately necessary to bring about these liberating reflections. It seems no salvation can be won in this end game.

Section IV extends the effects of the crab's death to portray it as an interpretative juncture for them both, for each has had a tortuous journey though the colours of the rainbow. The poet-as-hunter analogises colours to describe the journeys each has had: that the crab had eaten death in his acceptance of fate. Now the poet imagines his own species as an out-"cast wheezing." He recounts how from appetite he hunted the crab as part of evolution's plan: "I hunted you / like a favourite colour, / indigo", obeying biological imperatives, to "push on through the spectrum" of colours, from light to dark, "out into silence, and a landscape/ of endings, with the brute sky pumping red." Colour amplifies and multiplies effect. Indigo readily echoes Jesus' suffering (Jn 19:5) to biblical readers.

Section IV also plots discursive reflections; the poet surmises that his hunt reveals “what rainbows / we harbour with us,” in short, the human journey through the many changing colours of the rainbow indicates the manifold possibilities for growth and development they each contained, and the widest range of capacities for evil too. Chameleon-like, humans find they have variant selves, even to the extent of killing others. That end-point is a silence indeed, for all imagined possibilities are disastrously resolved in that one real fate. In a better world, it seems, man and creature could have come to a better arrangement whereby their lives are redeemed, the one from the taint of power and the other from a fate as prey or victim. As a result the poet surmises, a high leap from *eros* to *agape* is necessary. It is better to dream the transcendent.

Section V heightens the apparent differences between them even further, developing the relatively different circumstances of crab and poet in former times. Now in a minor key, the meditation explores the temporal dimensions of their difference, as the poet marvels at the many unrecorded battles for survival that the crab must have fought in soundless engagement on the seabed, musing that he heard no call to arms to defend its seabed existence. More broadly now, the poet realises he too is a part of this on-going unseen, silent struggle in progress between species. Living in different time frames within different environments (sea and land) and wearing different defences (shell and skin) for implementing the struggle between species could well render this crab species extinct.

Yet even more ironically, both poet and crab simultaneously belong to the Dance, a term capitalized to nominate undoubtedly the dance of life, and ironically the macabre fate of the inevitable dance of death to come. Circumstances dictate that all life is doomed: the crab in “its submarine retreat” and he in a hunt, that when seen from the

crab's point of view, is inevitably the dance of death. Evolutionary circumstances dictate that all life is locked into an endless cycle, but when some human consciousness of rescue enters in, that is the ethical tug of immortality, where a sense of mutual support breaks the cycle of determinism. In effect, the free action of the enlightened human in an ecological consciousness, such as "live and let live," would ensure the survival of both of their species. Thus, this exploration of differences leads to saving conclusions about their long suppressed commonalities. The inevitable win/lose outcome could be reversed with a win/win resolution. Some reconciliation / redemption may still possible, even if it is only controlled harvesting.

In Section VI, the monologue extends the dialogue into the affective domain. The poem now portrays them as two people meeting who were very different but who came into intimacy by exploring their differences, in the suggestion that "we were horizons / of each other's consciousness," as lovers would be, one with the other. The speaker suggests it is as if the crab and hunter shared a consciousness of greater possibilities, that "something more would take place." Could it be that that appetite actually feeds the tug of immortality, and that love is a lure for that fulfilment, the eventual salvation all intimates desire? When the hunter enters the sea to hunt for the crab ("I crossed the limits / into alien territory. One of us / will die for this"), he plots the course of his transgressive desire. He knows crossing the boundaries of caste or species when driven by desire must bring its unforeseen consequences. There are risks in seeking newness.

Because in unreconstructed practices, desire must always be consummated on contact, in this significant encounter "transactions uninsistent" are revealed. Beyond this crossover when appetite brings about the crab's death, those hidden intentions are

revealed to be fatal. Indeed, while “love remains a power to be reckoned with,”<sup>488</sup> this stanza explores the affective forces of desire and appetite, and the karmic consequences of unregulated consumption. Appetite clings to the mind like bindi burrs.<sup>489</sup>

In Section VII, the conceit of the hunt and its consummation is recounted metaphorically: “We are afloat together.” The moment of contact is exhilarating; each in his different element (air and sea) finds he counterweights the other. The feaster (inevitably a hunter) and his food share a kinship that could never be univocal. Just because they belong to different orders or castes of creation does not mean that a man is meant to hunt and crab is meant to be eaten (“my teeth seek you in the dark”). Despite their imagined differences, man and crab find they duel in an unfair match: “No, the end will not be like this.” Eventualities defy expectations; man’s unbridled exploitation and unbalanced forces plug for historically defined outcomes that in fact are not necessarily for life. Any affinities in this world are still mere words; the present reality is still struggle, conflict and domination.

Section VIII explores post-capture inevitabilities with the stunning phrase: “you broken before me.” Because both the man and animal share life and now a common fate means that they are engaged inevitably in a power struggle for life. The present practice is to eat the prey; the crab’s fate is to be hunted and eaten: “that sort of power kills us.” It dictates that desire commits, love submits and intimacy consumes. Unreconstructed, nature’s laws will ever be so: “I will be / broken after you, that was the bargain.” Any other law he says would be imagining blue sky in the moonlight. The tug to immortality is part of love’s aspiring while the fact of its eating requires dealing with mortality. The dramatic juxtaposition of the phrases, “I am with you in the dark” and “The secret flesh

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<sup>488</sup> David Malouf, “The Gift, Another Life” line 56, *Selected Poems*, 67.

<sup>489</sup> Wright quoted in Brady, *South of My Days*, 291.

of my tongue enters a claw,” seals the strange, unfair intimacy between the different species. He concludes that achieving salvation entails struggle; neither party emerges morally clean. This hard-won outcome is the fruit of overcoming the suffering of apartness and misunderstanding. Only accountable actions make it cleaner.

Section IX further develops the poet’s realisation of the consequences of the capture. Exploitation of this one species is a precedent for the exploitation of all. Killing in the crab’s native element “here in your kingdom”, the hunter learns regret and the guilt of his transgression: “your weight hangs upon me.” Experience teaches him: “so this / is what it is to drown.” The resolution in capture and consummation heightens differences and anaesthetizes feelings. Action brings knowledge as Eden’s lesson shows. The poet’s own composure afterwards should be modelled on the prey’s. For it is better to die in dignity with “no thrashing”, with “less than the usual disturbance”, and “to die smiling . . . beyond speech.” Contact and death should defy shame; guilt is an unnecessary emotion where the biological rules of engagement prescribe the outcomes.

Finally, Section X reviews the debilitating reality that the poem is a rhetoric of mere words, “words made you / a fact in my head.” The poet admits the fiction but reasserts the lesson: the crab will ever be food, and the laws of encounter dictate consumption and death. Their final and yearned-for bliss, “Assembled here / out of earth, water, air,” will be attained in fact only through a profound change in practice, striking in “a bolt of lightning” with ethical insight that will undo this relentless harvesting of crab meat. Now reviewing what has happened, it seems only impulse or attraction not the respect of responsibility had brought them together, and that impulse unfortunately was not love but appetite. That appetite is no substitute for love. He finds they have failed to pursue

the tug of immortality; they have ended up being just what they were; transformation was a mere dream.

That futile endgame echoes Wright's observation: "We are caught in the endless circle of time and star,"<sup>490</sup> in other words, the human race needs a full vision of true integration beyond limited, habitual horizons. The coda focuses on the performative force of the poet's trade, "the capacity of poetry at once to represent and to reveal qualities in experience which are not apprehensible except by its means."<sup>491</sup> The poem shows it is possible to exercise the authentic imagination to ethical effect.

In summary, like Eve, Malouf's feaster transgresses and so discovers "the tug to immortality" in the crucial insight that "we must be one." Quite mistakenly, he had come to believe that all's fair in limitless hunting. Yet now he finds that insight upon life's mysteries had disarmed him. In that unspoken "compact between us," they had both been "drawn into the process and mystery of things"<sup>492</sup>

The poem rehearses that significant encounter. In that moment of intimacy eating the crab flesh was "their silent communing."<sup>493</sup> In that very moment "when the shell cracked, there was nothing" separating them. For in treating the crab like "raw poundage," there is "no getting closer than this." Now that the crab has "prepared a new habitat under the coral reef of my ribs," they have become "horizons of each other's consciousness." The ache for completion transgresses in consumption rather than in species respect.

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<sup>490</sup> Judith Wright, "Woman to Child" lines 18-19, *C.P.* 29.

<sup>491</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, 63.

<sup>492</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Vintage, 1994), 143.

<sup>493</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 65.

This meal was uniquely revelatory, for it was to “reveal us as we were.” In fact, it was a dance macabre; it had opened “a dangerous clawhold” for death. This hunt revealed that, “all the parties to it [are] lost.” So as a result, the poet realises the extent of his unknowing moral complacency; now he realises “what rainbows / we harbour within us.” That fact is clear: in such a wild sea of compromises, silent intrigue, and unchallenged practices, both special human and sea creature are without recourse or redemption, they are “afloat together” in unethical space of unrestrained hunting.

The meal has brought this crucial realisation: “so this is what it is to drown.” Immorality is “to die smiling beyond speech.” In failing to express regard, in failing to articulate an acceptable ethic, they had failed each other. They cannot now have a “taste of the world [in] its greenness.”<sup>494</sup> In the death of the crab, there is no more potential, and in anaesthetising his conscience, he had been a hunter in an alien domain, unthinking, unfeeling and unbelievable stupid. On this basis, the fate of both is the same: “I will be broken after you, that was the bargain.” They both need to retrieve a better ethic about life’s transcendence for some sense of survival, for any salvation to occur. This transgression was no love feast; it was a last supper bringing betrayal. It is a revelation about just how colourfully humans fool themselves when destroying the world.

#### x. Ethical transcendence

This hermeneutical reading shows how the poet’s salvation lies in transformed insight. Just as Heidegger noted, poets are uniquely aware of the fractures of this world, of the gloom, dregs and filth of unholiness, “Salvation must come from where there is a turn

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<sup>494</sup> David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 193.



with mortals in their nature.”<sup>495</sup> The poetic imagination’s turn here lies in the ethical tug to seek transcendence, to find some baseline control that brings mutual survival and resolution, that is, salvation. In reaching for wholeness and plotting the changes that are necessary, the poet imagines deliverance, liberation and saving grace. Elsewhere, Malouf puts it another way to note encouragingly that:

What we experience through imagination, if it is deep and immediate enough, is every bit as real, every bit as useful to us as what we experience directly in the everyday.<sup>496</sup>

Such new visioning is decisive for achieving ethical transcendence. Idealism paints a rosy unreality; fighting the struggle to make ethical changes entails insight, skills, experience and some determination to bring a dream to fruition. Optimism is not a fey passivity or an individual indulgence. It is a constant necessary to win salvation. Malouf’s imaginative journey realistically faces the many resistances to his vision of species harmony granting any survival for the crab.

“The Crab Feast” is a tantalising exploration weighing up the exigencies of living and the dream of loving. In ten linked scenes, the poet finds that whereas appetite kills, love promises the tug of immortality. He finds the biological and the psychological are at odds. Flesh is “so much air, so much water.” They are merely the shifting reality within which we act, while on the contrary, being utterly respectful is caring-love’s vector. Desire dictates the exercise of power; care would yield respect to live. Salvation will be achieved only in responsible freedom, accountable actions, insightful vulnerability, and an authentic vision of harmony. Salvation will come not in a fantasy but in an imaginative grasp of otherness in our ecological relationships, in a central apprehension

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<sup>495</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon 1975), 141.

<sup>496</sup> Malouf, *Imagining the Real* (1987), 19.

of unity, in “a native grasp on the gist of things” (line 228). Clearly, humans need to learn this grasp so as to restrain greed, impulse, and exploitative fishing practices.

At the interpretative level, the key phrase, “the tug of immortality” identifies ethical progress towards more diversity rather than less, towards more development, more complexity and more fulfilment. Abundance and honour come only with more ethical states of consciousness.<sup>497</sup> Like any ethical vision, it takes *alterity* seriously, in feeling the fate of the other. The poem’s central critical shift from otherness to intersubjectivity is its crowning moment. Feeling mandates caring. In this communion meal, the plot of salvation is revealed. Impulse’s central action is fracture, interference and loss. Yet salvation lies in sharing a release from eternal biological struggle to live, to being “open to the dream” by accepting death, the incontrovertible reality of all living things. In that shift to sympathy and non-violence, the poet finds that both he and the crab can share survival in this ethical salvation.

An eschatological reading superimposes a future reality (here the survival of both species) upon a present reality to envisage them transformed. In this reconstructed attitude, as living creatures both the poet and the crab are destined towards better ecological arrangements for mutual survival. For clearly the crab has already preceded him beyond their predestined “fixed terms” upon “not-quite-solid earth” into “a love feast.” More optimistically, the “I” voice notes how life “does not finish there,” for each of them always was “an open universe expanding beyond us, [when experiencing and responding to] the tug of immortality.” The poet identifies how his one “transgressive” encounter has become a gateway to a higher, ethical consciousness about respecting all

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<sup>497</sup> I am conscious here of Teilhard de Chardin’s *noosphere*, a raised collective moral zone of maturity for the race and the planet, in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution* (London: Collins, 1971), 132, 199, *passim*.

forms of life. That moment of insight resolves the suffering of separateness and unsatisfactoriness. The poem is no staged stunt; it is indeed an imaginative retrieval of *alterity*. To sum up, in proposing the good life, finer fare should bring greater care, about who humans are and what we do.

#### xi. Applying the authentic imagination

David Malouf's success as a prose writer too is well evidenced in his literary success and its wide appeal. His very crafted elaboration of contemporary abiding themes in fiction<sup>498</sup> gives him the leading edge over so many other writers. The present hermeneutic draws on these major qualities that characterise his work more broadly. Because his works pre-eminently generate imaginative awareness of hope and transcendence, selected fictional works require our consideration in this dissertation.

As authentic imagination, his rhetoric employs metaphor. It stresses what is tangible while at the same time accessing the limitless world of the imagination.<sup>499</sup> Malouf's limpid prose has an open, seemingly non-technical quality about it that is accessible. In exploring what is concrete to the senses, he is a master of detail by creating emotive atmospheres in the construction of meaning. For example, his identification and celebration of "eternal E-flat weather" in a short essay in the same anthology, "A poor

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<sup>498</sup> "In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things-sights, sounds, smells-as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real: We sympathize, think, and judge. We act out, vicariously, the trials of the characters and learn from the failures and successes of particular attitudes, and beliefs exactly as we learn from life. Thus the value of great fiction, we begin to suspect, is . . . that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noble in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations." John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* quoted by J P Morrell *Tips for Fantasy Writing* [on-line] available: [www.ivillage.com/books/expert/writecoach/articles/0,,167258\\_88339,00.html](http://www.ivillage.com/books/expert/writecoach/articles/0,,167258_88339,00.html) [assessed 2004 April 24].

<sup>499</sup> Philip Neilsen quotes Malouf saying, "Fiction is something that believes absolutely in the capacity of the imagination to make the world." *Viewing Notes for An Imaginary Life* 4656imaginarylifefiles.pdf file page 3 [2004 December 27].

man's guide to Southern Tuscany,"<sup>500</sup> excellently relates the bliss of an opera's resolution:

[One can hear] . . . a note at the very end, a high E-flat is an exit of quite extraordinary promise . . . an absolute avenue [with] the clear certainty of an impending lightness, the possibility of flight . . . breathing, for as long as the note lasts, eternal E-flat weather, the atmosphere of another planet.

For espaliering the sensate while shaping emotional responses about imagined states, Malouf's metaphors show the authentic exercise of the imagination.

Malouf's sensitivity to the texture of prose comes from his first life as a poet. His writing has a heuristic quality with its ebb and flow of impression, elaboration and disquisition. His prose rhetoric is enlivened with refreshing observations and descriptions to undergird his narratives in ways that blend style with atmosphere in themes of relevance today. His skilful management of nested points of view is a technical *tour-de-force*. His lexical novelties refresh for their appropriateness and precision. In his mastery of imaginative language, he expertly demonstrates figurative intent:

tropes - metaphors, synecdoche, metonymy – are not ornaments but are inherent in the most basic linguistic functioning. Language is figurative through and through.<sup>501</sup>

He successfully projects the possibility of an enhanced consciousness for everyone. His worlds awaken characters to their own latent potentialities, and through generating imaginative awareness, his characters redeem their realities. His characters' contexts dramatise the universal wish for transformation. So in his texts, in their textures and by

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<sup>500</sup> *First Things Last*, 44-50.

<sup>501</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* trans K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

their contexts, his fictional works image salvation in secular rhetoric.

Malouf satisfies the expectation that works of fiction do not have to be religious to present redemptive themes. Richard Terrell<sup>502</sup> argues that the christian vision of reality entails authenticity in plots, affirmations of God's grace, and the influence of moral absolutes. He decries the "reign of the explicit" where enigma, nuance and evocation are excluded in works qualifying as christian literature. Malouf's fictions honour Terrell's expectations to probe for more profound meanings:

The meaning of things in God's creation is underlying rather than on the surface [in] a reality that invites reflection, meditation, searching, [and] curiosity. . . . The Christian literary artist [distinctively] can appeal through words to the imagination in all its sensuous, emotional, and moral capacities seeking profundity and not mere sentimentality.<sup>503</sup>

Malouf's works display the authentic imagination by demanding a closer look, to haunt or enchant with meanings beyond mere necessity, utilitarianism or superficiality.

Malouf's plots promise moves towards redemption and grace. He addresses common feelings of alienation. Malouf is a traveller who retells tales of experience. He reports an inductive, embodied wisdom. Unashamedly, he provides self-transforming epiphanies as remedies for his characters who are enmeshed in the languid boredom of constrained lives, so that readers too, like Janet at the bee hives, are "drawn into the process and mystery of things."<sup>504</sup> He shows how his characters achieve transformation and "reestablish the continuity in their lives"<sup>505</sup> so they may be at home in their circumstances, and in the wide living universe. Because his fictions deal with

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<sup>502</sup> Richard Terrell, "Christian fiction: Piety is not enough" in Leland Ryken, ed., *The Christian Imagination* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Shaw Books, 2002), 251.

<sup>503</sup> Terrell, "Christian fiction," 252, 256.

<sup>504</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 143.

<sup>505</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 187,

profundities like identity, alienation and redemption/salvation, they require our attention here too.

In style, Malouf offers a positive intuition about the essential wholeness of life. He writes about the tragedy of living with a light touch in ways in tune with our superficial society. He does broach philosophical issues but writes without a didactic tone. Readers find his dealings with the intangible are acceptable and not excessively technical or philosophical but sufficient for their generalised purposes. He does not accept tried notions of fate or God but accepts that existence is in constant dynamism. What actually happens to his characters reads as what would be circumstantially likely to happen. He holds open the possibility of the fulfilment of all human potentialities to his characters. For instance, his character Ovid wonders if the Child will “discover in himself some further being”,<sup>506</sup> to engage in a healing process of self-identification and transcendence. In this pursuit of transcendence, Malouf achieves sufficient certainties for readers to trust him as a prophet of their liberations, In this respect, he is a seer of salvation.

So Malouf writes about salvation because he practises the authentic imagination. For him, lost vulnerability is the sign of humanity, distinguishing us from the animals. He infers that protecting oneself from vulnerability destroys community. This theme is demonstrated well in *An Imaginary Life*, his story of the famous Roman poet, Ovid, who has been exiled from Rome and is thus forced to live with a "barbarian" people in exile on the farthest edge of the empire along shores of the Black Sea in present-day Rumania. Ovid must transform himself, finding survival among barbarians by learning totally new ways and a new language. He cares for a wild boy, and at the onset of harsh winter, observes that the animal-like boy shows the vulnerability that makes him

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<sup>506</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (Woollahra, NSW: Picador, 1984), 150.

human:

He is as vulnerable now as anyone of us, and in that at least – even if the old woman does not see it – he shows himself human at last.<sup>507</sup>

Ovid's sympathetic description of the elder Ryzak's death shows the other elders covering up his vulnerability. As he lies stricken with fever and approaching death, they punch and pummel him so that he does not die whimpering like a baby but fighting like the warrior he was in life. The scene is profound, liminal and religious in intent:

The elders of the village are taking Ryzak's life by force, beating and shaking the last breath out of his tough old body so that he will die fighting. For him simply to dwindle into a state of childlike weakness would leave him vulnerable at last to the demons who are hovering there in the darkness to pluck his spirit away. He is being savaged to death. Only in this way can his dying spirit be raised to such a pitch of violence that the dark ones will quail before it and he may pass unharassed on the air.<sup>508</sup>

Such descriptions of vulnerability are platforms for building a more comprehensive ontology. Because vulnerability is given, community must also be essential. Our species' salvation lies in acknowledging that connectedness expressed by community.

In his fictions, Malouf successfully intimates the longed-for unity of nature in defiance of analytic-scientific divisions. His world-view taps into more contemporary hopes for unity among all beings. His characters discover Edenic unities with nature, within their own bodies and in their empathetic resonances with prevailing conditions. That thematic connectedness with nature mandated in "The Crab Feast" appears also in his fictional characters' benevolent relationships with their immediate physical environments.

Malouf's readers find many appeals to the Romantic mind in his work. He supplies

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<sup>507</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 114-5.

<sup>508</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 132.

many intimations for the formation of identity, human connectedness and social salvations of sorts in his fictions. For instance, in *Remembering Babylon*, when Lachlan Beattie visits his cousin Janet, Sister Monica, at the convent along Wynnum Road Brisbane, she watches him eating an apple. In her mind, Lachlan was unconsciously re-dramatising the last moments of his grandson Willie, who was killed in the war in France just ten months before. The sensory experiences of taste, breath and blood marking his death carry readers through to an altogether different plane of meaning:

The sour-sweet wafer might still have been in his mouth when he was hit – his last taste of the world [in] its greenness, along with his warm breath expelled to meet the larger, colder one of the autumn morning, then the rush of blood<sup>509</sup>

Again, in *Remembering Babylon*, the rejected boy-animal Gemmy finds “the land up there was his mother.”<sup>510</sup> Such intuitive links mark physical and metaphysical intimations about a broader reality of some cogency for contemporary readers. His novels are virtually theatres of the mind, seeking stillness where he “reads landscape . . . for signs of time regained or at least retained.”<sup>511</sup> In his fictions, many of his readers scent real chances for redemption in their bodily and psychological vulnerabilities and in the exploited and neglected land. His works generate imaginative awareness that like the analogical imagination work to engender ethical and transcendent possibilities upon the present. These works exercise the authentic imaginative so distinctive of faith.

## xii. Salvation in shared language

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<sup>509</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 193.

<sup>510</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 118.

<sup>511</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, “Intimations of Secular Grace.” *Meanjin* 40.4 (1981), 502.



Because Malouf's major themes include wholeness / incompleteness, nature / culture, and change / stasis,<sup>512</sup> he offers intimations about salvation. He writes about the search for meaning when his characters face change and the possibilities of change. He shows that realising one's capacity for transformation is a decisive step to salvation. This is one of the ten virtues for salvation in Chapter 6.

While these key themes suffuse his poetry, the search for meaning is more completely expressed in Malouf's celebrated prose works. They contextualise and dramatise this study's motifs of community, identity and spirituality. In his prose works, Malouf explores identity, continuity, alienation and the search for meaning as remedies for the extreme individualism of western society and its tattered fabric of belief. Tacey calls this, the search for a "shared spirituality." He says in rejecting religion and rejecting institutional faith, Australians might have in fact short-changed themselves, and "we might, as Veronica Brady said recently, 'be living half-lives' because of our rejection of religion."<sup>513</sup> In Christian anthropology, identity, community and spirituality grant coherence, and are necessarily interrelated because humans are social beings living out identities formed within community. Sustaining those identities are the symbols, rituals, and beliefs that characterise spirituality.

Because language originates and nurtures these identities, our study now moves to explorations upon salvation in his novels. Malouf's fictions bear salvational themes for, retrieving coherence, identity and continuity as a nation and as a culture requires shared meaning about who we are and where we are going. In this sense, salvation means finding sustainable directions and clear parameters for living. Malouf's fiction contributes to the search for meaning, in short, he nurtures the desire for human

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<sup>512</sup> Philip Neilsen, *Imagined Lives: A study of David Malouf* (St. Lucia: UQP, 1990), 45.

<sup>513</sup> Rachel Kohn, "Re-Enchanting Australia: A Conversation with David Tacey on The Spirit of Things." ABC Radio National, Sunday 20/02/00.

salvation.

Increasingly today, individuals need to translate themselves into new spaces, to find viable identities, and to transform themselves. Today's flattening of identities is quite an unsatisfactory explanation of humans as persons with histories and choices. Regarding the search for meaning, Murray notes his sadness about the loss of our social fabric, or any social cohesion, or a shared outlook and network of values in society when he writes: "there's no agreed tune."<sup>514</sup> Malouf addresses this eventuality in his focus on identity and continuities. On these points, Malouf's fictions appeal for retrieving the person as mysterious and worthy of transformation.

To contribute to the search for meaning, Malouf offers a poetics from natural imagery, since all created reality needs redemption.<sup>515</sup> Language builds community, and new language transforms community. Community and language build each other. As Rahner says, "the ultimate words call to the all-pervading mystery and reach the heart are the words that unite. . . . [For] authentic words unite."<sup>516</sup> So in building fresh language for salvation, Malouf assembles a hermeneutical vocabulary all the better to understand the mystery of salvation when understood as disclosing significant meaning for his characters' narratives.

Malouf's contribution to the search for meaning arises in his call for continuities and recoveries. Because self-identity and community are interrelated, they both rely upon language for definition, quality and existence. Malouf strives to repair the limitations that language poses for communication between people, and illustrates how our reliance

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<sup>514</sup> Murray, "The Derelict Milky Way" line 12, *Conscious and Verbal*, 60.

<sup>515</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Patout Burns (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971, orig 1941-2), 43-53.

<sup>516</sup> Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian," 360.

upon language interferes with other methods of communication. Sadly, while the modern person lies at the "centre of discourse",<sup>517</sup> she or he is not the centre of social decision-making. Corlett explains that what many call a community is, in fact today, merely a body of individuals, and that "communitarian individualism" is what primarily exists in the Western world.<sup>518</sup> He pinpoints language as a central factor in shaping this condition, observing: "We are forced by language to be individuals [but unfortunately] we commune as individuals with something in common."<sup>519</sup> So, fresh rhetoric about salvation strives to redefine personhood and community-consciousness in language. Malouf's fresh images, newer rhetoric, and new languages transform perceptions about it.

To show how Malouf intimates some salvation to address the necessary shifts, I read two novels in particular, *An Imaginary Life* (1970) and *Remembering Babylon* (1993), two short stories, and some poetic fragments. *An Imaginary Life*<sup>520</sup> explores the origins and social structures of language, and explores the importance of language within society and the individual. Transformation develops as Ovid must grapple with a new, alien way of expressing himself and view the external seemingly hostile world.

In addition to dramatising the contrast between a sophisticated society and a relatively primitive society in this novel, Malouf introduces a third element, the theme of gaining the human capacity to communicate. In *An Imaginary Life*, his theme is introduced in the form of a boy-mentor who has been raised by animals (it is unclear which species of animal perhaps wolves or deer). The boy's "language" is vastly different, and Malouf's description of how this impacts upon the protagonist's psyche and world is fascinating.

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<sup>517</sup> Corlett, *Community*, 33.

<sup>518</sup> Corlett, *Community*, 19.

<sup>519</sup> Corlett, *Community*, 44.

<sup>520</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (London: Picador, 1978).

Malouf foregrounds the issue of subjectivity, and the place of poetic expression by comparing speech and writing, to find that orality is closer to "true" communication. Ovid's disparate modes of expression are explored and dramatised with great effect. He finds salvation in transforming himself by humbly learning a totally new language for survival and for social inclusion. It could be fairly said that in this novel, Malouf demonstrates a viable language for a secular soteriology where macro and micro-structures are integrated. Language, identity and community coalesce in a new synthesis for Ovid along the hostile shores of that blacker sea.

This theme of communication echoes Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*.<sup>521</sup> This play exploits the antithesis between the "civilized" subjects' high opinion of bookish learning and Caliban's paradoxical response to this form of wisdom. As with the boy in *An Imaginary Life*, the creature is considered more animal than human. In this case, Caliban is closely connected to the earth, where language and text are of little consequence. However, it is curious that Caliban speaks quite eloquently and inspires the questions: whether humans are instinctively inclined to use language as the dominant form of communication, and whether language plays a major part in defining the human being.

Like Shakespeare, Malouf addresses the issue of authenticity, identity and community by addressing the modes of language that their different characters use. He shows that something essential, communitarian and spiritual adheres in the language of gestures, in sharing needs, and in bodily presence, something that spoken and written speech seems to ignore. He points to the discovery that neither speech nor writing saves, but that presence, intimacy and mutual help are more genuinely human, and so are salvational,

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<sup>521</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

because they more truly express the affirmations we all seek.

That observation that language is the ticket of entry to a society appears again in *Remembering Babylon*. Here Malouf presents Gemmy, a boy raised by the Aboriginies so much so he has almost forgotten the English language he was born with. The dramatic scene of first encounter pivots round language:

`Do not shoot,' it shouted [to children who are not quite convinced that the creature they are looking at is human], `I am a B-b-british object!'<sup>522</sup>

Indeed he was a "B-b-british object," a young boy until British seamen heaved him overboard near the coast of Australia sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. Then raised by the aborigines, Gemmy Fairley's story begins when the pioneers find an incoherent crab-encrusted creature on the shore: the creature does something that approximates a dance and becomes, thereby, approximately human. The boy himself accepts this account of his origins except that in dreams and in memories he intimates a language he no longer speaks but has not entirely forgotten. Then after sixteen years among them, he ventures forth to regain his white identity at a pioneer outpost. This encounter with a strange creature begins a long story for Gemmy with the McIvor family as they all struggle to find acceptance in colonial society.

Caught between two worlds, neither fully one race nor the other, it seems that Gemmy can find no salvation. He was better off in the oblivion of his existence among the Aboriginies. Teased by the children, rejected by the squatters, but included among the good-natured McIvors, Gemmy gradually finds some level of identity and coexistence as a white black man. Less moral in his own ambiguity, Jock McIvor "made no further

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<sup>522</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 3.

argument because the chief thing he had against the man [Gemmy] was so unreasonable; he was ashamed of it.”<sup>523</sup> It affected Jock however in his dealings with his nervous neighbours: “Little defensive spikes and spurs appeared in him that increased suspicion that they might somehow have been mistaken in [their trust of] him.”<sup>524</sup> He was unsettled by their closer scrutiny of him and his wife’s naïve acceptance of Gemmy. Yet in her sleepless nights too, Ellen’s “neighbours’ doubts took possession her.”<sup>525</sup> In a place like that, “there were no sureties of any kind.” Their own survival always came back to Gemmy.

Again here, Malouf is dealing with difference and language, with the essentials that make community. In his review of this novel, Harvey Blume notes that, “Gemmy sees from both sides; he is the fractured unity, the unobtainable translation.”<sup>526</sup> Gemmy becomes the test case for inclusion or suspicion, the scapegoat for all the settlers’ prejudices and ignorance about the Aboriginies and the land itself. His simple naivety does not help him either so a compromise of words is not possible. “Afterwards he was just Gemmy, someone we loved.”<sup>527</sup> Eventually exclusion of “the greasy rag of a man”, “that plain imbecile”<sup>528</sup> was the only possible outcome. Gemmy had disappeared into the rainforest and disposed of the written accounts of his life. Without acceptance and the common language, he could not live in community, could not find dignity or salvation. Where Ovid had succeeded, Gemmy had failed to find authenticity, identity and community.

### xiii. Salvation in acceptance

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<sup>523</sup> *Remembering Babylon*, 70.

<sup>524</sup> *Remembering Babylon*, 72.

<sup>525</sup> *Remembering Babylon*, 72.

<sup>526</sup> Harvey Blume, *Remembering Babylon* review [on-line] available: [www.bostonreview.net/BR19.1/reviews.html](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR19.1/reviews.html) [2004 July 27].

<sup>527</sup> *Remembering Babylon*, 194.

<sup>528</sup> *Remembering Babylon*, 179.

A third source for my theological reflection is one of Malouf's short stories, "At Schindler's,"<sup>529</sup> in his *Dream Stuff* anthology. This is a story of reconciliation with the facts, and with that acceptance comes Jack's salvation, in a coming to terms with his domestic situation and his father's death at last. Jack comes to accept the reality of his POW father's failure to return from war. His mother's war-time relationship with Milt, Milton J. Schuster III, a US Air Force navigator from Hartford, Connecticut reveals his own horror at her shift in loyalty from her long-gone husband Stan and her need for companionship. It had a devastating effect on the boy: "Jack felt turned about."<sup>530</sup> However, he burst out in a bloody fight with Arnold Garrett to defend her when that outsider had the impertinence to observe that, "she goes out with one" (of the foreigners, the "Yanks").<sup>531</sup> The story deals with any widowed parent's attempt to find a partner. Facing her vulnerability brought the transformation she desired.

"At Schindler's" celebrates a boy's desire for continuities, securities, clear frameworks in relationships and predictability in life. The setting portrays an easy harmony among the holidaying campers by the shore at Scarborough for resuming the little world of other families who meet at Schindler's every Christmas and Easter. The same families meet and reconstitute the boarding house atmosphere of the Schindler's each school holidays, with Mrs Chester, the Ludlows and their daughters, Mrs Fran Williams and family, Dolfie and Mary Schindler and Mrs Schindler.

The story plots one's boy's growing awareness of his own capacity for loss and sorrow as the shadow of the loss of his father whom he loved impacts on his young life and, it is suggested, shadows his life to come. The climax of the story and its most telling

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<sup>529</sup> David Malouf, "At Schindler's" in *Dream Stuff* (London: Vintage, 2001), 1-24.

<sup>530</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 17.

<sup>531</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 17.

moment is almost a cinematic script, for when arriving at his mother's bedroom door in a thunderstorm, Jack sees his mother and Milt in the throes of sex. Then he imagines his father standing there looking on as a ghost to complete the apex of his disenchantment round the affable and harmless Milt whom now Milly his mother had taken as a lover. The reader certainly feels sorrow for Jack. Readers feel for him in coming to terms with the final acceptance of the fact that his father is not coming home.

The sorrow and poignancy of the boy's point of view (though not a first person point of view) is handled dexterously as readers move with him through thick and thin: "There was a shadow on his heart that would be there for many years to come, a feeling of loss from which he would only slowly be released."<sup>532</sup> Jack's "salvation" comes with his own physical strength and daring, and mental inventiveness in crisis.

Jack finds that the changed realities of war and loss require new coherences that he cannot seem to grasp, until in sharing the hobby of archaeology, his mother's new suitor Milt extrapolates structures and proposes reconstructions of bodies from fragments of bones. Jack finds he is able to grasp the whole analogously from the fact that "everything fits and agrees."<sup>533</sup> He finds that evolution has its own defined laws and accommodations, and what a wonder that was. Learning these lessons from Milt's hobby, Jack was prepared for the great challenge that was to overtake him. He would have to come to terms with the changed social realities. The reality of war and its far-away effects had its own logic and rules that could not be mastered. Thus, he finds his mother's new love also has its own fitness, its own grammar and syntax like life in general.

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<sup>532</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 24.

<sup>533</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 11.



Thematically, Jack learns that things have an internal logic. There's an "everyboy" quality about Jack here. He finds it is a comforting reassurance that harmony may be grasped and achieved. It taps into the experience of many readers, for Jack's loss is not singular. He is given no surname to help this universalising quality in the story. To heighten this comprehensive overview, he seeks emotional comfort in his retreat high in the trees. In "its big-leafed light and shade you shook loose of the actual, were freed of ground rules and habits of life."<sup>534</sup>

High in the air in the trees, in the dappled light and shade of Nature's intrigues, Jack could command a view of the Bay unseen and atop of something, King of the Trees if you like, a watcher of life and an observer of realities others could not perceive.

In that state of openness, of wide view and intense awareness, he finds recuperative peace in an acceptance that is a release into some insight apart from the routines of ordinary things:

He sat a little longer, enjoying the sense that there was no rush. In a state of easy well-being. Refreshed, restored. . . If he had bothered to think about it he would have said that he was happy.<sup>535</sup>

He finds that life required some struggle. In coming to terms in his own time and in his own place, life challenges him with facts beyond his own making. In his response lay his salvation for he finds the courage to forgive his mother, and to face up to the new situation with a new explanation. He finds the necessary coherences to deal with pain, loss and apparent dishonour. Knowing how everything fits and aggress, he finds his salvation in acceptance of life in general.

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<sup>534</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 23.

<sup>535</sup> Malouf, "At Schindler's," 24.

## xiv. Salvation entails risks

A fourth source for my theological reflection, “Eustace,”<sup>536</sup> dramatises the power of play in life, in its liberating aspects, and its recreative potentials. Life without any risk would be dull indeed; life without following our instincts would be less than a human life. For what is it to be alive but to respond to our intuitions, our best instincts and have them explored? Total predictability is safe but never fully satisfying nor individual. “Eustace” is a celebration of risk and individuality for which our age yearns.

This is a seven part story of an unnamed boy who finds an entry to a girls’ school dormitory, where he connects with an upper-class girl, Jane, and some nights later together they elope. The story is rich in detail, seemingly telling itself, economical, spare and intense, yet ringing with youthful truth. The boy is led on by he knows not what, but bravely he responds to each eventuality. He longs for something better than his grease-stained life. He is ugly and yet in the surreal world of the school dormitory he finds some delight. He is totally unprepared, and finds he is included in Jane’s secret about the fictional Eustace. The focus is on the boy and his consciousness and Jane’s subjectivity enters only as it impacts upon his. Her wish to elope is long awaited and finally granted. He is relieved and excited. Its tone is wispy, immediate, and sensate.

The story displays postmodern evasiveness: the plot is simple but the theme is perennial: an exploration of intuitions and longings that are not or not yet identified as sexual. These longings are pristine, simple and pure, free of any smuttiness whatsoever. A rereading is still engaging for its sympathy with a child’s point of view. Readers are curious but satisfied; Both Jane and the boy got what they wanted - to escape and get

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<sup>536</sup> David Malouf, “Eustace” in *Child’s Play with Eustace and The Prowler* (Penguin Books, 1983), 147-177.

away together.

This story dramatises the human desire for happy simplicity. Despite the risks, “Eustace” reaches back to a place of initial wonder, not complicated by competing demands from different people. It portrays a dreamy place of unreality, a place within desire but no longer reachable, a place of primitive encounter in all its wonder, simplicity and potentialities. The boarding school dormitory is a shadowy moonlit place that promises to satisfy “his dissatisfaction with himself and everything about him”<sup>537</sup> The welcome intruder finds some transcendence in this place where he can breathe and feel freedom. As a place to escape from the shackles of ordinary life, it offers transcendence full of possibilities for his self-discovery. That boarding school dormitory becomes a place to drink in potential, pure and sweet, unmixed with the dross of real life.

Clearly, Christian faith is not totally justifiable or totally rational; it points to a better view of life, it is positive, unconstrained, and liberating, vectoring towards a wished-for fulfilment. Like intuition, faith leads on wherever it may lead. Faith in the Saviour should be able to capture that spirit in ourselves. Insecurities imprison us; the social universe usually forbids following one source of transcendence as the boy does in “Eustace.” Faith may not be foolish but it is courageous. Faith empowers believers to find a new dignity for themselves and others within a different framework, one not constructed from life’s desires and exigencies. Faith in a God who knows and loves is stronger material than learning to cope with stability. The boy in “Eustace” is surely a model for faith, for he responds to what is genuine in him without weighing up the consequences. The story shows that winning salvation entails taking risks.

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<sup>537</sup> “Eustace,” 168.

Finally, Malouf projects an appealing acceptance of everyday events, by finding worth in a long night's conversion in *Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Adair's final reconciliation with his own nature is dramatically satisfying there. Ellen McIvor wonders why her persistent memory of the tight-rope walker should not "hint at some mystery that the trivialities of everyday life usually conceal."<sup>538</sup> The half-caste Gemmy and his two aboriginal visitors were seen mysteriously apart in "their silent communing."<sup>539</sup> In this basically optimistic framework of sustaining mystery, his characters progress their lives. In his passion for valuing being alive, Malouf offers readers a belief in a second chance, a kind of secular grace anticipating salvation.

Malouf challenges the lies of modern life in the quiet and cogent exploration of what people have and where they have been, towards who they may become. As the feaster says to the crab, "the back of my head / was open to the dream / dark your body moves in." He feeds the humanitarian hope for a happier world for the human family beginning in the Great South Land where the black and white races' lives "were [inevitably and inextricably] intertwined."<sup>540</sup> *Remembering Babylon* finishes on this hint for at least incremental progress towards this goal of a human family: "As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge./ As we approach one another."<sup>541</sup> With this quasi-liturgical invocation, Malouf seems to invite his readers to envisage a possible future that is far better than the present. Surely, this makes him a seer of salvation.

#### xvi. Review

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<sup>538</sup> Genevieve Laigle, "Approaching prayer, knowledge, one another: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*." *Commonwealth* 18 (1995), 79.

<sup>539</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 65.

<sup>540</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* 164.

<sup>541</sup> Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 200.

This chapter began reading one poem in depth, “The Crab Feast,” about one feaster’s ethical moment of transcendence. A thematic analysis and the central comprehension followed before a review. The discussion showed the hermeneutical method in action, both in textual analysis and in reader-aware interpretation. My reading finds some transcendence in the reconciliation of species that augurs salvation. Salvation begins in conserving the ecology. That ecological intimacy images the universally yearned for salvation, for ethical attitudes image salvation.

Then the discussion read two novels in particular, *An Imaginary Life* (1970) and *Remembering Babylon* (1993), two short stories, some poetic fragments, and ended with a thematic overview. Malouf’s works conflate the aspiration to seek personal and social wisdom. His poetry and fictions promise contiguity with what humans need, for he shows “a sensitive preoccupation with the whole quality of life itself, with the oblique nuanced particulars of human experience.”<sup>542</sup> Constructing personal texts from his works, I show how readers may strive to perceive visionary and inventive possibilities for their lives and our world. These images of salvation arise in dialogue with his art.

The study now moves to Chapter 5, a discussion of theoretical underpinnings, before concluding in Chapter 6 with the dissertation’s conclusions.

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<sup>542</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An introduction* second edition. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996, 2002), 24.

## Chapter 5: Discussion: Poetry and Religion

### Introduction

This chapter situates my readings within the literature of this interdisciplinary discipline of reading literature from a religious point of view. The present chapter also delineates the different scopes and processes of poetry and religion, notably in the operations of the poetic and the religious imagination. I draw on the literature to include the views of poets, James McAuley, Les A. Murray, Vincent Buckley, Judith Wright, David Malouf and Kevin Hart; philosopher, Paul Ricoeur; literary critics, John Coulson, Amos Wilder, T. R. Wright, Robert Holyer, Malcolm Guite, Patrick Sherry, Mary Kinzie, and Noel Rowe; and theologians, Janet Martin Soskice, C. S. Lewis, Paul S. Fiddes, S. Mark Heim, William F. Lynch, David Tracy, Luke Ferretter, Gerard Hall and Anthony J. Kelly.

This chapter demonstrates how this hermeneutical process is a legitimate work of the theological imagination. This chapter draws out the poetic imagination's similarities and connections with the religious imagination. It explores the power of poetic tropes and imagery in the processes of the poetic imagination. It indicates how tropes and imagery image salvation, and applies Christian literary theory<sup>543</sup> in Australia. It shows how the theological imagination fires images of aesthetic completion, rescue and redress that appear in Wright's poetry, in Murray's applications of the numinous apperception,<sup>544</sup> and in Malouf's ethical insights valuing the certainties that species respect mandates. The chapter details the transformative effects of the sacred through reading literature.

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<sup>543</sup> Luke Ferretter, *Christian Literary Theory* (2003).

<sup>544</sup> I call it an "apperception" because of its self-conscious dynamic. The numinous perception of dreaming mode is truly poetic, and is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

In its ten subsections, this chapter addresses two underlying focuses: poetry as resource for salvation (the salvific / theological dimension of poetry), and theology as a horizon for poetry (the poetic dimension of theology). In surveying the theoretical issues in the literature about this hermeneutic, it establishes an heuristics of salvation.

#### i. The poetic imagination

Like the poets themselves, readers of poetry work outwards from an individual perspective. The individual imagination constructs something valuable for general disciplinary criticism. This poetic imagination seeks to stitch words together that speak from the heart (Rahner). For this creative dynamic, Australian poet James McAuley argued that the poetic imagination “is a special instrument of discovery,”<sup>545</sup> and kept poetic insight separate from expressions of religious revelation. For him, “poetry is disinterested: its note is joy, delight, contemplation, celebration.”<sup>546</sup> C. S. Lewis argued the need for a playful attitude in dealing with theological matters. In this observation, he anticipated postmodernism’s playfulness. The poetic imagination then makes meaning by playfully conflating and colliding meanings for imaginative entertainment. These poetic dynamics offer important resources for understanding salvation more fully.

Naturally then a religious reading practises both humour and high seriousness. For in employing the poetic imagination, readers of literature “surrender [them-] selves to the work itself, not so much as an act of the will, but as a natural response to the literature itself.”<sup>547</sup> Poets test various limitations with ever-widening connotations; in effect, they push for the widest boundaries when they search for manifestations of the sacred. Some

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<sup>545</sup> James McAuley, *The End of Modernity: Essays on Literature, Art and Culture* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959), 146.

<sup>546</sup> McAuley, *Modernity*, 140.

<sup>547</sup> Robert Holyer, “‘Christianity and culture’: A retrospect” *The Downside Review* No. 388, (July 1994), 177.

public broadcasters today introduce it into ordinary public discussion.<sup>548</sup> In Chapter 3, I instance Les Murray's claim that the quality of sprawl is a Christian virtue. Murray calls his exercise of the imagination a "breathing in dream-rhythm when awake and far from bed / [that] evinces the gift"<sup>549</sup> [of poetry]. So in its play for widest meanings, the religious imagination drawing on both sensate data and imaginative recasting is wide awake to the world's realities.

While they have distinctive operations, poetry and religion do creatively nurture each other. Reading literature for theology is legitimate, for the roots of great poetry are "nerved and sinewed"<sup>550</sup> from the metaphysical and religious origins of [western] culture. Thus the poetic imagination encourages creative readings that may well encompass religious applications. Poetic language begins in sensation and fructifies by transforming those sensate realities. It does have its own dynamic. Reading literature with a faith consciousness creatively benefits the reader by fusing the two modalities.

To so many poets, the religious impulse reads experience to reveal more transcendent meanings about daily life. Thus, in his inductive reflection on experience, Murray's numinous apprehensions adequately address Rowe's charge not to privilege theological goals. To Murray and Wright, the task of writing poetry broaches spirituality when revealing transcendent meanings about life, and is overtly religious when situating such insights within traditional faith frameworks. While being more cautious about references to the divine, Malouf explores a spiritual perception when projecting instances of better futures for humankind in ethical prescriptions with just the same

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<sup>548</sup> Veronica Brady, Geraldine Doogue and Caroline Jones in David Tacey, "Re-Enchantment: The rise of spirituality in Australia" page 2 [on-line] available: [www.harpercollinsreligious.com.au/books/extracts/re-enchantment.htm](http://www.harpercollinsreligious.com.au/books/extracts/re-enchantment.htm) [2003 June 16].

<sup>549</sup> Murray, "The Instrument" lines 39-40, *Conscious and Verbal* 17, and *Collected Poems 1961-2002* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2002), 459.

<sup>550</sup> McAuley, *Modernity*, 138.



urgency and cogency. For some readers, his images of salvation excite faith with their relevance and intensity.

Poetry then is a resource for imaging salvation, and theology offers a horizon for poetry. While the poetic imagination feeds on the poetic, it may not supersede the religious imagination, that is, neither may claim a logical priority in the operations of the imagination. Each supplies its distinctive perspective while each richly enhances the other. Honouring this distinction addresses Rowe's challenge in the first chapter that modern theology was unduly ready to appropriate poetry's language, imagery and authorship to itself in "its immense detour"<sup>551</sup> of merely finding data to support doctrine. In this discussion, poetry and religion, culture/literature and theology/faith, and their respective reading communities are treated as discrete and yet sometimes complementary poles in the same magnetic field. For the data of poetry usefully serves the interests of the Christian reader seeking theological reflections upon salvation.

Both poetry and theology incite the imagination to envisage better realities. In that sense, they image salvation. In her autobiographical *Half a Lifetime*, Judith Wright espouses "the values of feeling."<sup>552</sup> Without that exercise of the imagination, Australia's post-war reconstruction would be senseless, futile. She writes with some despair:

How do we pick up threads of faith in a future lost in disillusionment and hatred?  
Indeed, how do we value "the things of the spirit" without cynicism?<sup>553</sup>

Transformative self-consciousness fructifies the *praxis* of the imagination. For instance, in responding to the Chernobyl nuclear cloud passing over his Italian village, Malouf

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<sup>551</sup> McAuley, *Modernity*, 138.

<sup>552</sup> Patricia Clarke, ed., *Half a Lifetime Judith Wright* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), 208.

<sup>553</sup> *Half a Lifetime Judith Wright*, 204, 220.

himself talks of a writer's power to access what may be grasped beyond the first level of perception, the senses. He writes:

As writers we have the duty—and we ought to have the capacity—to provide an experience of the imagination that will have the . . . effect of immediate illumination and understanding.”<sup>554</sup>

Malouf here sees the imagination's anticipatory grasp of realities, which are other-than-sensory and not-yet, as very much a saving power for individual persons and, indeed, whole cultures. With greater reason then, when poetry and faith engage the imagination together, that exercise of insight salves and saves.

So when a poem images an irrevocable and irrefutable state of awareness or a decisive resolution of tensions, it presages emancipation, rescue, redemption and liberation to readers of faith. In short, some powerful images photographically fix a moment of salvation.

## ii. The religious imagination

Both theology and literature employ the power of the imagination, sometimes even sharing the same symbols and cultural forms. Each can generate transcendent meanings from primary experiences to enrich the other. The poetic imagination mediates discovery for depth, enlightenment and fresh alternatives through aesthetic excitement giving the idea of salvation a topical texture, to mark out its many contours and effects. Contextual theology is an exercise of the religious imagination, faithfully reading contemporary poems to broach the Open, as Rilke and Heidegger describe it.

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<sup>554</sup> David Malouf, in Dorothy Green and David Headon, eds., *Imagining the Real: Australian Writing in the Nuclear Age* (Sydney: ABC Enterprises, 1987), 22.

Both theology and literature practise the imagination and so each benefits the other. Critic John Coulson observed that, “the real assent we make in faith is of the same kind as the imaginative assent we make to . . . literature.”<sup>555</sup> In both domains, metaphor dislocates customary usage to create new meaning,<sup>556</sup> and stories perform the classic task of imagination: they “dissipate and destroy single mindedness and substitute diverse levels of never-ending interpretation.”<sup>557</sup> More pertinently, “imagination safeguards us from fixation.”<sup>558</sup> In that freedom, the imagination grants an “enlargement of consciousness”<sup>559</sup> to re-envision reality differently. When ignited by the ember of faith, the imagination generates life-changing insights even to progress guarantees about theological truths. This process is called the religious or analogical imagination. Malouf’s meditation in Chapter 4 shows this dynamic occurring particularly well.

While each is distinctive, both literature and theology share a common enemy, the “literalism that prevents many people from understanding the nature of Christian belief.”<sup>560</sup> In their kenotic deferrals for seeking richer resonances, both mediate richer meanings by displacing surface interpretations. Distinctively, the religious imagination mediates transcendent expectations in the trope of hope.

One excellent example of the transformative power of the religious imagination occurs in Les Murray’s use of the numinous perception. With it, he assimilates the culture as a poet and believer in the faith community. His is truly an apperception for being self

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<sup>555</sup> John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: In Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 145.

<sup>556</sup> Coulson, *Imagination*, 150.

<sup>557</sup> Coulson, *Imagination*, 151.

<sup>558</sup> Coulson, *Imagination*, 158.

<sup>559</sup> Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*, 13. Imagination grants “an enlarged sense of reality” (8) and “a new unity in our perceptions and extends our consciousness” (10).

<sup>560</sup> T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 1.

conscious of its own focus and processes. About it, he says, “a poem is an afterlife on earth.”<sup>561</sup> His numinous perception perceives “what faith knows in the extra-aesthetic wrestling with the enigmas of personal providence.”<sup>562</sup> The numinous perception reads life experience from within the widest frame of reference, the religious dimension. So, the religious imagination is a distinctive activity for enculturating the transcendent.

A religious reading to nurture faith then is a work of the religious imagination. In it, the impulse to read comes from the reader’s purpose to incite religious feelings, and to excite the religious imagination (such as in the contemplation of salvation) to deal with felt crises and exigencies. Without necessarily producing conventionally “religious” language, a religious reading seeks new understandings, emotional consolation or heightened spiritual identity with the divine. A religious reading expressly involves the situation of the reader in his or her quest for spirituality or transcendence. With this purpose, a religious reading finds images of salvation in literary texts.

Advantageously, a religious reading couches the transcendent more authentically because it honours life representations. A religious reading anchors theology in life experiences. Beyond analysis and semantics, a religious reading guides believers to see life experience more holistically and anew, quite often critically. Like in Ricoeur’s “restorative hermeneutics,”<sup>563</sup> such readings refresh perceptions the world. Notably, T. R. Wright found that more satisfactory interpretations reside in finding a text’s relationship to the world, beyond any semiotic system, whether theological or literary.<sup>564</sup> Wright’s life-reference criterion guides my religious reading of the poems

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<sup>561</sup> Murray, “The Misery Cord” line 31, *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 294.

<sup>562</sup> Amos N. Wilder, “The uses of theological criticism” in Giles B. Gunn, ed., *Literature and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 45.

<sup>563</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 350, 352.

<sup>564</sup> Wright, *Theology and Literature*, 54.

here. In applying this criterion, my interpretative pursuit avoids fantasizing or escapism,<sup>565</sup> to employ the more profound Christian anthropology of human life and destiny called salvation.

Inevitably, the religious imagination works with changing cultural forms. Just as changes in cultural forms require a re-imagining of faith, images of salvation change with time. As most desirable endings for human stories, images of rescue, redemption and reconciliation constantly appear in art and literature. Metaphors and motifs of rescue and relief constantly re-appear in cinema and literature today. For instance, Sherry reads literary, cinematic and artistic works from a religious perspective.<sup>566</sup> Salvation is returning as a central concept of importance in contemporary culture. He observes:

Literature, art and history may help to provide a fresh understanding of religious ideas. . . . Concepts like redemption, salvation and atonement may be particularly apposite at the present time.”<sup>567</sup>

Poetic images depicting salvation deepen appreciations of life because they address primary experiences. They present salvation as pertinent, current and accessible.

The religious imagination supplies religious readings with the necessary critical distance to explain and contextualise life’s primary pain. Thus, when Judith Wright writes:

time lifts no knives to heal or to destroy,  
and did not cause, and cannot cure, our pain,”<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> Pope’s ironic couplet: “Now lakes of liquid gold, Elysian scenes, / And crystal domes, and angels in machines.” “The Rape of the Lock” Canto IV lines 45-6 *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* third edition, 418.

<sup>566</sup> Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption* (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 13-14.

<sup>567</sup> Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 2.

<sup>568</sup> Judith Wright, “Waiting” lines 23-24, *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1996, 2002), 10.

her images do truly evoke religious value. Such pain and suffering ache for salvation. Thus, literature and poetry transform ordinary experiences to be saving ones with literary insights and exemplars. Faith translates these feelings and connotations into religious salvation.

Certainly, art and literature have always explored the faith imagination in images. Such visual<sup>569</sup> illustrations foster a religious understanding for the virtual culture. They display, explain or illustrate religious expressions like salvation, by touching “on what is most profound and moving in human life with deep human responses.”<sup>570</sup> Poetry valorises those primary perceptions. So, the religious imagination generates religious readings that bring fresh messages of hope. In religious readings, poetry’s play with images more effectively mediates key motifs like salvation.

### iii. Salvation critiques experience

Salvation is topical. The concept and language of salvation balms primary emotions like naked fear and terror. Certainly, in its more embodied conceptualizations in poetry,<sup>571</sup> salvation decisively counters fears with images of serenity<sup>572</sup> and due fulfilments. Suitable and pertinent primary images of salvation like the teapot, the marriage vows and the warm rain topicalise understandings about salvation. In such ways, salvation critiques topical experience.

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<sup>569</sup> Sherry, *Images*, 162, and “Saying and Showing: Art, literature and religious understanding,” *Theology Today* 18:1 (January 2002), 38-39.

<sup>570</sup> Sherry, *Images*, 163.

<sup>571</sup> Paul Ricoeur’s seemingly obvious observation is so pertinent: “We can obtain the secondary signification only by way of the primary.” Paul Ricoeur *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth; Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 55.

<sup>572</sup> Murray’s teapot of calm and Wright’s a garden in blossom, a river’s hush and lovers who share one mind powerfully image the beatitude, blessed are the peace-makers.

Because it is expressed in cultural forms, a religious reading's different point of view acutely critiques culture. This dynamic is possible because, as Robert Holyer<sup>573</sup> argues, faith is within, but not necessarily tied to the culture's inheritance. He shows how hermeneutical readings of poems bring fresh understandings about society for faith. For both poetry and theology today value life experiences and privilege discourses that offer insight and critique upon social life. As a term of judgment, salvation is a very suitable normative concept for critiquing society's inadequate ideologies and for addressing its primary fears.

Relevantly, topical issues grow from raw experiences. Sherry suggests revaluing primary experience as an essential source for religious authenticity: "Religion needs to approach people through their hearts and imaginations."<sup>574</sup> He finds salvation runs the risk of suffering a reductionist fate being too commonly wholly or partly reduced to mean merely a happy ending, or achieving health or wholeness, or is wholly subsumed in secularised notions such as environmental conservation or extended physical life. In a nuanced argument, he urges theology to engage with art and literature because the arts offer fresh appreciations of primary experiences. Often poetic language and forms brings such primary experiences to the surface.

It follows then that salvation's different point of view drives its dialectic of critique. Malcolm Guite<sup>575</sup> demonstrates this dialectic approach. Applying Ricoeur's second naïveté,<sup>576</sup> he notes that the narrator's point of view has central significance for those

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<sup>573</sup> Robert Holyer, "'Christianity and culture': A retrospect", 170-184.

<sup>574</sup> Sherry, *Images*, 3.

<sup>575</sup> Malcolm Guite, "Through Literature: Christ and the redemption of language" In J. Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 27-46.

<sup>576</sup> Ricoeur (1962) provides his own explanation: "Restorative hermeneutics 'understands in order to believe'." In "Reply to John E. Smith" in Lewis Edwin Kahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 167. In 1988 he wrote: "Hermeneutics, child of

aware of the Gospel precept to become as a little child (Luke 18:16,17). He shows how that dialectic inspires Christian readers:

The extraordinary power of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* depends directly on the story's being told by a child. The storyteller's clear gaze, at once powerfully open and impartially critical, tries and tests everything in the culture in which she grows up."<sup>577</sup>

With its changed and restorative point of view, a religious point of view drives a dialectical to prefer more just solutions, for the redress of wrongs, and the refusal of relegation.<sup>578</sup> Salvation then operates as a normative concept.

In fact in their quite developed interpretative competencies, both the religious and literary reading communities readily critique their common culture's values and artefacts. The literary community critiques society by its representation of alternatives. Quite often, poetic images offer repair and cure, and bring hope and transcendence to a

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'modernity', is one of the ways in which this 'modernity' overcomes its own forgetfulness of the Sacred. I believe that being can still speak to me, no longer indeed in the precritical form of immediate belief but as the second immediacy that hermeneutics aims at. It may be that this second naïveté is the post critical equivalent of the precritical hierophany." Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I" trans. Denis Savage in Don Hide, ed., *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 1988), 298. Buchanan comments: Ricoeur's "second naïvete . . . is an achievement of hermeneutics, since we are in every way children of criticism, and [must therefore] seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative." Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 350, 352. Lavine notes his restorative hermeneutics is "the celebrated conflict between the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion centred on the defence of religious faith from sceptical attack" in Thelma Z. Lavine, "Ricoeur on the conflict of interpretations" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Illinois: Open Court, 1995), 170. Steiner hints at similar: "beyond the act of meaning in our moral intentions" George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 15. Restorative hermeneutics is not revolutionary but moves the emphasis from individual to communal wisdom, to communal data with an emphasis on the themes of verification and application; it seeks reinterpretation in attitudes. Gadamer (*Being and Time* 189) stresses its production of envisaged possibilities: "Nor is interpretation in the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working out of possibilities projected in the understanding" in Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A reading of "Truth and Method"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 71. Restorative hermeneutics describes the reader's intentionality; it is "something that happens to what the interpreter is." 72.

<sup>577</sup> Guite, "Through Literature: Christ and the Redemption of Language," 39.

<sup>578</sup> This is a key term in Murray's value system taken up in Chapter 3.



society mired in materialism, relativities and enclosed ideologies. Religious readings of the same images direct faith to envisage salvation's repairs of these ills.

In summary, both the poetic and the theological imagination constantly generate fresh meanings. While both faith and culture practise the imagination, faith's insights critique and transform cultural forms and expressions. More viable interactions between faith and culture generate new images to focus on ever-changing life experience. To avoid fantastic and escapist notions, the best religious readings use the life-reference criterion. Using them, poetry's fresh and distinctively more idealised images provide faith with a productive dialectic to critique cultural values.

The discussion now moves to show that the critique in salvation cures present perceptions by replacing them with images of a better reality. In this way, poetic images go beyond mere critique to cure personal, social and environmental ills.

#### iv. The cure of poetry

Although literature and theology have different purposes, they share metaphors, and metaphor always carries a surplus of meaning.<sup>579</sup> Poetic references are not discourses, because they are necessarily more fragmentary, contingent, varied and subjective. Poetry enhances life's particulars, and so religious readers experience poetry as a significant *locus* for imaging social salvation. More than any other medium, poetry more distinctly communicates with unique richness the fluidity, intensity, nuances, and the incommunicable in experiences. With its clusters of metaphors, poetry bathes

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<sup>579</sup> Stephen Happel writes extensively on the power of metaphoric excess in science for example to explain the surpluses of disequilibriums in the primordial soup that led to the Big Bang, and to explain the continual generation of species. See *Metaphors For God's Time in Science and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 35.

meaning in patterns that tend to play with, undercut, and subvert an idea. Poetry's playfulness is a uniquely powerful healing for life's paradoxes.

Since creative interactions possible between faith and poetry are so productive, it is very relevant to observe here that poetry's care is to cure humanity. Theology's balm is not the only factor at work in this nexus. Although literature and theology have different purposes, they share metaphors. Literature and poetry both speak in metaphors, and metaphor always carries a surplus of meaning.

The operations of the two different methods of theology and poetry may be better demonstrated by a comparison of their typical outcomes, the sermon and the poem. Both are crafted arguments but work in different ways, the first appears in prose by linear argumentation, the second works in more organic ways accumulating coherences. Both address public audiences but find definably different hearers. Whereas the sermon explicates doctrine, poetry primarily explicates experience. Both strive to be memorable but are remembered differently, the sermon for its intellectual coherence and force of delivery, and the poem for its emotive effectiveness and intensity. The sermon demands acceptance, compliance and religious obedience, whereas the poem invites a sharing in an experience for its intensity, beauty and aptness. The sermon often focuses on the preacher, but the poem draws attention to its theme or its form, not its author.

So, each treats ideas of salvation quite differently: the sermon uses analogy to bed down examples, but the poem uses analogy to excite activities of the analogical imagination. The sermon seeks to define salvation's causes and effects, while the poem invites participation in its experiences. The closure of the sermon leads to acceptance of the concept; the poem however thrives in its variety of examples and the various images it

excites. Each modality may be reduced to a memorable take-away: the compelling one-line proposition or powerful image. Each genre serves truth in different ways: theology serves by elucidating and stabilising, while poetry cures with the balm of sensuousness.

As well as having different methods, literature and theology cure to different scopes. They may work together but differently. Noel Rowe finds Tillich's notion attractive that, "religion is not a separate category of experience but a dimension of depth within all experience."<sup>580</sup> He rightly finds that literature's goal is to play and to celebrate, for poetry is "disinterested: its note is joy, delight, contemplation, celebration."<sup>581</sup> Poetry saturates allusions and uses their significance to embellish [one's] own [experiences]."<sup>582</sup> Its free explorations actually heal life's inevitable wounds. That balm does not belong to religious practice and theology alone. As works of the poetic imagination, with their entertaining diversions, direct honesty and open celebration of all experience, both literature and poetry smooth over, reconfigure, relativise, and more importantly, narrativise the pains of life within the story of salvation, and thus seek to cure them.

Again poetry and fiction offer epiphanies of future possibilities for resolving suffering. Murray's hierophanies and Malouf's epiphanies already discussed are excellent examples. Literary representations of the great dilemmas of the human story produce shifts of perspective and insights of power to balm and cure. In the creative imagining of the poetic arts, writers and readers conceive foretastes of what has not yet been realised. Because it projects images as fresh possibilities, poetry translates attention to a

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<sup>580</sup> Noel Rowe, "Landing the Sacred" in Michael Griffiths and James Tulip, eds., *A Grain of Eternity: Proceedings of the 1997 Conference of the Centre for Studies in Religion, Literature and the Arts* (Sydney: Australian Catholic University, 1979), 180.

<sup>581</sup> McAuley, *Modernity*, 140.

<sup>582</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 154.

better life, and replaces suffering with its healing saturation. Poetry's imagery explores experience's textures, while theology stabilises ideas of salvation with a fix as on a photographic plate.<sup>583</sup> Poetry evokes feelings and overtones to cure by inversion or subversion, whereas theology critiques by substitution. Both shift attention but to different places along the temporal scale. In this way, poetry's cure<sup>584</sup> anticipates religion's salvation. Their complementarity is demonstrated in this current project.

In summary, literature and theology, poetry and faith share metaphor. They use different methods but each applies a cure in applying a built-up interpretative competence within its reading community. Poetry plays to cure life's paradoxes. Whereas religion wrestles like Jacob with life's enigmas, poetry cures the problems of life by playing out fresh possibilities. Poetry balms those dialectics in its clusters of healing images. Poetry's cure images and anticipates religion's salvation, while theology's narratives, especially the living narrative of winning salvation, incite courage and commitment to soldier on with refreshed determination. The next section explains the usual operations of these poetic and the religious imaginations.

#### v. Elaboration of the religio-poetic imagination

The previous section outlined how the poetic imagination serves a public function to

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<sup>583</sup> Stationary images have a special power to crystallize evocative moments of experience. I instance a music video where the music continues under static images of a concert performance with quite remarkable effects. *Queen on Fire* "Queen in Vienna" Capitol Music Label 2004. Rosenblatt echoes this effect of an image: "The evocation of even the simplest work is tremendously subtle and complex, with its blending and balancing of overtones, attitudes, feelings, and ideas. Whether unconsciously produced, or consciously willed, the aim is to clarify, to 'fix' (as a painter 'fixes' the colours of his painting) the work-as-evoked, to sense its movement and pace and structure, to register the personalities encountered or empathized with, to hold on to the special quality and texture of the experience."

Louise M. Rosenblatt *The Reader, The Text, The Poem (The transactional theory of the literary work)* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 134.

<sup>584</sup> See Mary Kinzie, *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), vii.

cue life's ills with more saturated experiences. Differently, theology nurtures hope to transcend suffering. Rowe rightly notes how "theology's teleology is ever forward and upward in a story that must always arrive at hope founded in Christ."<sup>585</sup> With gloss over gloss, and evocation over remembrance, theology's re-readings of texts become contextually richer over time within the tradition.<sup>586</sup> Contextual theology works this way: meanings increase and expand exponentially with time and experience as further applications are made.<sup>587</sup> Not only does theology present a cure, but it offers the best cure to life's fragmentations by including them in a life story, or in more technical terms, by narrativising life as a journey of salvation.

The question now arises as to its authenticity, its validity as a path to the sacred. An answer rests on the belief that "all dimensions of life, sublime and mundane, are touched by a religious vision. . . . Religious convictions are of public and not only private significance."<sup>588</sup> In explicating the operations of the religious imagination, this section addresses the issue of identifying the sacred in the ordinary. It shows how the ordinary offers epiphanies of the sacred.

For Christian poets, religious impulses in poetry articulate their religious imaginations.

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<sup>585</sup> Rowe, "Landing the Sacred," 182.

<sup>586</sup> I might add this clarification on method, that these images of God are tested in the community of the church. "In *Metaphor and Religious Knowledge* (1985) Soskice is not saying that revelation is an assortment of images from creation being applied to God, a very crude natural theology indeed. Rather, she is arguing that the church's images of Christ through history critically draws from the religious experience of Christ within the ecclesia (as king, rock, lover, fellow sufferer, groom, ascetic, and so on) so that we are dependent on this 'cloud of witness' to know God." Gavin D'Costa, "Response to Moore" # 11 on Moore's *Realism and Christian Faith*, in *Ars Disputandi* Volume 5 (2005) [on-line] available: [www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000205/index.html](http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000205/index.html) [2005 October 28].

<sup>587</sup> For instance, Soskice gives as an example the Samaritan woman at the well when Jesus promises "living water" (Jn 7:38). Readers' evocations could include Isa 55:1: "come to the waters", Jer 2:13: "they have forsaken me / the fountain of living waters", Zech 14:8: "living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem," Ex 17: 6: when Moses strikes the rock at Horeb whence gushed out living water, and Rev 22:1: "river of the water of life."

<sup>588</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and difference in religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 166.

In his 1968 discussion on the religious nature of poetry, “Specifying the Sacred,” Australian poet and critic Vincent Buckley observed similarities in the work of the poetic and religious imaginations. He argued that poetry is “an act both sacred and sacralising,”<sup>589</sup> noting how a religious poet would always express himself in “the recognition of and response to forces outside of him[self], and superior to him, which prompt to his self-completion (sic).”<sup>590</sup> He observed that when poetry specifies the sacred, it “may involve concepts such as personal or communal salvation.”<sup>591</sup> Thus, poetry specifies the sacred in breakthroughs along the continuum of the profane via insight, wonder, awe and humour.

The theorem is that the poetic movement catches the sacred when common experience seems to “transcend or complete itself.”<sup>592</sup> The poetic focus on making sense of ordinary experience also feeds this desire for specifying the sacred in coherences. Because poets see that “certain experiences or places or people or memories are representatively revealing ones,”<sup>593</sup> the poet’s selection of these particulars draws out the symbolic significance of those persons or events. Distinctively then, the poet and poetry specify the sacred.

In the metaphoric shifts they provide, Australian poetic images like water, wattle, ferns, and fruitful farms symbolise religious themes like regeneration, transformation and salvation. In that movement, they recover emotive significances from the particulars of life experience felt in family life, drought, bushfires and rain. In short, inductively assimilating poetic images powerfully aggregate fresh notions of salvation.

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<sup>589</sup> Vincent Buckley, “Specifying the sacred” in Giles B. Gunn, ed. *Literature and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 57, and in *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), 8, 20, 21.

<sup>590</sup> Buckley, “Specifying the sacred,” 62.

<sup>591</sup> Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, 11.

<sup>592</sup> Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, 15.

<sup>593</sup> Buckley, “Specifying the sacred,” 62.

The poets draw attention to these everyday, apparently everywhere-occurring revelations of the sacred as the “little sacraments of daily living” (Malouf), that give life some meaning for “specifying the sacred” (Buckley).<sup>594</sup> The discussion of ritual in Murray, land rights in Wright and respect for species-diversity in Malouf for example shows these retrievals for coherence. Their insights benefit both individuals, and more significantly, interpretative communities of faith.

So, as functions of the religious imagination, poetry sometimes engages in retrievals for coherence. Like believers trying to specify the sacred, poets find significance in ordinary events. For instance, at Mr. Warrender’s funeral in Malouf’s novel, *The Great World* (1990), the young academic eulogist praises poetry for arising from and celebrating ordinary life:

He was speaking of poetry itself, the hidden part it played in their lives, . . . [expressing] all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things that is our *other* history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events and is a major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the beginning.<sup>595</sup>

In this eulogist’s view, poetry is passionate and precise about life’s transcendent experiences. It may not speak always in understandable ways, but the poet must speak, lest the sacred go unrecorded. Malouf here presents the poet as witness to the intensities and ambiguities of language that troubles the heart of society. In their vocations, poets show a special intuition with which to speak about the “other history” underneath the chatter of daily life. They may move from the experiential to the metaphoric and

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<sup>594</sup> “Some poets, as a mode of life, concern themselves with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred . . . extending and completing in language a contact with the world which is religious in its nature.” *Poetry and the Sacred*, 17, 18.

<sup>595</sup> Mr Warrender’s eulogy in *The Great World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), 283.

sometimes through to the metaphysical domain to offer answers regarding the purpose and end of things. So generically, poets do not light fires for doctrinal positions; they are intensely aware of their distinctive ability to create significantly new meanings to balm painful experiences.

This section on the elaboration of the religio-poetic imagination explored how enduring poetic images give familiar significance to ordinary events. The discussion now moves to examine that process showing how the analogical imagination permits readers to search for durable images of salvation while remaining grounded in history, by interplaying different levels of reality at one grasp, by interpreting human lives, and by reaching other dimensions of reality beyond the merely empirical in the same grasp of all reality. It is a central tool for envisaging salvation. The following sections detail the functions of the analogical imagination, outline and apply it as Christian literary theory (Ferretter<sup>596</sup>) and value the interactions of faith and poetry in the Australian context.

#### vi. The analogical imagination

The analogical imagination is a major tool of the religious imagination. Like faith, poetry is free to imagine meaning. The Christian poetic act grasps more than one level of reality at once in defiance of science's univocal imagination in its one-storey description of reality, "evoking quick infinities in our souls."<sup>597</sup> The analogical imagination ploughs a middle way "to get the real into the actual," while keeping "the tang and density of actuality," infusing it with a commitment to reality's other levels

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<sup>596</sup> Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003). In summary: Christian literary theory is no less legitimate than any of its rivals for being cultivated by a community of believers in a framework of tradition and theological authority. A Christian reading should be seen as a special instance of the way in which all interpretation has to proceed as a matter of course.

<sup>597</sup> William F. Lynch, "Theology and the Imagination II: The Evocative Symbol" *Thought* XXIX, 115 (Winter 1954-5), 538.



and dimensions, in its “densities” (Lynch). Using it, faith celebrates the original freedom humans enjoyed, for faith’s tang grows from poetry’s densities.

In the previous century, Lynch enunciated six key properties of the analogical imagination. In summary, they are: the analogical imagination is grounded and sourced in the sensory, is always a partial perception, it ranges over the many levels, is always focused on human potential, and it breaks out of its era’s limitations. It is a central theological tool for reading salvation in the poems.

More importantly, David Tracy’s landmark, *The Analogical Imagination* (1987), identifies the religious imagination as intensification in a systematic reordering of one’s life priorities.<sup>598</sup> He calls it a situational discovery where the dangerous and provocative memory of Jesus of Nazareth lives as a transforming presence upon all experiences. It reveals the need to keep the primary focus on intensification of the Christian identity, the need to explicate the questions and realities of that stand in *praxis*, and it risks any critically controlled correlations stemming from that faith stance.<sup>599</sup> It is an existentially meaningful theological interpretation of God that evokes dialectical mystery.<sup>600</sup> It releases the self who has heard the judging and liberating word from God. The analogical imagination certainly grasps notions of salvation.

As a Christian spirituality emanating from gifted trust, the analogical imagination grants that the sensate, sexual and aesthetic reality of one’s embodied reality may be transformed into teleological orientations and deontological demands.<sup>601</sup> Thus, by stressing how the self is affected by God and the world in the mandate of *agape*, it

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<sup>598</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 423.

<sup>599</sup> Tracy, *Imagination*, 424, 429.

<sup>600</sup> Tracy, *Imagination*, 432.

<sup>601</sup> Tracy, *Imagination*, 433.

escapes the wordless trap of Romantic and existential narcissism. This embodied perception may be said to “suffer with all the living and the dead anxious for a victimless history.”<sup>602</sup> Aesthetically then, it reads transcendence in images of self-sacrifice and of salvation. Tracy’s model offers criteria for mediating meaningfulness and adjudicating the inevitable conflicts between situation and tradition. Like the numinous, the analogical imagination is pre-eminently our tool for reading these poetic images.

By way of application now using the analogical imagination, the natural creation itself, in its very dynamics, presents images of salvation. The cycle of the seasons images progress in the natural world. The universal cycle of growth, decay and regeneration has become a powerful template for much of human thinking. Within this wheel of the four seasons are contained all the colours of the rainbow, all the possibilities for ever-present change, and a directionality towards life. Such a cycle images rescue, regrowth, regeneration and endless transformation as nature’s way. Hopelessness, despair, misery and heartlessness lead nowhere useful or meaningful. Entropy and meaninglessness is not nature’s unidirectional plan. To save the planet, humans ought to read this universal pattern of the seasons to learn about hope, promise and newness of life. Fowler observes,

God’s covenant is a universal pledge of faithfulness to creation and all humanity. [It images] a deep *logos* – a structuring of reason and lawfulness that intends justice and right-relatedness in creation.<sup>603</sup>

Thus, using the analogical imagination shows how the natural world images God’s enduring act of creation, providence and the offer of salvation. The numinous perception explained and demonstrated in Chapter 3 is an excellent application of the

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<sup>602</sup> Tracy, *Imagination*, 437.

<sup>603</sup> J. W. Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 195-6.

analogical imagination.

The analogical imagination always focuses on human potential. They experience a lift in spirits at a beautiful sunset or wonder at the endlessness of the ocean's ever-shifting horizon. That momentary connectedness with the elemental is an image of our salvation, for it permits enjoyment of freedom, rescue and liberation from all that imprisons. Such aesthetic experiences in nature have a wonderful capacity to push mental and ethical boundaries out further than habitual comfort zones usually permit. Poets often connect such natural beauty with truth. Since Truth, Goodness and Beauty are essentially connected,<sup>604</sup> such experiences of beauty bring fresh resolve to reject the ugliness of selfishness and sin. The horizons of sin are self; the horizons of God are boundless self-giving. While beginning in the elemental, the analogical imagination implements movements to realise human potentials in truth, goodness and justice.

Since it is grounded in the sensory, applying the analogical imagination also leads to a consideration of nature in poetry. In reading nature, does metaphor exceed by anthropomorphic projection over nature or apostrophize it or anaesthetise it? Do poets inflate it, conflate with it or underrate it? In other words, how does the religious imagination in its critique of society deal with nature as its subject matter? This discussion serves to justify my readings of Wright's bird poems in particular. More broadly, it situates the three focus poets' treatment of the natural environment. Such understandings usually reflect prevailing paradigms.

After the metaphysics of all life's unity in antiquity came the conceit of kinship with nature in Blake and the Romantics as a reaction to Darwin's materialism. Romantic

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<sup>604</sup> John Cottingham, "Philosophers are finding fresh meanings in truth, beauty and goodness" *The Times* 68, Saturday June 17, 2006.

poetry stressed differences of degree not of kind typical in nineteenth century materialism. Emerson's transcendentalism creatively paralleled the Darwinian hierarchy. Two nineteenth century American theorists, John Burroughs and John Muir, whose names are synonymous with the reaction to the extreme personification of nature in the Romantic period, represent two standard approaches for relating to nature in poetry.

Burroughs' high Victorian realism personified nature with a sense of comradeship.<sup>605</sup> To him, any psychic kinship with nature that poetry claimed was merely a remnant of the more comforting kindred sensibility of earlier periods. Based on his detailed observations of birds in particular, Burroughs' scientifically controlled anthropomorphism of nature replaced the myth of a purposeful universe. Yet he was unable to reconcile his science with the usual demands of the spirit in its concern for nature in what we would now call environmental poetry.

His contemporary, John Muir, was more ingenuously romantic with a spontaneous notional pantheism. Buell notes<sup>606</sup> how he found an easier resolution between science and poetry since science's discoveries were able to reveal the divine mind in nature in his naive pietistic apostrophes. To his mind, creation is after all composed of a fraternity of equal members. Muir played on the pathos of the animal-human bond. For him, nature in poetry was the image of his desire in pathetic fallacy, whereas for Burroughs nature was the object of scientific discovery and more obvious expression of common biological needs. It could offer only low levels of relevance to human life.

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<sup>605</sup> "It seems to me that I do not know a bird till I have heard its voice. . . The song of the bobolink to me expresses hilarity; the song sparrow's, faith; the bluebird's, love; the cat-bird's, pride; the white-eyed fly-catcher's, self-consciousness; that of the hermit thrust, spiritual serenity; while there is something military in the call of the robin." Quoted in Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 190.

<sup>606</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 192, 199.

So these two traditions, Burroughs' objectivising of nature as merely the incomplete background for mankind's primary dominant role, and Muir's spontaneous affinity of pathos with nature typifies prevailing approaches into the early twentieth century.

Muir's approach was to treat nature as the subject of poetic meditation in emotive communion. This latter approach more closely describes my approach in these readings. While intensely relating to nature and even at times comically anthropomorphising it, Wright never let her poems slip into mere romanticism. To her, nature was both the model and impetus for human interest and concern, never the end point of her meditations. She stressed nature's contingency (e.g., the migrant swift) and mankind's dependency on it and vulnerability to it ("Dry Storm"). More scientific knowledge could only add even more reason to protect and respect nature. While Murray is too glibly categorised as a neo-romantic for apostrophising cattle in particular, in fact his poetry evokes a more ethical way to relate to nature, both wondering at its own distinctive processes (the mollusc), and for finding more suitable venues for representing human bliss in its recurring processes of repair and regeneration ("Song Cycle"). As profoundly needed co-actors in the web of life complementary with human life, creatures in nature in Murray's poetry freely dramatise the non-human participation in creation (instance "Animal Nativity"), to recognise its inherent worth and its religious potential for symbolically representing the creator.

Malouf's poetry takes the emotive connection a step further to draw out ethical attitudes for sustaining nature within a sustainable ecology. In Malouf, modernism's analytical scientific interest in nature falls far short of postmodernism's much wider spiritual concern for the health of the global environment. His poetry is akin but not pietistic to the intensely subjective prong in that fork of standard attitudes. Of course animals are

not moral agents, but his discursive innovation is like Murray to dramatise animals as partners in the biosphere. They are neither anthropomorphised nor neglected. As a religious reader of poetry, my stance is to wonder at the complexities science finds in nature, and to use them to find grounds for emulation (“the eucalypt she commits no excess”) and a venue for religious meditation. Metaphoric projections are after all just language emoting new understandings because Westerners are incapable of indigenous intimacy with nature. My readings find a middle way to seek images of restoration, plenitude, and redress for the natural environment and for mankind.

So, as a reader from a religious viewpoint, I am much advantaged by the methodology of the analogical imagination to engage in a meditation on the finite “as the path to the infinite,”<sup>607</sup> as Lynch says. The analogical imagination understands our human realities as occurring within a divine plan of salvation, and permits users to see what is and what is imagined in the same perception. It uses the data of science the better to understand and value nature. The analogical imagination identifies my particular interpretative community’s reading practices, applies Schillebeeckx’s constants, and permits me to carry out this hermeneutic to read poems on several levels at once, to critique the present and to envisage that future development of human potentials called salvation. The next section applies the analogical imagination within the framework of a Christian literary theory.

#### vii. Christian literary theory

Social images better portray our religious experiences in communities. So Stanley

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<sup>607</sup> Lynch, “Theology and the Imagination” 67.

Fish's concept of the "interpretative communities"<sup>608</sup> paves the way for this communal hermeneutic. The work of Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (2003) building on it, justifies and demonstrates the analogical imagination as a Christian hermeneutic.

Ferretter argues that it remains possible to use theological language in literary theory. He writes that Derrida's critique is itself a theology, "entirely resigned to the immanence of its own textual play,"<sup>609</sup> and replaces the traditional theology's binary oppositions with the task of deconstruction. Certainly, saturated with disjunctions and contradictions, Steiner says there is no word less deconstructable than hope.<sup>610</sup>

Positively too, poet Kevin Hart notes that deconstruction pertains only to "that which is metaphysical in theology" leaving open the possibility of "a non-metaphysical theology that would not be susceptible to deconstruction."<sup>611</sup> I suggest that found poetic images belong to the latter group, less susceptible to deconstruction as they compose visual language. Practitioners of the discipline of religion and literature may continue unafraid, even empowered by deconstruction, with its renewed respect for textures, resonances and connotations in a hermeneutic of caution.

The work of Sherry and Ferretter certainly inspires this dissertation. Since all interpretation is made with a set of pre-understandings within a reading community's tradition, a Christian hermeneutic is clearly one defensible reading tradition among the

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<sup>608</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretative communities* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>609</sup> Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.

<sup>610</sup> Brueggemann, "Appropriating postmodernism" 8, quoting George Steiner, *Real Presences* 231.

<sup>611</sup> Ferretter, *Christian Literary Theory*, 13, quoting Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989) n.p.

many possible ones. Recognising that different readings grow out of different interpretative communities legitimates a hermeneutical framework for an identifiable Christian literary theory. As well in support, Ricoeur's second naiveté with its "restorative hermeneutic" offers distinctive reading strategies (e.g., subject position, deconstruction, and delay for meaning) to practise it. By foregrounding my membership of the Christian community, I avoid any simplistic or idiomatic analogising. Within an identifiable historical tradition and hermeneutical framework, my readings of some poems are viable readings within the Catholic Christian hermeneutical community.

The theory works in this way. A Christian's impatience with the present and a radical yearning for the kingdom of God fires its ethical-utopian thrust. Ferretter outlines the dynamic:

The world of the fictional or poetic text represents a better or more satisfying version of the world . . . and so is part of the expression of a desire to live in a new and better world, transformed by its redemption.<sup>612</sup>

So a Christian reader's desire for a better world and for future happiness, in other words, the ache for salvation or sense of the "thirst of the world" (Wright), is evident in how he or she reads fictions and poetry. Imagining a new and better world expresses the desire for the kingdom of God. Such a reading increases understandings of believers as moral agents, and tests the text's envisaged world against the reader's Christian norms.

In effect, by exercising the analogical imagination, Christian readers conduct a theological reflection upon texts in a dialectic way, critiquing and reformulating the concerns and values projected by those texts in the light of their views and beliefs. In this critical and imaginative way, Christian literary theory operates as one interpretative

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<sup>612</sup> Ferretter, *Christian Literary Theory*, 186-7.



community among many, where the shared ethical norms and reading strategies apply and express the *habitus* (abiding values and modes of operation) of that believing community. I locate myself within the overlap between a Christian community and a literary community reading poetry. I read kenotically with a faith purpose.

To be quite clear, I am not seeking evidence for doctrine or doctrinal positions or ecclesiastical persons, places or events. I am speaking of an identifiable reading hermeneutic defensible in the academy and community that characteristically seeks to valorise Christian service from within the living memory of Jesus in the scriptures and tradition. This hermeneutic finds salvation's tang in poetic images stressing a change of heart, forgiveness, righting of wrongs, regeneration of spirit, the fight for justice, service to all humanity and sharing a common life in community.

#### viii. The Australian context

While the great majority of Australians nominate themselves as religious at census, Australian society has traditionally remained silent upon religious themes such as salvation. The broader questions of life and existence are silent in the secular public domain,<sup>613</sup> and so any theological questioning is relegated to the private realms of family and community networks. Around the barbecue, such topics are considered unsettling talk. To deal with the unintelligible and the ineffable and the experience of God remains an open question in a democratic society. That reticence grows out of its diversity and the desire to be socially inclusive.

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<sup>613</sup> "Most Australians believe in God or a spirit, higher power of life force (74%) and around 40% accept conventional Christian beliefs." National Church Life Survey, Australian Community Survey (1998) [on-line] available: [www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=96](http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=96) [2006 October 04].

Despite remaining resistant to easy answers, religious questions increasingly concern poets. Always suspicious of the risk of quackery about such open and broadly unanswered questions, the ordinary Australian shuns embarrassment by relegating such questions to thinkers on the margins, such as poets. Pertinently, cultural commentator and poet Kevin Hart observes:

In our times the word 'religious' can be taken to intensify something essential in the word 'poet' while just as often it can be taken as a sign of seduction or nostalgia . . . [It is] likely to indicate not merely the religiosity of its author but what is religious about his poetry.<sup>614</sup>

Australian society has occasionally tolerated poets addressing metaphysical or religious questions, for example, religious rituals are tied to events. Theologian Gerard Hall<sup>615</sup> writes that Wright leads her readers to read more meaning from the very landscape:

Judith Wright's images have become part of the fabric of our nation. She is the political poet dancing between the mystical experience and the demands of justice. She leads us to shed our too-European eyes to see and not despoil the strange beauty of the Australian landscape.<sup>616</sup>

So because Australian poetry typically avoids overt theological questions and discourse, preferring instead in its secular environment to focus on events and their significances, it tends not to emphasise the transcendent or sublime. More often it explores analogical significances in the themes of sin and forgiveness, sacrifice, hope and promise, and applies redemption and reconciliation to needs for the common good. Poetry focuses on natural objects and processes. Yet poetical contexts grant best theological meanings.

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<sup>614</sup> Kevin Hart, "Francis Webb: Unsayings transcendence" *Southerly* 2/200, 10.

<sup>615</sup> John Salter, "The Republic of Australia and the poems of Judith Wright" (16 January 1999), 3, [on-line] available: [www.ozemail.com.au/~jocgjohn/JohnSalter/papers/e06.html](http://www.ozemail.com.au/~jocgjohn/JohnSalter/papers/e06.html) [2001 March 12].

<sup>616</sup> Gerard Hall, "Judith Wright (1915-2000): Australian poet and prophet" *Outlook* 22, no. 9 (November 2000), 26 [on-line] available: [www.ozemail.com.au/~wfnev/nov00hall.htm](http://www.ozemail.com.au/~wfnev/nov00hall.htm) [2001 March 12], 2.

In their poetic insight, Buckley argued, poets are theologians of sorts for bridging contemplation and empathy for those who are not free: the poor, the sick, the despised, the oppressed, the marginalised. So it could be fairly claimed that Australia's religious poets typically share "a metaphysician's sensibility without a belief in the metaphysical."<sup>617</sup> They reflect the Australian character's laconics in its articulation of matters religious. As Malouf observed: "the air's alive with wings; but uncongenial to visions / or saintly levitations."<sup>618</sup> As a result, poetry is free to fill the interpretative gaps concerning metaphysical issues and theology. From their advantaged viewpoint outside the mainstream, Australian poets are free to critique the flat enclosure of the prevailing materialist culture. Their readers similarly seek to transcend materialism.

At different times, three leading Australian cultural commentators, Noel Rowe, Les Murray and Kevin Hart, have broached this interface between poetry with a religious aspiration and Australian society at large. In his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (1994), Hart eloquently rehearsed Murray's discussion outlining the real difficulties he faced in finding criteria for defining the terms "poetry", "religious" and "Australian" for his anthology. He sought material that displayed any "radiance" or some concern with "matters of the spirit." He included "material raised to the level of art" that "took [either] faith or doubt as its main concern,"<sup>619</sup> or that took religious questions seriously.

However Australian poets are not laconic. Poetry's power to intimate and expand meanings through the analogical imagination concretizes and narrates this altruism well. Australian poetry makes particular applications to many and various individual

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<sup>617</sup> A helpful paradox borrowed from D. McCooey, *Eureka Street*, 10, no. 9 (2000), 16.

<sup>618</sup> David Malouf, "Notes on an Undiscovered Country" line 9, *Selected Poems* (1981), 57.

<sup>619</sup> Kevin Hart, "Introduction," *The Oxford Book of Australian Religion Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), xxiv.

circumstances, and identifies what salvation means for the current readerships. Their images make reading their poems theologically relevant.

In the Australian context, talk of salvation brings to a Christian's on-going life of faith the promise and surety that the end is not chaotic, random or annihilation. The promise of reunification with loved ones who have passed into the light is surely a real vector of their love. Others say the offer of salvation may offer relief from present sorrows or repair of the eroded earth. To most, the offer of salvation is a call to action, to serve for the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. This is particularised in these poets' persistent calls for a better Australia, in a vision of a more compassionate society, a society rejecting patriarchy, environmental destruction, unaccountable exercise of power and weak social responsibility. Thus, salvation comes to mean earning a clean conscience on rights, environment, patriarchy and every kind of addiction. In effect then, images of salvation suggest a great deal of welcome change, relief, righting of wrongs and redress of many kinds.

Today, this call to salvation most urgently means "convergence," Murray's word<sup>620</sup> for a hoped-for integration or fusion of Australia's three main cultures, the Aboriginal, the rural and the urban. He calls it "the refusal of relegation"<sup>621</sup> in his poem, "The Mitchells." In 1973, Judith Wright's "Two Dreamtimes"<sup>622</sup> ("I am born of the conquerors, / you of the persecuted") also sought to repair our cultural identity as a conquering nation. The three selected poets celebrate the saving value of inclusivity in a denial of exclusivity, and in affirmations accepting the responsibility for past injustices.

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<sup>620</sup> A longed-for fusion the poet discusses in L. A. Murray, "The Human-Hair Thread" *Meanjin* 36, no. 4 (December 1977), 566.

<sup>621</sup> Murray, "The Mitchells" lines 9-10, Appendix 3. It is not possible to underrate the power of this key term "relegation" in Murray. It is the key to much of his fight against injustice. See its usage in the "Our Man in Bunyahh" column, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 75, 162.

<sup>622</sup> Wright, "The Two Dreamtimes," *C.P.*, 315-318.

## ix. Review

In its ten sections, this fifth chapter meet its two aims: to situate the interpretative hermeneutic within its theoretical and historical framework, and to survey the fertile crossovers between theology and poetry. The chapter backgrounds and underpins the readings. It notes how poetic imagination amplifies with its metaphoric density. While religion and literature occur in the same continuum, theology tends to constrict ideas with symbols, while literature and especially poetry plays with language to extend perceptions in image and metaphor. While the two disciplines differ in scope and in their role for the imagination, the discussion shows how theology and literature amplify each other, while each does not replace the other. The criterion of relevance to life is especially applicable to serve theology's traditional aspirations. The discussion notes the power of a literary device such as point of view or analogy for throwing theological light upon salvation.

The chapter addresses two underlying foci: poetry as resource for salvation (the salvific/theological dimension of poetry), and theology as a horizon for poetry (the poetic dimension of theology). The changes in modern life indicate that interplays between literature and theology are now problematic and dialectical. This transformative or incarnational model in a Christian engagement with culture alerts the reader even more strongly to the essentially dialectical task that contextual theology faces today. The characteristic playfulness, parody and pastiche of postmodernism assists this theological purpose by delaying universals and universal causation so as to offer real possibilities for a fresher, more self-critical reading of events. Its hermeneutic of caution is eminently kenotic.

For at crossovers between literary and theological reading communities, poems offer opportunities for fresh theological interpretations of worth that surpass moral injunctions. I indicate how theological data may be found in the particularities of human life depicted in poetry. This chapter establishes my hermeneutical precedents and relevance<sup>623</sup> to engage with the insights of poets in theological reflections upon salvation. The chapter finds that experiences commonly found in literature are valuable points of departure for theological reflection. Finally, this chapter shows that, like the clown and the poet, literature and theology communicate with metaphor and imagery for different purposes. Like Shakespeare's Lear and his Fool, literature and theology are different but complementary aspects of life. Literature and theology occupy different polarities, at discrete corners of the boxing ring. Like player and referee, they both need the play of metaphor, but place punches in different ways. In the last chapter, ten virtues of salvation are educed from these hermeneutical readings, to underpin five conclusions for possible use in homiletics, catechetics and theology.

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<sup>623</sup> Topically, in the wake of 9/11 and the depravity and compassion seen after Hurricane Katrina, Leadership University's website argues the need for and value of a distinctive Christian worldview: "Worldview: History and Christian application of weltanschauung theory" Leadership University [on-line] available: [leaderu.com/focus/worldviewconcept.html](http://leaderu.com/focus/worldviewconcept.html) [2005 September 16].

## Chapter 6: Salvation: Towards a fresh discourse

This final chapter reflects on the significance of the study and its results. The discussion will then be in a position to commend the significance of this dissertation for contributing to a wider and fresher discourse on salvation “in [its] fresh intimations of significance.”<sup>624</sup> This chapter shows how the study meets its three primary aims: to show how the poetic images make salvation topical, that familiar imagery supplies fresh rhetoric about salvation, and that poetic images supply enhanced theological understandings upon salvation.

### i. Salvation re-examined

The study re-examines salvation. Poetic imagery in the selected Australian poems unpacks the idea of salvation. When Judith Wright admires the stability, continuity and flourishing of a large eucalyptus tree, “a great tree . . . its roots [in] eternity,”<sup>625</sup> when Les Murray celebrates the welcome arrival of warm rain, or when David Malouf infers that happiness does not come from the flesh, they image the same basic choice for transcendence and hope and a contesting of pessimism and apathy. Whether that ache is felt in the existential option for personal responsibility in a humanitarian philanthropy or in the Christian commitment to selfless service, that basic choice for hope underpins any desire for the betterment of humankind and the world. I argue that salvation is being achieved whenever justice prevails over evil. Where poems image betterment, redress and transcendence stemming from that basic choice, they contest despair towards fulfilment of the promised salvation.

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<sup>624</sup> Les Murray, *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: CollinsDove, 1986), 15.

<sup>625</sup> Wright, “Night” lines 2, 4, *C.P.*, 49.

Such poetic images replace dualistic thought with the holism typical of the Hebrew scriptures. Although the images were glancing and fragile as traces, shadows or outlines of transcendence in embodied existence, they are tied to human lives and observations, to affirm the Semitic truth that humans live by the breath of God and that the world is given as the gift of creation. The poetic images value salvation as happening in this life before death. The images have the immediacy of real-life narratives in Heidegger's *Dasein*. They show that life events transform life stories in aspirational constructs like salvation.

Within the trope of hope and transcendence, these poetic images dramatise the liberations being effected in the events and rituals of social and organic life in this world. Within this focus on salvation, these poetic images, crumbs or "scraps of experience" (Wright)<sup>626</sup> and images of refreshment suggest virtues and pathways for attaining a fulfilling destiny for human beings. These scraps echo the happy revelation that God has saved the world and everyone in it. When they incite fresh prospects and real possibilities for liberation in this life, these virtues and pathways certainly compose a fresh rhetoric about salvation.

Salvation is so central to belief. Pieterse and van der Ven, pertinently note: "If Christianity still has anything to say, it must be the belief in salvation."<sup>627</sup> Fresh rhetoric supplements the tradition to stress that salvation is a response to invitations, that it is granted, not imposed, that salvation cannot be effected in a hardened heart, that salvation is surprisingly superabundant and identifiably relevant to human lives, that

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<sup>626</sup> Judith Wright, Introduction to *Australian Poets: Judith Wright* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), vii.

<sup>627</sup> H. J. C. Pieterse and J. A. van der Ven, "Human rights: A channel for salvation?" *Journal of Empirical Theology* 16.2 (2003), 51.



salvation is eschatological for bringing forward the final fulfilment promised to believers, and that salvation is not an escape from the world, but an engagement with it in a mandate to act justly and humanely. The images show salvation embodied as hands and feet to serve, a tongue to challenge, and a smile to enchant. They show transcendence is embodied in everyone has who learnt this particular “poeme-vision”<sup>628</sup> (sic) in the trope of salvation.

While reading the data for surplus, I find key images that connote local experiences, in images of retrieval of identity, continuity and renewed commitment to serve humanity in the Australian context. Taking the cue from Murray, who alerts that “it is serious to be with humans,”<sup>629</sup> I find that the laconic national character in sprawl is a rich antidote to current trivializations, implying that, in the wider and divine domain beyond work and ideology, freedom, joy and hope are superbly and satisfyingly surprises in store for receptive people who dream of salvation.

These poetic images of salvation contextualize living situations and familiar life circumstances. These poetic intimations about salvation are recognisable for being pegged to Australian landscape images such as “tree-frog, dingo, rainforest and seacoast, stark cliffs and eroded hills, bushfire and flood, dust and drought, wind and rain, flame-tree and cicadas, gum tree and cyclone.”<sup>630</sup> So, when that salvation is imaged in familiar metaphors, such as the scent of rain-wet earth, the nostalgic scent of eucalyptus trees, Wright’s emergent bud or Murray’s walking “knee-deep in ferns,”<sup>631</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> Les Murray’s term for a particular embodied way of viewing the world, with a “changed picture of the world” (525) that I identify with the trope of salvation, It is evident in a Wholespeak embodied moment of truth. See Les Murray, “Poemes and the mystery of embodiment” *Meanjin* 47.3 (Spring,1988), 519-533.

<sup>629</sup> “The Fishermen at South Head” line 39, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 168.

<sup>630</sup> Gerard V. Hall, “Judith Wright (1915-2000): Australian poet and prophet” *National Outlook* (November 2000), 26.

<sup>631</sup> Murray, “Noonday Axeman” line 63, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 5.

they represent holism, harmony and fruition grounded in Australia and achievable by its people. The readings show environmental redemption comes in respectfully treating the land.

In producing a movement of aspiration, these poets demonstrate Buckley's "sacralising imagination" at work. Wright envisions redeeming her New England landscape by restoring land rights to its resident Aboriginal owners. Murray celebrates grace in the cycles of birth and rejuvenation on his farm as recurrent gifts of nature. Malouf offers the possibility of ecological redemption in imaginative rehearsals of more ethical attitudes. These poets (among our contemporaries) retrieve respect for the land (and the sea as in the Mabo decision) as the material place that nurtures continuity and identity. They dramatise the psalmist's hope: "Let the earth open, that salvation may spring up" (Isa 45:8).

This fresher rhetoric demonstrates that salvation is firmly tied to human actions and their outcomes. These poems discourse upon the restoration of rights and dignity, relief from suffering, rescue from impending disaster, resolution of crises and genuine peace at the end. Within the trope of transcendence, they present salvation as a changed state experienced as timely rescue, decisive and binding because it is ethically better. This fresh rhetoric of salvation is truly missionary because it impels responsibility for one another and the physical world. In this view, to those who take both religion and literature seriously, salvation is not a fantastical utopia in a dreamer's paradise, unreal, imaginary, impracticable and hopelessly remote. To Christian believers, talk of salvation never conveys a chiliastic dream of escape; it is a daily exercise of the eschatological imagination.

Re-examining salvation through poetry shows that saving messages for society endure when couched in perennial imagery. For instance, the Christian tradition remembers biblical images of salvation occurring as responses to ordinary events. Single images such as Christ's arm extended to Peter falling into the waves (Mt 14:31) or the angel freeing Peter from prison (Acts 12:9) endure to bear multiple applications and resonances across the ages. Such perennial images convey saving messages. The public heard her when Wright sang: "The wattle tree / it tosses, it shines, it speaks its one word. Beware! Beware."<sup>632</sup>

Similarly, in the readings of the selected poets, I find images of transcendence persist in everyday terms such as life, sap, regret, grace, serenity, warm rain, ritual, song and marriage. Like the wattle tree, these images are stable in the Australian cultural memory. Enduring terms like "the compass heart"<sup>633</sup> the sweet completion, and shape's most pure serenity, "the gift ungiven"<sup>634</sup> and "the undreamed-of rain"<sup>635</sup> readily dramatise embodied transcendence. These images from ordinary life relate to people's lives in society. Read as images of salvation, they readily connect with the cultural memory.

The images are not sentimental diversions but present ethical mandates. Generated within stated theological frameworks, my readings image redress for today. Panikkar's definition bridges its religious and secular events, salvation is "whatever is considered to be the end, goal, destination, or destiny of human kind."<sup>636</sup> Schillebeeckx notes that salvation cannot be claimed until all suffering is over. Heidegger urges readers to

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<sup>632</sup> Judith Wright, ". . . and Mr Ferritt" lines 33-34, in *Five Senses*, 110, *C.P.*, 144.

<sup>633</sup> Line 29, "Spring After War" *Collected Poems 1942-1970* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), 36, and *C.P.*, 33.

<sup>634</sup> Wright, "The Unborn" line 16, *C.P.*, 48.

<sup>635</sup> Wright, "Rain at night" line 8, *C.P.*, 89.

<sup>636</sup> Raimondo Panikkar, *Faith and Belief* (1975), 83.

question prevailing cultural, ideological and religious assumptions. His pertinent focus for finding wholeness reminds us of “the unshieldedness of love, pain and death.”<sup>637</sup> Murray’s insights in numinous apperceptions remind that the mystery of salvation typically supersaturates suffering with a transforming abundance. Malouf’s pertinent phrase, “life’s mysteries disarm me” indicates the needed vulnerability to imagine salvation as “an open universe expanding beyond us” keeping open “the risk of transcendence.”<sup>638</sup> The selected images mandate the struggle for justice and a better world.<sup>639</sup>

These poetic images reveal an intense human ache for transcendence. By bringing images to light in reading the poetry, I show how the broad theme of salvation fuses the broad religious aspiration and the literary trope of dreaming for a better world. The images re-examine salvation to show it is a best-fit solution and not temporary opium or an ersatz whitewash for all. These images of salvation reveal a shared human wish for finding, gaining, winning, achieving, grasping and responding to wholeness. For salvation is a holistic antidote to western culture’s anarchic relativity and directionless drift. Salvation promises resolution after entropy, judgment to arrest conflict, and finality to stifle endless modern tedium. Assembling these poetic images in a fresh rhetoric partly reconstitutes the coherence of the lost reality that was Eden. Those images inspire the longed-for decisive restoration to wholeness and justice for everyone.

Finally, re-examining salvation finds that embodied salvation is realised in relationships, whenever and wherever justice is restored, wrongs are righted, debts are

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<sup>637</sup> Veronica Brady quoting Heidegger, unsourced, “For the love of a land and its people” *The Courier Mail*, Brisbane 14 March 1998, *Weekend* 7. Quoted by Mark O’Connor, “Poetry and Religion: Is Christmas over?” 2000, p. 1 [on-line] available: [www.abc.net.au/religion/features/poetry/poetry-mystical01.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/features/poetry/poetry-mystical01.htm) [2003 March 23].

<sup>638</sup> Kevin Hart, “Francis Webb: Unsaying Transcendence” *Southerly* 2/ 2000, 18.

<sup>639</sup> Wright for example seeks to undo the injustice to the indigenous peoples of New England by granting land rights. See “Nigger’s Leap, New England” *C.P.*, 15, and “Eroded Hills” *C.P.*, 81.

discharged, addiction is overcome, human dignity and rights are recognised, happiness is won, sin is forgiven and environmental degradation is reversed. As the rhythm of the sacred, the dream of salvation re-focuses human lives to reconcile fractured relationships. Poetic images of salvation catalyze that regeneration with images of purification, growth, directionality, restoration, and plenitude.

In summary, the selected poems show that the dream of salvation is a basic choice for transcendence and hope over despair. Their images outline virtues and pathways to this betterment. This restorative hermeneutic does not generate quirky idiosyncrasies, but works to inspire and reveal the universal desire for transcendence. I find that salvation is embodied in Australian images, being pegged to the land's cycles and familiar events of social life. That incarnational view of salvation demands ethical choices about environmental redemption. Salvation mandates engagement. Thus, in re-examining the received concept, this dissertation grounds some poetics for the politics of salvation.

## ii. Salvation as transcendence

Throughout the discussion, the reader encounters many references to the transcendent, such as retrieving the transcendent, mediating the transcendent, glimpsing the transcendent, analogizing the transcendent dimension, and poetry being the fount of transcendence. Transcendent opportunities and meanings are achieved in art's transcendent vision. Social, ethical and embodied transcendence describes the processes and effects of the numinous perception. One also expects to acquire transcendent wisdom when reading and assembling images of salvation. Transcendence is any desirable state of experience at a remove from a present state. It need not denote only a state of existence such as in the afterlife. As the thesis is working within Ricoeur's

primary level of symbolism, poetic images of salvation describe hope and transcendence as opportunities and occasions for envisioning and grasping rescue, fulfilment, plenitude and embodied transcendence.

Hope and transcendence have been here paired to show that hope looks towards what is not yet achieved, or towards what may yet be possible, or to redress an ache of unsatisfied desire. In this understanding, salvation is yearning for some higher, wider and better kind of experience. The wattle tree's recurring fertility and overall usefulness is an image of recurrent resourcefulness. Wright's images of redress, in lovers who share one mind, the compass heart and a gift ungiven graphically describe wondrous states of unanimity, subtle discernment and tragic hopefulness. Murray's non-violent dreamtime, the teapot of calm, and fresh-minted hills image states of crisis resolution and natural bliss. Malouf's "eternal E-flat weather" is a desirable and comprehensible state of blessedness. These are transcendences on earth, not just beautiful natural scenes but human achievements. Salvation lies in that judgment that a decisive resolution is reached, supersaturating what is good with due harmony and serenity. In this way, transcendence and salvation are inextricably linked as process and outcome in the same continuum.

### iii. Unique contribution

A real outcome of this study, useful for the Church, the academy and society, is its contribution to the rhetoric surrounding salvation. The dissertation contributes to Australia's cultural knowledge by providing insights across the boundaries of conventional readings. It reads in a literary domain to generate theological readings for the nominated audience. A fresher discourse shapes perceptions, and rehearses newer

approaches, applications and more pertinent reconceptualisations of salvation.

With their long history, Catholics accumulate scripts for a variety of situations. However, reading about salvation is no routine to be scripted. Almost uniquely in Australia, this dissertation shows how the aesthetic experience of seeking poetic images enhances religious understandings. Without irony, it intones a single *entendre* honesty to demonstrate comprehensively what Christian readings are in practice. The study does not assume a separate Christian culture,<sup>640</sup> or berate the wider culture's fragmentation, or legitimate my own new readings as more authoritative than any received readings of these poems. Its process is an exchange for gain, stimulating the feelings to enhance the depth of faith. It paves the way for others to overcome self-consciousness about the precariousness of this kind of interdisciplinary endeavour. This work is a unique contribution.

First, the study's outcome is useful to the church and the academy as an exercise of its distinctive perspective on the world. Importantly, the Christian point of view instanced in these readings is increasingly becoming an alternative view to the prevailing secular materialism of our culture. For the Christian, it is the most fundamental lens through which to view the world. That priority shows the profound shift that salvation produces, such as when the "psychic leads to [the] noetic."<sup>641</sup> The Christian reader's privileging of faith is the "elevation of one part of our life"<sup>642</sup> over all the rest. So the theme of

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<sup>640</sup> This study is part of the urgent work of theology today to express its truths in contemporary terms. I quote Dr. Sean McEvenue: "Theology is no longer just being true to the past - or recovering the past always, to huddle together in the past. Theology is a central responsibility to the human being – the human being who is very confused right now, very frightened - running around trying to understand where he or she could ask even about the love of God or his or her own value." Christine Jamieson, *The Lonergan Web Site* 1999 [on-line] available: [www.lonergan.on.ca/interviews/mcevenue.htm](http://www.lonergan.on.ca/interviews/mcevenue.htm) [2005 October 28].

<sup>641</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 19.

<sup>642</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 19.

salvation, as the believer's most significant horizon,<sup>643</sup> derives from the identifiable shift that comes from the essential conversion or *metanoia*, the change of heart necessary to live Jesus' story. As a distinctive perspective then, the Christian vision challenges secular society at its philosophical heart. As a religious vision, it shifts the frame of reference beyond radical individualism, and money, sex and power agendas to quite different priorities. This dissertation shows what salvation looks like when that living vision, found most richly in the church,<sup>644</sup> reads poetry.

Second, this study records a faithful search for confirmations of faith in its central theme of salvation that are to be found in poetic imagery. In a very real sense, my readings are evocations infused with the community's faith and supported by the standing framework of scholarly criticism. This fresh re-conceptualization draws out the sum of the images composing it. In exploring their resonances with one another as in a collage or *assemblage*, the study accesses its central theme for a contemporary readership. It reconciles construct and data, objectivity and subjectivity, the Burroughs and Muir dichotomy. One worthwhile outcome is that it resolves silences when religious and scientific explanations seem to diverge, collide or disprove one another. The study advantages faith for it shows how a religious reading of reality necessarily departs from a scientific one.

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<sup>643</sup> "When we look upon the world of our day, we see how it is similar to, yet different from the world of the biblical author. We merge our horizons into a single larger picture and try to imagine how that God whom we recognize as having been present and active in the biblical author's day continues to be present and active in our own day." Anthony R. Ceresko, "A hermeneutical strategy for a liberationist interpretation of St Francis de Sales" *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* Volume 63 (January to December 1999), 37-46 Vidyajyoti Educational and Welfare Society Academy Press [on-line] available: [www4.allencol.edu/~salesian/tonycer.html](http://www4.allencol.edu/~salesian/tonycer.html) screen 3, [accessed 2002 March 6].

<sup>644</sup> A major source of imaginative structuring for me: "Our lives are shaped by the preconscious effects of all the traditions whose narratives and ways of envisioning the world have forged our memories and subsequently our actions." David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 37.



Third, the study's hermeneutic is a unique, contemporary contribution. It reveals an indigenization of concepts of promise, rescue and salvation in our poetic heritage. While poems stimulate various different intertextualities with relevancies to specific readers, my readings have found that Wright, Murray and Malouf do supply culturally symbolic images of salvation. The crab, the bushfire, the wattle and the migrant swift are instantly recognisable as survivors contesting, struggling with and battling the elements. These religio-literary readings are not analytic appraisals. Rather, they record the impacts the poems have had on this reader in his reading community. The term salvation crystalises truths about Australian life experiences. While these readings are my considered evocations from my foregrounded position of faith, they do convey the successful enculturation of that faith in the Australian social and cultural context.

Fourth, the study shows how a religious reading claims the believer's first priority at critical philosophical collisions between science and doctrine. A religious reading of reality draws attention to this first priority of religious belief, as salvation comprehensively explains the life of the believer and the mission of the tradition as the widest meta-narrative there is. In defiance of today's postmodern playful relativity, salvation's teleology to ultimate resolution values human action as centrally decisive, and it draws attention to the unique saviour by depicting the history of the world as a narrative of worth to the creator and redeemer. I read salvation as that human aspiration for a fuller and richer life, and a catalyst for interfering to halt ugly trends.

Fifth, as an exercise in postmodern subjectivity, this study celebrates creative individuality in a reversal of a reductionist response common nowadays to reduce every feeling to a sexual impulse, every intuition to supporting an archetype, and every reflection to a discourse about competing dualities. That simplistic reduction denies the

possibility of any creative contribution. These readings arise solely within this individual's efforts to synthesise, illuminate and invigorate a communal faith. Intertextually with those discourses, they enlarge consciousness about salvation with images from our national life.

Finally, one of the significant benefits of this study of poetry and rhetoric is to reinforce belief in the transformative power of language. Of all the sciences, theology is acutely aware of language as catalyst for any change of attitude. Malouf's observation is that the poet's unique power is to excite an experience of the imagination that has the effect of immediate illumination. As he said of the crab, "words made you / a fact in my head." Realities become facts first in words, and new language leads to new perceptions, and to new spaces to grow new actions. New rhetoric critiques limited horizons. Changes begin with new language. This fresher rhetoric re-presents salvation with new relevance and immediacy.

To summarise, the outcomes of the study are that it provides a stimulus to faith in a religious reading of cultural texts. It provides a reconceptualisation of salvation in an indigenisation of concepts of recovery, redress and salvation from the Australian cultural landscape. It features the distinctive Christian perspective on the world with its furthest horizons gleaned in the numinous perception. It celebrates creative individuality, and reminds that, with few sure epistemological guarantees, the transformative power of language creates and sustains ideas and ideals of worth.

#### iv. Review of methodology

As part of postmodernity's freedom and the turn to subjectivity, I am accessing poetry's abundance of meanings in poetry's plurivocality, to find access for the religious reading

of poetic texts as an act of the religious imagination. I am advantaged using poetry's creative elasticity for permitting a theological reflection within the public discourse. Univocal and definitive terminology would deny the very richness of the broader connotations that religious language bears. In this way, theology shares the language of metaphor with poetry. Indeed, my interpretations extend and challenge conventional poetic meanings at times. I explore these connotative possibilities in content and form. My hermeneutical readings address perennial questions.

My readings are not the work of an unscrupulous appropriator. My interpretative readings strive to collect references to the ache of salvation as they make their power present to contemporary audiences. Indeed, in some cases at least, their relevancies have intensified with the passage of time, so that what were seminal references at their publication, now have richer potency in the new century.

The sole norms for scholarly interpretation cannot just be whether images resonate with depth of experience and breadth of perception, or fashionable preference and palatability. My chosen methodology adheres to five public norms for establishing fair and comprehensive readings:

1. Deal with themes major in these poets.
2. Be true to the spirit of the poems.
3. Honestly foreground my own experience, bias, intention and value system.
4. Pay attention to academic criticism.
5. Be consciously self-critical in the hermeneutical process.

In diligently adhering to these foregrounded criteria, the discussion achieves a defensible hermeneutical reading of the poems.

On the first norm, to deal with the major themes in these poets, my readings appear

within the same general cultural frameworks as the frameworks of their authors of origin. This is an Australian reading from within Australian society. Australia has a developed literary culture in which its significant cultural and religious themes have become recognisable landmarks. Critical-analytic research anchors my readings within the poets' major themes. This discussion identifies and elucidates these publicly acknowledged themes that endure in the public sphere and speak to our age of recovery, liberation and promise.

On the second norm to be true to the spirit of the poems, I read true to the spirit of the printed poems. I make selections not as proof texts to appropriate what was desired; rather, I give consideration to the poems' integrity as whole texts. This reader has preferred the attitude of finding salvational references in poems only if they are overt, and has self-critically striven to contest any readings recorded. I strive to be *kenotic* (with Rowe) in dealing with what is offered and in dealing with silences in the poems.

On the third norm, to honestly foreground my own experience, bias, intention and value system. I engage in the standard tasks of reading encounter, in question-posing, meaning-making, decodification of signs, and response verification. To avoid aesthetic distortion, I observe constant monitoring by regular reference to these procedural and substantive norms for reading within this interpretative community of Christian faith. A valid reading is a fair and reasonable reading when respecting that community's tenets.

For the fourth norm, to pay attention to academic criticism, this exercise in Christian interpretation is not a special case or departure under exiguous circumstances, but an open, accountable activity within the legitimate processes of reading texts. I am attentive to visual, rhythmical, metrical and phonic devices. I read, not to reinstate the theological language of doctrinal formulations, but strive to engage with current

scholarship in Australia today. I am wary of imposing persuasive limitations on the very open genre of poetic texts.

Meeting the fifth norm, to be consciously self-critical in the hermeneutical process, entails a cautious reading for surplus, since poetic texts are plurivocal and polysemous, and have the potential to generate a wide range of responses in readers. I am critically aware of the issues of “over-interpretation” that Eco raises.<sup>645</sup> I recognise that no public norms limit readings of poetry, for poetry’s sources are not completely public, and its images, references and echoes are variously recognised by “empirical,” “implied” and “model readers” alike.<sup>646</sup> The community of readers (and the community of Christian believers) access poetry’s imagery to different depths. My self-critical hermeneutic is constantly guarding against any desire for indefensibly “totalising” completions and compellingly glib conclusions.

In being hermeneutically aware, I honour Noel Rowe’s challenge to be kenotic. The study is not discursively mapping out an aesthetic journey towards a theological destination. I do not seek to retrieve and rehearse religious experience and insight in given categories and imagery. Rather, I seek to make a substantial contribution to the growing movement linking the arts and religion inductively, by reinterpreting existing data, opening up newer ways of interpretation, isolating poetic insights into the sublime and better integrating faith’s recognition of the natural world.

In review, the study addresses Rowe’s challenge regarding theology’s deconstruction of

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<sup>645</sup> Umberto Eco, in Stefan Collini, ed. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 120-22. For Eco, overinterpretation is a result of an “excess of wonder”—the propensity to treat elements as significant, which are simply “fortuitous” (122). It results from the posing of questions that exceed the intention of the text; it is “putting questions the text does not pose to its model reader.”

<sup>646</sup> Key terms in Eco’s “hermetic semiosis” in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 45f.

texts. In being more *kenotic* in my encounter with literature, I do not make any procedurally prior claims in the interests of doctrine. I strive to engage in praxis with whole texts and life contexts, and to permit poetry to have its own ways of communicating. This has been done.

I recognise Rowe's demand in the post-modern condition, that theological readers should share the same hermeneutic dilemmas as literary readers, and so I accept that my readings have an interim status, a limited grasp of the truth, and constantly risk erasure. Rowe challenged theology to work in this new unstable environment, and this study strives to address this challenge cautiously. Further, deconstruction retrains religious readers to sharpen their interpretative methodologies, and Rowe's deconstruction objection is addressed here too.

#### v. Significance of the results

This study meets its aims as an exploration of Australian mindscapes depicted in poetry to assimilate elements of Australian spirituality in a configuration of coherence. The study seeks to assimilate what these poems say about the gifts of creation and salvation, especially growth, regeneration, redress and plenitude. This effort is a genuine attempt to find coherences, structures, themes, tropes, meanings and vectors in poetic language that image salvation in modern Australian poetry.

The study works within an academic discipline. Reading literature as data for theological reflection is now an accepted discipline. In that effort, "Effective translation is incarnational, taking the Gospel message and finding culturally relevant clothing to

express it.”<sup>647</sup> The current study may even be characterised as a literary contribution to a theological pluralism of sorts, wherein, as a contemporary believer, I strive to locate the foregrounded, inherited and church-nurtured faith within the literary culture of my times.

If my close perusals are still more incipient than definite, there can be no doubting the authenticity of the impulse or the worth of the discoveries obtained. An unfair criticism of its limitations would be to call it, in Murray’s words, “a sophistication trying to happen,”<sup>648</sup> or “the critics’ testament.”<sup>649</sup> Rather, intensely aware of its limitations and the risks of appropriation, I would rather the study be remembered for “making the vague hard - catching the wraith - speaking with a pure voice”<sup>650</sup> about salvation. I regard this endeavour as testament to the power of poetry to evoke heightened understanding from poetry’s “inexhaustibility.”<sup>651</sup> The images make salvation more real, for “poetry models the fullness of life and gives its objects presence.”<sup>652</sup>

In its methodology, this study is a more precise endeavour than sketching images among the stars. It makes conceptual sense of what I read, without rearranging the data for convenience or building wax bridges of tenuous import between the poetic lines. In its methodology, I read between authentic romanticism and basic structuralism, offering neither a work of sheer imagination nor magical enchantment nor a predictable derivation from existing patterns. This is a task of “interpreting slowly” (Kinzie), as a gift of reverie, a work of creative imagination fleshing theology with an earth-bound

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<sup>647</sup> Angus J. L. Menuge, “Neibuhr’s *Christ and Culture* Reexamined,” p. 4. [on-line] available: [www.mtio.com/articles/bissar26.htm](http://www.mtio.com/articles/bissar26.htm) [2004 June 14].

<sup>648</sup> Murray, “The Names of the Humble” in *Poems Against Economics* (1972).

<sup>649</sup> Murray, “Each Morning Once More Seamless” line 36, *C.P.1961-2002*, 419.

<sup>650</sup> Wright, “For Precision” line 15, *C.P.*, 129.

<sup>651</sup> Murray, “Poems and Proesies” in *A Working Forest*, 374.

<sup>652</sup> Murray, “Poems and Proesies” in *A Working Forest*, 378.

realism. To secure “heightened meaning,”<sup>653</sup> the poetic images engage in “acts of moral imagination and redemptive yearning”<sup>654</sup> for dealing with affliction, injustice and death. The study gains much from Murray’s instinctual sense of the sacred in the diverse world. Reading with heightened consciousness, my readers are invited to see new possibilities for meaning in their poems. Now ten key virtues for salvation distilled from those readings follow as the hard outcomes of the study.

#### vi. Ten virtues for salvation

In order of appearance, this section elaborates ten virtues for attaining the salvation arising from the readings:

insightful vulnerability,  
authentic imagination,  
clear-sightedness,  
responsible freedom,  
hope and optimism,  
dream the transcendent,  
faith in the saviour,  
accountable actions,  
non-violence,  
seek newness.

The discussion now elaborates each singly and in turn.

#### Virtue 1: insightful vulnerability

The first virtue, insightful vulnerability, is a measure of that admirable capacity to be naked to life as was Wright’s exemplar poet John Shaw Neilson.<sup>655</sup> When life is seen as a bargain, insightful vulnerability is a humble admission of one’s chances in a wager with it. As in “The Crab Feast,” Malouf in particular values self-consciousness as the

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<sup>653</sup> Murray, “Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia” *A Working Forest*, 137.

<sup>654</sup> Mary Kinzie, *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral essays on the poet’s calling* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), xii.

<sup>655</sup> “John Shaw Neilson” in *C.P.*, 235.



gift of evolution. Imaginative insight defines the human being, it generates language, it celebrates creativity and engenders transformation. Insight is a share in the divine, for surely it is the gift of a self-aware presence who desires all humankind to come to their senses, to accept environmental responsibility, to see just what they really have as opposed to what they do not, and to build up what is genuinely possible for human dignity rather than destroy what cannot be regained. In Murray, vulnerability is the seed of eternity in humans, as “the crux of eternity remembered as a star.”<sup>656</sup> Nothing dies in Paradise, and that was the crux of the phoenix’s dilemma. Being fully alive requires “making room” for the numinous understanding of existence, which is certainly an act of insightful consciousness. The virtue of insightful vulnerability begins salvation because it opens the person to wager with realities of evil, and answers the mandate to contest them.

#### Virtue 2: authentic imagination

The second virtue is the power of the analogical imagination, for self-consciousness engages the power of the imagination. Malouf describes a writer’s power to access what may be grasped beyond the senses: “writers have the duty . . . to provide immediate illumination and understanding.”<sup>657</sup> He sees that anticipatory grasp of realities that are other-than-sensory and not-yet as very much a saving power for individual persons and whole peoples. Practised in both poetry and theology, the authentic imagination is a virtue for salvation for seeking the coherence that salvation offers.

#### Virtue 3: clear-sightedness

The third virtue is the gift of continuous, healthy clear-sightedness, because it offers a wider possibility for developing potentials. When unassailed by limitations or

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<sup>656</sup> Murray, “Animal Nativity,” lines 19-20, *C.P.1961-2002*, 375.

<sup>657</sup> Malouf, in *Imagining the Real*, 22.

unhindered by doubt, and when there is unlimited scope for action, an individual or a society acts to consolidate identity development and achieve progress in making and executing plans. To assist society, the poet offers clear-sightedness from the margins, about the whole of society, to save it from its wilful, foolish trends. Wright described the poetic capacity as being “naked to life.”<sup>658</sup> As a virtue for salvation, poetic clear-sightedness reveals the constants for increasing freedom and dignity for humankind.

#### Virtue 4: responsible freedom

The fourth virtue is responsible freedom, in particular by taking responsibility for our own actions and omissions. Responsibility brings opportunities to shape experience according to anthropological guidelines, in a conscious bringing of one’s own personal history and Christian commitment for shaping both present and future events. Freedom experiments, tests limits and makes choices as a right of personal identity, for “we ourselves ravel the thread by which we travel.”<sup>659</sup> Such essential choices are celebrated in images of marriage, such as in Wright’s “In Praise of Marriages”<sup>660</sup> and Murray’s “Towards the Imminent Days.”<sup>661</sup> Salvation enters only with that free assent: “I can be your tree / if you consent to be flower / seed and fruit.”<sup>662</sup> The poets show how acting responsibly is a virtue for salvation.

#### Virtue 5: hope and optimism

A fifth virtue for salvation is hope and optimism. Hope discourses about salvation. Like Simeon’s “hope of salvation” (Lk 2:22), our poets mandate readers to serve the real and desirable world, not escape it. Christians are mandated to love the world. Without that

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<sup>658</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, 119.

<sup>659</sup> Wright, “For the loved and the unloved,” *C.P.*, 126.

<sup>660</sup> *C.P.*, 152.

<sup>661</sup> Murray, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 37.

<sup>662</sup> Wright “Flesh” lines 24-25, *Five Senses*, (1963) 112, has echoes of line 19 “Woman to Child” *C.P.*, 29.

beholden duty, cynicism thrives. Hope also indicates how attaining salvation is risky. Indeed, better times are no more certain to come than worse ones.

As a virtue, hope is the true remedy for fear. Like the gift of the fear of the Lord given at the sacrament of confirmation, notions of salvation act like that healthy fear of falling that saves us at cliff's edge. Fortunately, a realistic anticipation of what could happen reminds us humans of our contingent nature. Wright's "Eroded Hills"<sup>663</sup> expresses her regret over her forefathers' naïve farming methods that produced permanent and irreparable environmental damage ("These hills my father's father stripped"). Wright repairs that lost opportunity when arguing for the referendum for the Aboriginal vote.

Hope and optimism are fragile qualities. Our news broadcasts relate much to be pessimistic about, and contradictions widely abound. There is no end of discourse about "imminent apocalyptic disaster whether nuclear, ecological, economic, cybernetic or astronomical"<sup>664</sup> for instance. Derrida even mentions a benefit in the rhetoric of nuclear meltdown as being its power to destabilise discourse and reference.<sup>665</sup> However, this study has demonstrated how the poetic, sacralising imagination, infused with that "ache needing appeasement"<sup>666</sup> aching for transcendence and contesting despair heals such contradictions. Wright's images stress that fragility. She explores paradoxes in birth and love and time and death, for example, "love that knew not its beloved"<sup>667</sup> and "you shall escape and not escape,"<sup>668</sup> "lion / look upon my flesh and see / that in it which never

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<sup>663</sup> Wright, "Eroded Hills," *C.P.*, 81.

<sup>664</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in theology and literature* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000), 227.

<sup>665</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 227.

<sup>666</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 197.

<sup>667</sup> "Woman to Child" line 10, *C.P.* 28.

<sup>668</sup> "Woman to Child" line 13, *C.P.*, 28.

dies,”<sup>669</sup> and “open, green hand, and give / the dark gift you hold.”<sup>670</sup> Imagining possible transcendence does not blind us to facts but refreshes discourses upon salvation with regenerative imagery.

In these virtues for salvation, I promote the supreme role of hope and positive thinking for attaining transcendence, and their benefits for health, positive action and achievement. The study notes the force fields of effect in operation when human actions make an impact on others. Since we are essentially social beings, these poets help to show how hope and transcendence brings an ordered match of gifts with needs.

#### Virtue 6: dream the transcendent

The sixth major virtue distilled from these readings is a valorisation of the dreaming side of human nature so well explicated by Heidegger and Rahner as windows to the divine. Murray’s poems show the power of the numinous insight as a virtue for salvation. He refers to the poet’s unique “language of feelings, or atmosphere and symbols”<sup>671</sup> Thus, the poetical numinous grants unique access to the wholeness of divine reality about our human existence. Daniel Liderbach names “our dreaming side [as] a channel of the Divine.”<sup>672</sup> Only valorising the dreaming side accesses that Otherworld of Wholespeak and reintegration. Poetic insight in the dreaming does access truths of salvation.

Murray extols this embodied power of dreaming the transcendent in the numinous for interfacing human and divine as being dynamic, possessive and therapeutic all at once.

It is worth reminding ourselves once more of this poetic power, as writes:

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<sup>669</sup> Wright, “Lion” lines 3-4, *C.P.*, 86.

<sup>670</sup> Wright, “Dark Gift” lines 17-18, *C.P.*, 71.

<sup>671</sup> Murray, “Introduction” *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: CollinsDove, 1986), 17.

<sup>672</sup> Daniel Liderbach, *The Numinous Universe* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989), 22.

If a poem is real, it is inexhaustible; it cannot be summarised or transposed into other words . . . The poem is dancing us to its rhythm. . . . It is, discreetly, borrowing our body to embody itself. . . . It is this ordinary ecstasy . . . [where] fresh intimations of significance are likely to arise. . . . A poem exacts this wholeness, draws us into it so as to promote and refresh our own.<sup>673</sup>

The numinous insight finds sacraments of the commonplace in vernacular experience, especially in the everyday rituals of teapot and work. It finds an honourable *modus operandi* in its rejection of consumerism, greed, waste and ambition for implementing God's reign. Poetic dreaming permits enhanced discourses about the recurring theme of transcendence. In it, Wright and Murray convey the sense of a wider framework containing the whole, as an interpretative framework that cannot now or ordinarily be accessed. Oubré's<sup>674</sup> "numinous mind," transcends limited perspectives and the pathos of life. The numinous as the tug of the invisible is very much evident in these poems.

#### Virtue 7: faith in the saviour

The seventh virtue for salvation is a focus on the saviour or author of salvation. One prominent image in the Letter to the Hebrews has it that "Jesus became the author of eternal salvation" (Heb 5:9). National salvation is often focused on the political liberator, and medical miracles on the surgeon as the human agent for a recovery of what was needed. People often look to a saviour to rescue them from debt, addiction, crisis or despair. Eliot's "notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" in "The Wasteland"<sup>675</sup> suggests this personal Presence as agent of rescue and restoration.

Often the impetus to embodied salvation lies within the human self, but unfortunately

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<sup>673</sup> Murray, *Anthology*, 14-15.

<sup>674</sup> Alondra Yvette Oubré, *Instinct and Revelation: Reflections on the origins of numinous perception* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1997). 111.

<sup>675</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" in Alexander W. Alison, et al., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* third edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 1000 – 1012.

and unhappily, some are unable to help themselves either through ignorance, incapacity or fragmentation of identity. Wright's line, "seventy years are hived in him / like old honey,"<sup>676</sup> is just such a wonderful example identifying one human harbinger of wisdom for identifying salvation within human experience because the accumulated wisdom of the human race is stored up in such persons of insight. Such trusted ones are our seers and poets.

Such an emphasis on persons as agents of salvation puts a firm focus on finding those "angels" in times of crises. Salvation's arrival tests sincerity. For instance, the townspeople in Murray's "The Burning Truck"<sup>677</sup> are the sole interpreters of their fate. Their search for wisdom is tested in that mysterious event. In such poems about catastrophe, use of opportunity judges actions. Times of crisis show up the fragility of social structures to meet them. Only people bearing hope and trust, the dream of salvation, cry out for their saviour.

In our incarnational definition, salvation is gradually won through human acts. With good will and insight, such acts are guided by the presence of God, who loves men and women when they serve the human world in accord with the divine plan. The study also notes that salvation is achieved only by a conscious turning towards that world in ethical actions. The focus poems note how ethical actions build for salvation, or in other words, they are inspired by divine grace.<sup>678</sup> Finally, salvation is both a present reality and a future conditional. Faith tells that salvation is conditional upon an enduring faith in the saviour, for "the man who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22). The chosen examples show how responsible human agents bring about future possibilities.

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<sup>676</sup> Judith Wright, "South of My Days" line 16, *C.P.*, 20.

<sup>677</sup> Murray, "The Burning Truck" *C.P. 1961-2002*, 1.

<sup>678</sup> Aidan Nichols O.P., *Epiphany: A theological introduction to Catholicism*, Ch. 6: "The Nature of Salvation" 3 [on-line] available: [www.christendom-awake.org/pages/anichols/epiphany/epiphch6-2.htm](http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/anichols/epiphany/epiphch6-2.htm) [2003 August 5].

#### Virtue 8: accountable actions

The eighth virtue for salvation educed from reading the poems is making actions accountable. Incarnational theology drives Christians to mission, to serve the human family in love by working out that redemption in the present age as creation's fulfilment. Faith in a saving God derives from confidence in the defining power of the resurrection of Jesus to transform this world. To be genuinely saving, actions need to be accountable and change agents need to be accountable to conscience, to the community, guided by the ten commandments, inspired by the Schillebeeckx constants and won in love. Salvation is surely won by those who believe in "the God of our salvation" (Ps 65:5, 68:20).

#### Virtue 9: non-violence

The ninth virtue for gaining salvation is non-violence. These poems envisage that respect, cooperation and harmony will replace neglect, discord, division and anarchy. Certainly, salvation's latent heat is unleashed in the praxis of its implementation. The poetic images show purposive operations between spirit and body, between reason and emotion in an enduring accordance between aims and operations towards "the teapot of calm."<sup>679</sup> The non-violent dreamtime of salvation restores harmony through non-violent means. The metaphor of Eden's garden elaborates this aesthetic dimension of non-violent harmony through many subtle levels to do with coherence, order and mutual interdependence. As non-violence to persons, salvation is the restitution of true liberty.

#### Virtue 10: seek newness

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<sup>679</sup> Murray, "Toward the Imminent Days" line 72, *C.P.1961-2002*, 39.

The tenth virtue for salvation is the desire for indestructibly permanent newness, for ending obsolescence and the tarnish of wear and tear. To speak generally, salvation brings a decisive newness, purpose instead of entropy, and extending human life into the infinity of ever-available freshness. In the poems, salvation celebrates “the *is-full ah!ness* of things.”<sup>680</sup> My readings show that salvation is being realised in the ordinary actions of the universe; it does not arrive in high epiphany. That unique sacramental source of salvation, the eucharistic feast, ritualises these ordinary processes of regeneration and renewal, foretasting the final reunion and reintegration.

In summary, these ten virtues, the gifts of self-awareness, clear-sightedness, responsible freedom, hope and optimism, the dreaming vision, honouring the saviour, yearning for fulfilment and completion, being accountable to the divine plan, non-violence, and the desire for permanent newness present key themes for winning salvation. Such key images comprise a fresher discourse about salvation. They describe salvation as being a daily task, and at the same time as “a non-violent dreamtime where no one living has been.”<sup>681</sup>

#### vii. Five major conclusions

The next section reviews the worth and relevance of the dissertation through five major conclusions about salvation. They demonstrate the dissertation meeting its three primary aims: to show how the poetic images make salvation topical; that familiar imagery supplies fresh rhetoric about salvation; and that poetic images supply enhanced theological understandings upon salvation.

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<sup>680</sup> Murray, “Recourse to the Wilderness” line 71, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 26.

<sup>681</sup> Murray, “On the Present Slaughter of Feral Animals” line 30, *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1996, 1997), 42, and *Collected Poems 2002*, 408.



## 1. Enhanced theological understandings

My first conclusion is that some images of the natural world, such as the bud, rain, song, the egg's arc and the gift ungiven, considerably enhance understandings about objective salvation. The poetic analogies achieve aesthetic displacements. Wright and Malouf imaged the experience of life and self-awareness as a gift. Having them brings salvation, for life's right direction is growth and fulfilment of human potentials. Wright's restorative images, "the undreamed-of rain"<sup>682</sup> and the sap rising within analogise ordered development, for they suggest that total suffusion of life from its core through to every limb and leaf. The birds' eggs' "serenity of shape"<sup>683</sup> offers a saving symbol of order in the universe, an aesthetic appreciation that recognises and affirms the beautiful cosmos that is creation. These natural models grant access to embodied transcendence over ugly chaos, misery and suffering. Wright's celebration of grace is certainly aiming at more than verbal style; it seeks to identify what gives meaning and direction to biological life. These potent images grant enhanced theological understandings.

As tactile images, poetic images considerably enhance understandings about objective salvation. Poets are not merchants trading for what they crave; Heidegger notes their altruism: "The song of these singers is neither solicitation nor trade."<sup>684</sup> The poet's language properly works in the "precinct" of the heart, that is the *locus* of repentance. Murray's warm rain is a rich image of rescue, of relief from the long, dry wait through drought. Rain images restoration of physical life for the land, psychological refreshment for the inhabitants and economic prosperity for the rural communities. In Murray, ritual activates saving communication between humans, connecting them to the human

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<sup>682</sup> Wright, "Rain at Night" line8, *C.P.*, 89.

<sup>683</sup> Wright, "Eggs and Nestlings," lines 7-8, 15-16, *C.P.* 162-3.

<sup>684</sup> Heidegger, *Poets*, 138.

family, to history, and to the numinous aspects of lives. These various images embody desire for fulfilment.

As a profoundly developed aesthetic healing, salvation is learnt in the flesh. Relevantly in Malouf's fictions, readers follow vectors of good deeds and trace trajectories of bad intentions in the imagination. In his stories, characters come to terms with life's eventualities. If "embarrassing silences in our culture can be starting points . . . for a spirituality based on a sense of the self,"<sup>685</sup> how much more effective will be self-chosen silences, exploring the dynamics of self-transcendence and the movement to what is more, sublime and saving? In Ovid's musings on mortality, Malouf's readers gain some intimations of immortality: "I was finished with the dead. Free, at last, to prepare a death of my own."<sup>686</sup>

Ovid's fictionalised experience dramatises salvation's transformations. Malouf's Ovid seems to infer, nay presume, a tug of immortality in its "continuance of things."<sup>687</sup> His Ovid epitomises many ever-replenishing possibilities for the human spirit: "we are in process of becoming . . . beginning, as always, with what is simple."<sup>688</sup> Those dynamics of self-transcendence in the particulars of life enhance significant understandings about objective salvation.

I have shown that poems offer relevant images of restoration, redemption, rescue and regeneration from the many different, crippling slaveries that abound today. Since poetry discourses from the margins on thought and action, it offers authentic views from under or from outside events, such as the battler's view, the common person's view and

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<sup>685</sup> Anthony J. Kelly, "Praxis and pragmatism in an Australian theology" *The Australian Catholic Record* xxi, no. 3 (July 1994), 200, 202.

<sup>686</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 47.

<sup>687</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 54.

<sup>688</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 32.

the victim's view. Wright and Murray echo the same benign optimism and compassionate faith, calling readers to envisage a better, completed world. Along with Malouf, they show that any shallow rhetoric of happiness, bourgeois contentment or escapist romanticism does not substitute for solutions of justice, imaged in motifs of rescue, healing, righting wrongs, reconciliation, minority recognition, inclusiveness, transforming social praxis or prophetic calls to resistance and persevering hope.

My first conclusion then, is that strong images of salvation appear in appreciations of gifts, such as ethical awareness in Malouf, regeneration and grace in Wright, and rain and ritual in Murray. For poetry's intensities excite salvation's possibilities, and poetic revelations release salvation's promise.

## 2. Images convey cultural wisdom

My second major conclusion is that both learnt and inherited wisdom bring salvation. It is based on the advanced theological insight in the Book of Wisdom<sup>689</sup> that recognises the link between creation and salvation. In the Old Testament, the same elements that save the Israelites and define them as saved are those that define the non-saved. The difference is the application of wisdom. By means of actions upon created things (e.g., water, blood, animals), God punishes the wicked who persecute and enslave, and by this same action, turns the same things into the means for saving his people. The waters of the Nile are turned into blood to signify their rescue and to plague the Egyptians, yet in the desert, water springs from the rock under the rod of Moses:

For creation, serving you who made it,  
exerts itself to punish the unrighteous,

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<sup>689</sup> Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Spirituality: A spirituality for liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 156-158.

and in kindness relaxes on behalf of those who trust in you (Wis. 16:24).

So possessing wisdom defines the different fates of the righteous and saved: “for through the very things by which their enemies were punished, they themselves received benefit in their need” (Wis 11:5). Wisdom lies in the indissoluble link between God’s creation and salvation. In the New Testament too, salvation is seen in wiser outcomes: “Thus, you will know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:15-20). Poetic images give cultural substance to these desired outcomes.

Today, the same logic holds. The possession of God’s gift of wisdom identifies those who are being saved. Those who have accepted God’s wisdom use the gifts of creation to win their salvation. Rather than misuse, abuse or exploit them, and make others servile in transactions over them, those who are winning salvation guided by wisdom seek to liberate peoples. This learnt wisdom is also an excellent basis for implementing incarnational or embodied salvation. The way to transform human actions into saving actions is to respect the gifts of the earth and one another.

Thus, in the change of attitude, from being selfish, exploitative and willful, to deferring to wisdom in being guided, collaborative, conservative and regenerative, one pursues salvation. Malouf’s insight that the humans need to honour the earth’s biodiversity is a saving wisdom. Murray’s numinous insight saves, for it grasps the golden basis in ordinary life, for all experience is infused with (divine, significant) radiance. This numinous insight should not be confused with narrowspeak sophistication. It was the animals’ wisdom to “discern a [fellow] water-walker” at the animal nativity. That numinous grasp also understands that what is, is actually a fact at all. Numinous wisdom grasps the world in Wholespeak holism.

Wright's supreme source of wisdom lies in the "the reverence of the heart."<sup>690</sup> For her, it is wiser to model nature's simplicity. Her calls for Aboriginal reconciliation and repair of environmental erosion comprise saving wisdom for the nation. Such transcendence is always possible. For all things work together for those who are good – the event of creation, the workings of nature, the directionality of evolution, and the possibility of transcendence over sin and ugliness.

### 3. Honesty about human contingency

My third major finding is that the poets articulate pathways to salvation in honesty about human contingency. At the most basic level, there is salvation in accepting life as a gift - the experience itself, as something given, unchosen, a contingency daily taken to maintain and protect, and alas, a gift some throw away in despair. When life is gratefully received, salvation is possible. Wright images such profound acceptance: "I feel the green, the sap that moves within me"<sup>691</sup> and elsewhere, "How do I recognise / life's squirming throb and wave? / Alive. Like my eyes. Alive."<sup>692</sup> Indeed, "motes from his hand's delight / crowded earth, water, air / the whole Creation is an ancient testament"<sup>693</sup> of God's loving promise to bring salvation to his creation. Humans ought to admit their contingency. To do so is to accept the gift of salvation.

Our human view of God is very limited as is the human capacity to be honest. Pertinently, David Tracy notes, "Every human understanding of God is at the same time

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<sup>690</sup> "Lyrebirds" lines 19-21, *C.P.*, 176.

<sup>691</sup> "The Flood" IV, line 11, in *C.P.* 43. Many other poems focus on the sap as metonymic of life itself, e.g., "sap, the upward weave of blood" line 4, "Metamorphosis" 217, and "this fountain of hot joy" line 15 "Flame-tree in a Quarry" *C.P.* 60.

<sup>692</sup> Lines 7, 12, 27 "Alive" (1973), *C.P.* 320.

<sup>693</sup> Lines 21, 22 and 77, 78 (inverted) "Creation - Annihilation", *C.P.*, 370, 372.

an understanding of oneself and vice versa.”<sup>694</sup> Despite these limitations, humans are prone to trick themselves. Yet in creation a tree “is forever tree,” that is, it is true to its nature, ever itself. At peace with its landscape, the eucalypt “commits no excesses.”<sup>695</sup> Perennially, Wright urges profound honesty and acceptance: “Be simple to myself as the bird is to the bird.”<sup>696</sup> This is “the forgotten logic of nature.”<sup>697</sup> Honesty about human contingency is pivotal, even the earth seems to possess knowledge we cannot access:

Everything except language  
knows the meaning of existence.  
Trees, planets, rivers, time  
know nothing else. They express it  
moment by moment as the universe.<sup>698</sup>

Honesty about human contingency gains the virtue of equanimity that is “of infinite detailed extent / like God’s attention”<sup>699</sup> and a “continuous recovering moment.”<sup>700</sup> In honesty, readers of poetic images access the numinous, that is “the ordinary mail of the otherworld, wholly common / not postmarked divine.”<sup>701</sup> Honesty and humility grant the “map of Earth’s fertile soils”<sup>702</sup> where one can “be merry with farms”<sup>703</sup> and “walk knee-deep in ferns.”<sup>704</sup> Those pursuing clear-sightedness are granted wisdom; they are “conscripted to storm the house of meaning.”<sup>705</sup> In this virtue, salvation is a tangible mystery on earth, of continuous extent, and infinitely recoverable. In various images in the poems, my readings show how honesty about human contingency risks salvation.

<sup>694</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 429.

<sup>695</sup> Wright, “The Eucalypt and the National Character” line 17, *C.P.*, 362.

<sup>696</sup> Wright, “Birds” line 20, *C.P.*, 86.

<sup>697</sup> Wright, “The Flood” III line 10, *C.P.*, 42.

<sup>698</sup> Murray, “The Meaning of Existence,” lines 1-5, *Learning Human* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2003), 199.

<sup>699</sup> Murray, “Equanimity” line 58 *C.P. 1961-2002*, 180.

<sup>700</sup> Murray, “Equanimity” line 33 *C.P. 1961-2002*, 179.

<sup>701</sup> Murray, line 8, “First Essay on Interest” *C.P. 1961-2002*, 166.

<sup>702</sup> Murray, “Pascal” *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 49.

<sup>703</sup> Murray, “Toward the Imminent Days” line 65, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>704</sup> Murray, “Noonday Axeman” line 63, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1965), 33 and *C.P. 1961-2002*, 5.

<sup>705</sup> Murray, “An Immortal” line 16, *C.P. 1961-2002*, 201.

#### 4. Poetic images convey acceptance

A fourth major conclusion is that winning salvation lies in accepting life's forces, processes and cycles, believing that life's forces do reach their neat and "sweet completion."<sup>706</sup> The plenteous rain calms life's restlessness to leave "a soaked earth left bare / to drink its light in peace."<sup>707</sup> The mollusc's serenity and equipoise images the purposive and creative presence of its creator. Malouf in "the sadness of the flesh,"<sup>708</sup> suggests that a wider framework is needed for understanding life in its corporality. Salvation's potential stirs conversion to fresh identities.

#### 5. Poetic images demonstrate real transformations

My fifth major conclusion is the need for and possibility of personal and social transformation, and so images of salvation naturally cluster round the theme of transformation. Images of salvation grant glimpses of newness, freedom and liberation; indeed, these glimpses begin newness, freedom and liberation. Wright deftly recounts the process of creating a new identity in colonial society in her early poem, "Remittance Man."<sup>709</sup> She shows that transformation is not a fairytale or a dream. She outlines the reality of "the more difficult agony of rebirth"<sup>710</sup> in real transformations in *The Gateway* (1953), including that unique call to the son of man to be God, for "the flesh is slave of accident or pain"<sup>711</sup> Murray dramatises this gift of cleansing transformation in the man weeping in the street in "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow." Malouf marks the

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<sup>706</sup> Wright, line 23 "The Nautilus" *C.P.*, 187.

<sup>707</sup> Wright, "Dry Storm" lines 21-22, *C.P.*, 191.

<sup>708</sup> Malouf, "The Martyrdom in Room Fourteen" line 11, *First Things Last*, 4.

<sup>709</sup> Judith Wright, "Remittance Man." *C.P.*, 10, and *Five Senses*, 6.

<sup>710</sup> Line 93 "Transformations." *C.P.* 78.

<sup>711</sup> Line 48, "Transformations," *C.P.*, 77.

poet's change of ethical stance in "The Crab Feast" as the "tug to immortality."

In practical terms, that social transformation appears in Murray's longed-for "convergence", his word for the integration or fusion of Australia's three main cultures, white, rural and Aboriginal. This dream espouses Schillebeeckx's constants three and four: the connection with social and institutional structures and the conditioning of peoples and culture in time and space. Social transformation means to right wrongs, to "unmask ensnared freedoms" (Sartre).<sup>712</sup> Wright's recipe for real changes of attitude appears in "Old House" ("heard them with one part of his mind"),<sup>713</sup> "Two Dreamtimes" ("we the robbers robbed in turn . . . a knife's between us"),<sup>714</sup> and "For a Pastoral Family" ("corruptions one cannot endorse").<sup>715</sup> Viable transformations realise salvation here and now.

Malouf's Ovid also demonstrates the real possibility of personal transformation:

These recoveries, as of a motif  
scattered and reformed out of itself,  
are the old life re-invented.<sup>716</sup>

Any such recoveries address the needs of the old life; salvation is its motif. These found images of salvation express a transformative vision to unmask ensnared freedoms. That dynamic has eschatological resonances and purpose.

In summary this section comprising five major conclusions clusters round five key words: understanding, wisdom, honesty, acceptance and transformation. Reading key images, such as consciousness, rain, growth, serenity, song and imagination permits

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<sup>712</sup> Sartre, J.P. *Situations II* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948), 58.

<sup>713</sup> Wright, "Old House" line 20, *C.P.*, 82.

<sup>714</sup> Wright, "Two Dreamtimes" lines 31, 56. *C.P.* 415.

<sup>715</sup> Wright, "For a Pastoral Family" line 7, *C.P.* 406.

<sup>716</sup> Malouf, "Ode" *First Things Last*, 54.



access to the power and benefits of saving awareness and understanding. They say that to have wisdom is the sure pathway to salvation. To be honest about human contingency grounds a pathway to salvation and to aim at transformation is to pursue salvation. A consideration of images of salvation generates virtues for the current age, with mandates about directions and actions that build up the human family. These five key catalysts to salvation summarise my poetic readings.

#### viii. Poetic discourses upon salvation

Ultimately, to speak is to utter metaphor, for language subsists in metaphors. All imagery, allusions and referentiality is bought, borrowed or learnt from lived experiences. Speech and language then can never be univocal. Since speech is metaphor, it cannot limit connotation to strict denotation. Scientific language may strive to do so but metaphor brings an excess of connotation. In discussing the cognitive force of metaphor, Kittay notes how metaphor beings with it an excess of connotation: “Metaphor presents possibilities not evident without it. . . [Even] are the less salient properties of the vehicle [are] utilized in metaphor.”<sup>717</sup> Poetry brings with it such an abundance of meanings and connotations that it most usefully supports discourses upon salvation.

To treat salvation as a metaphor then is to explore its concomitant possibilities. Rather than treat salvation solely as a poetic term in religious language however, salvation is also a fact of existence, complementary with creation. Salvation connotes a great many more meanings than it names. Because faith holds that the world is being saved, salvation is not just a metaphor. If salvation is a fact of faith, it cannot be neglected as

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<sup>717</sup> Kittay, *Metaphor*, 210.

vague, remote, indefensible, irrelevant and incomprehensible. Indeed, salvation discourses from this vision as a prescription for the cure of the world's perennial ache.

The study has shown that salvation as imaged in poetry connotes possibilities for on-going moral maturation in the human story. This study considers some poems as starting points for fresh discourses on the theme of salvation. For the term salvation encompasses both the saving of the world and the necessary inward change of heart that makes it possible. While I select poems projecting happier possibilities, yet all poems are about possibilities.<sup>718</sup> The poetic images are occasions for intimations about salvation. Salvation describes human life as a map in a journey with a destination and an agenda of responsibility for one another. Poetry images some of that faith's social discourses.

Salvation's discourse gives definition, shape, form and vision to the human story. Salvation is about depth of horizons; it fuses human dreams and divine possibilities. Salvation is like a panoramic view of history: it maps out the longitudes of hope across the latitudes of despair. Salvation energises effort out of the doldrums of doubt. Salvation's constants trace boundaries for what is human. Salvation triangulates the human reality with its beginning and goal, from its creator to its judge. Salvation's global scope projects possibilities, probabilities and outcomes to orient humans to goals of fulfilment, responsibility and harmony. Salvation promises that everything will be put right at last; its certainty reinstates hope in this era of corrosive doubt. Salvation reconstructs the remnants of promise from despair, anarchy and mindless drift to give a sure hope and shape to history. Salvation reveals the divine-with-human matrix, and it mandates faith's praxis with history. Salvation codes human lives with worth and

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<sup>718</sup> Thom Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 107 talking of Jonson's "willed, conscious and rational arrangement of a life."

infuses them with optimistic meaning. Poetic images can support these discourses.

The study shows that poetry may discourse upon a theological theme, through elaborating on life. Scripture teaches that God is “a mighty saviour,” who grants “a knowledge of salvation” (Lk 1:69, 77). The Good News is a gift that brings “the day of salvation,” a *dies salutis*, the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2a,b). It is a daily gift of newness. In this way, St. Paul reminds readers that salvation has already begun in the here and now. Similarly, a poet finds enhanced awareness in the events of life. For the poet broaching the numinous, ordinary events are mysterious and revelatory. “Mollusc” celebrates right function and relationships in the natural world and “Equanimity” celebrates the universal right to grace in the human world.

The study shows how poetic images access the intersection of ordinary and extraordinary, best revealed in human tears and suffering, as shown in “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow,” and when joy, freedom and salvation come with “The Quality of Sprawl” in a liberation from human seriousness and restriction. Poetry captures our world as in a mirror, and faith perceives God’s immanence in discoveries of grace.

It shows poetry’s unique modalities convey the unexplainable in life. Murray’s poetical forms convey robust messages. This is proletarian poetry: accessible, vernacular and part of the prosaic tapestry of everyday life. Murray’s special voice is his role as seer of saving attitudes and events. He shows that poetry is the best genre to explore the meanings attached to mysterious events like salvation.

In these particular discourses, ordinary experience is shot through with the fire of divinity or, as Wright observed, life is, “the play of opposites, their interpenetration -

there's the reality, the fission and the fusion.”<sup>719</sup> Poetry discourses upon salvation when it images cosmic impacts on the human and natural world such as in the ironic plainness of “Animal Nativity.” Murray's ordinary betokens the extraordinary being achieved.

Poetic discourses demonstrate the perennial virtues. Murray's figure of the weeping man is an excellent chiasm of the divine in the ordinary. “The Quality of Sprawl” defines generosity and spontaneity as vectors to salvation. Sprawl goes beyond expectations harmlessly, generously and unpredictably. Generosity is a sign of God, for salvation is granted now in qualities like this. The metaphor of the burning truck suggests that ambiguity, uncertainty and the dilemma of the unexplained are part of life's journey towards salvation. Overall then, Murray's “substantial inspired imaginings”<sup>720</sup> show that pre-eminently, Schillebeeckx's anthropological constants of salvation mandate our embodied relationship with nature in the universe.

To be discourse, poetic imagery is not moral or didactic but illuminative, by which I mean that being situated within a faith framework, it reads reality in a theological way. It does not strive to extol, persuade or impose, but more generously throws light upon the ambiguities, helplessness, ignorance or positives that life throws up. Poetry of salvation finds ready contiguities with the divine, and touches belief with brief contacts of blue hope.

Murray's poetry is seen to discourse upon theological themes through elaborating on life. The discussion finds that the numinous framework suffusing Murray's poetry is an excellent access at the interface of the poetic arts and the Gospel message.

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<sup>719</sup> Wright, “Patterns” lines 1-8, from *The Shadow of Fire* (1985), *C.P.* (1994), 426.

<sup>720</sup> Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 189.

Finally, I pay my grateful tribute to the three poets. Judith Wright's career spanning several decades of the century records many of its anxieties. Her wonderful insights and bold spirit must inspire readers in the new century. Her enchanting observations on fauna and flora, that elegant metaphysic that gives meaning to biological life, and her passionate advocacy for national responsibility are more needed than ever. The discordant joy of her poems still tantalises and intrigues me. She shows that hope and desire are not cruel tricks or ironic habits as she moves through questions of intimacy, identity, death and rebirth.

Meeting Les Murray at a book signing (at Brisbane's Judith Wright Centre on Judith Wright's own writing desk) was a moment to remember. His infectious enthusiasm and optimism are sure prompts to reading his poems. I have been very enriched by reading and sharing his work with my students. Because his work offers accessibility and difficulty at the same time, I believe it will endure. His open-hearted spirituality is a untapped cultural resource for younger generations searching to integrate faith with the natural world.

David Malouf enchants me. Reading his published works has uniquely enriched me as a man and a Christian. One understands his fiction better for reading his poems. I come back to *Remembering Babylon* as his hallmark work in its empathy for the underdog and for reflecting on the value of everyday lives and actions. As inspirational writing, *An Imaginary Life* will always be a classic of English literature for its haunting landscapes and as a poignant memoir of transformation. These three Australian voices dare us to care for an inclusive society. They wonderfully pioneer and retrieve experience, and show the enormous power of words and ideas. How can I thank them enough for their poems?

To close this section on poetry and religion, I repeat that poetry supplies many strong images of salvation. Reading poetry is both emotive and cognitive: the thoughts take us beyond pleasure as the devices delight and challenge us. Poetry leads beyond delight and challenge to insight, to emotional refreshment and to some sense of transcendence over the present. The poet's eye and the poet's tongue speak about this theological mystery with many compelling valencies.

ix. From mystery to praxis

Objective salvation focuses on the righting of wrongs, in racial reconciliation, minority recognition, societal inclusiveness, transforming social praxis and especially in the prophetic call to resistance and hope. This dissertation on images of salvation is offered in the spirit of "meekness and fear" (I Peter 3:16), that is, with truthfulness, realism and courage. It strives to plot an enduring respect for differences through plotting the positive dialectic of salvation's interaction with history. May its publication encourage other writers with more intuitive insights for plotting the retrieval of *alterity* as the primary metaphor of Christian discourse. May it encourage other researchers who may "still find the limitless country / Too near for speech."<sup>721</sup> For salvation makes sense of death and the unknown. I trust these images of salvation have articulated the mystery of the gift of salvation.

Theological language readily benefits from the tropes of poetry because that rhetoric discourses on thought and action. Because salvation is expressed there as an embodied idea, that conceptualization relates to readers' aches for transcendence and completion.

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<sup>721</sup> Murray, "The Fire Autumn" *The Ilex Tree* (1965), quoted in Dianne Ailwood, "The Poetry of Les Murray" *Southerly* 31, no. 3 (1971), 190.

For example, Ovid's reflections in *An Imaginary Life*<sup>722</sup> seem especially relevant to contribute to a revised rhetoric about salvation:

What else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become?

This rhetoric of salvation both drives and draws readers to winning fulfilment through instances of taking responsibility:

Our bodies are not final. We are moving, all of us, in our common humankind . . . Slowly, and with pain, over centuries, we each move an infinitesimal space towards it. We are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god.<sup>723</sup>

There are few prerequisites for receiving salvation, except a good and true heart, right relationships and radical honesty to self. In distilling experience, the selected poems offer insights about the richer potentialities of optimism, honesty and belief in human possibilities and contest their negative opposites.

#### x. Review

The investigation espaliers ten images and five virtues as major conclusions about pathways to salvation. Analysis and comparison of the content and style of these poems illustrates salvation in different clusters of images. Salvation comes as the gifts of life, self-awareness, health and freedom. As optimism, it is regenerative salvation; as access to the numinous, it restores insight and transcendence. Remarkable individuals author salvations. To be called salvation, a transformation must be holistic. Harmony, fruition, abundance and plenitude betoken the *eucatastrophe* of salvation (to coin a phrase). Finally, reading the poems images that personal and social transformations are desirable

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<sup>722</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (Woollahra: Picador Pan, 1978), 135.

<sup>723</sup> Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 29.

and possible.

The discussion establishes that literary artefacts have greater worth when recognised by inhabitants of the literary and the theological cultures, for revealing refreshing insights that raise affectivity. Some poems do heighten meaning to image universal, salvational themes. Clearly, there are many other expressions of salvation. Other liberations may come to mind; liberation from colonisation or political oppression is just not, for instance, an Australian experience.

Finally, I hope that this dissertation becomes an impetus for future, similar and even wider interdisciplinary readings in this emergent domain of contextual theology. I hope that others will further explore the provocative implications of salvation. This study now comes to an end, but may the interdisciplinary endeavour continue growing by contextualising faith within their own literary cultures. That enculturation, that bridge-building between faith and culture, will always continue Church's missionary outreach to an increasingly pluralistic culture. That effort will always help the causes of both the academy and faith community.

In conclusion, the study bridges the secular and sacred towards a wider theological discourse. Naturally, poetry focuses on events (physical, virtual, remembered or fictional) but also broaches their significances. The study seeks to explore significances analogically derived from this great theological theme or, as one Australian theologian defines it, "shows a sensitivity to that deep level of consciousness where integrity is formed."<sup>724</sup> These Australian verses bring an authentic and insightful sincerity and refreshment to undergird that integrity faith names as salvation. # THE END

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<sup>724</sup> Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990; 1991), 13.



## Appendix 1: Poetry by Judith Wright

### THE WATTLE-TREE

The tree knows four truths---  
 earth, water, air and the fire of the sun.  
 The tree holds four truths in one.  
 Root, limb and leaf unfold  
 out of the seed, and these rejoice  
 till the tree dreams it has a voice  
 to join four truths in one great word of gold.

---Oh that I knew that word!  
 I should cry loud, louder than any bird.  
 O let me live for ever, I would cry,  
 For that word makes immortal what would wordless die;  
 and perfectly, and passionately,  
 welds love and time into the seed,  
 till tree renews itself and is for ever tree----

Then upward from the earth  
                                     and from the water,  
 Then inward from the air  
                                     and the cascading light  
 poured gold, till the tree trembled with its flood.

Now from the world, four elements I make  
 my immortality; it shapes within the bud.  
 Yes, now I bud, and now at last I break  
 into the truth I had no voice to speak;  
 into a million images of the Sun, my God.

Judith Wright, *The Two Fires* (1955). In *Judith Wright Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1993, 2002), 142. Hereafter *C.P.*

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### FOR PRECISION

Yet I go on from day to day, betraying  
 the core of light, the depth of darkness –  
 my speech inexact, the note not right,  
 never quite sure what I am saying –

on the periphery of truth. Uphold me now,  
 pure colours, blacks, whites, bells on the central tone,  
 middays, midnights. I wander among the cross-lights.  
 Let me be sure and economical as the rayed  
 suns, stars, flowers, wheels; let me fall as a gull, a hawk,

through the confusions of foggy talk,  
 and pin with one irremediable stroke –  
 what? – the escaping wavering wandering light,

the blur, the brilliance; forming into one chord  
 what's separate and distracted; making the vague hard-  
 catching the wraith- speaking with a pure voice,  
 and that the gull's sole note like a steel nail  
 that driven through cloud, sky, and irrelevant seas,  
 joins all, gives all meaning, makes all whole.

Judith Wright, in *Five Senses* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 97.

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Section from CAMPHOR LAUREL *C.P.*, 35

Under the house the roots go deep,  
 down, down, while the sleepers sleep;  
 splitting the rock where the house is set,  
 cracking the paved and broken street,  
 Old Tim turns and old Sam groans,  
 "God be good to my breaking bones";  
 and in the slack of tireless night  
 the tree breathes honey and moonlight.

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Selection from ELI, ELI in *C.P.*, 44.

to see them go by drowning in the river- / . . . /  
 that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him . . . .  
 To hold the invisible wand and not to save them/ . . . /  
 this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him . . . .  
 To hold out love . . . and faith/  
 and knew they dared not take it/  
 . . . betrayed him.

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From GRACE *C.P.*, 331

Living is dailiness, a simple bread  
 that's worth the eating. But I have known a wine,  
 a drunkenness that cannot be spoken or sung  
 without betraying it. Far past Yours or Mine,  
 even past Ours, it has nothing at all to say:  
 it slants a sudden laser through common day.

It seems to have nothing to do with things at all,  
 requires another element or dimension,  
 Not contemplation brings it; it merely happens.  
 past expectation and beyond intention:  
 takes over the depth of flesh, the inward eye,  
 is there, then vanishes. Does not live or die,  
 because it occurs beyond the here and now,  
 positives, negatives, what we hope and are  
 Not even being in love, or making love,

brings it. It plunges a sword from a dark star.

Maybe there was once a word for it. Call it grace,  
I have seen it, once or twice, though a human face.

by Judith Wright from *Alive* (1973) in *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (2002) 331.

From DRY STORM (lines 17-22) *C.P.*, 190:

O ease our restlessness, Wild wandering dark,  
vague hurrying depths of storm, pause and be full,  
and thrust your fullness into our desire  
till time release us, till we sleep. And wake  
to a cool sky and a soaked earth left bare  
to drink its light in peace.

#### THE EUCALYPT AND THE NATIONAL CHARACTER

Yes, we do perceive her as sprawling and informal;  
even dishevelled, disorderly. That may be because  
we are still of two minds about militarism and class-systems.  
When we are informal, we're half afraid of bad form.  
She, on the other hand, follows a delicate bent  
of her own. Worn by such aeons, dried by such winds,  
she has learned to be flexible, spare, flesh close to the bone.

Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,  
she leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,  
symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends  
whip-supple, pivoting, loose, with a minimal mass.  
She can wait grimly for months to break into flower  
or willingly bloom in a day when the weather is right.  
Meagre, careless, indifferent? With the toughest care,  
the most economical tenderness, she provides for seed and egg.

Nor is she ever vulgar; she commits no excesses.  
Her various gestures surround our pine plantations,  
those fat green regiments that gobble our noble hills,  
letting no light through, bearing no flowers. She is all light,  
breathes in the noonday as lovers their lovers' breath.  
We darken her sky with our cities.  
She is artist enough to manage a graceful asymmetry;  
but we are more apt to turn crooks.

From *Fourth Quarter* (1976) in *Judith Wright Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 2002), 362.

## WOMAN TO CHILD

You who were darkness warmed my flesh  
 Where out of darkness rose the seed.  
 Then all a world I made in me;  
 all the world you hear and see  
 hung upon my dreaming blood.

There moved the multitudinous stars  
 and coloured birds and fishes moved.  
 There swam the sliding continents.  
 All time lay rolled in me, and sense,  
 and love that knew not its beloved.

O node and focus of the world;  
 I hold you deep within that well  
 you shall escape and not escape-  
 that mirrors still your sleeping shape;  
 that nurtures still your crescent cell.

I wither and your break from me;  
 yet though you dance in living light  
 I am the earth, I am the root,  
 I am the stem that fed the fruit,  
 the link that joins you to the night.

From *Woman to Man* (1949) in *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, 28-9.

## WOMAN TO MAN

The eyeless labourer in the night,  
 the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,  
 builds for its resurrection day-  
 silent and swift and deep from sight  
 foresees the unimagined light.

This is no child with a child's face;  
 this has no name to name it by  
 yet you and I have known it well.  
 This is our hunter and our chase,  
 the third who lay in our embrace.

This is the strength that your arm knows,  
 the arc of flesh that is my breast,  
 the precise crystals of our eyes,  
 this is the blood's wild tree that grows  
 the intricate and folded rose.

This is the maker and the made;  
 this is the question and reply;  
 the blind head butting in the dark,  
 the blaze of light along the blade.  
 Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

From *Woman to Man* (1949) in *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, 27.

## WAITING

Day's crystal hemisphere travels the land.  
 From starfrost to starfrost the folded hills lie bare  
 and the sheep move grazing or stand.  
 How can the sirens of danger pierce this air?  
 Only the parrots exploding in green and scarlet  
 shatter its glass for their shrill moment's flight.  
 From the houses on the hill the small smoke rises  
 in patterns of vague peace from dawn to night.

But the circling days weave tighter, and the spider  
 Time binds us helpless till his sting go in.  
 Moving in a dazed routine, we hardly wonder  
 what hour ahead waits with a basilisk grin.  
 Only the radio, like a seashell held to the ear,  
 gives back the echo of our own blood's fever;  
 its confused voices like the body's urgent warning  
 of a disease that it may not recover.

Oh, let time be only the monster of a dream,  
 the sick distortion of minds anaestherised;  
 let time be only the calm surgeon, deciding  
 our cancer is not mortal, can be excised.  
 But past our prayers we know only ourselves  
 have choice or power to make us whole again;  
 time lifts no knives to heal or to destroy,  
 and did not cause, and cannot cure, our pain.

All that times gives is the crystal hour of waiting  
 through which we travel, listening to the radio  
 turn back ourselves upon us; our own Iscariots,  
 we know the agony we do not know.  
 The witchball hour returns the twisted face  
 of what we are; oh, let our weeping be  
 amendment for these lives, and make us whole  
 in man and time, who build eternity.

From *The Moving Image* (1946) *Collected Poems 1942-1985*, 9-10.

## Appendix 2: Poetry by Les Murray

### AN IMMORTAL

Beckoner of hotheads, brag-tester, lord of the demi-suicides,  
 in only one way since far before Homer have you altered:  
 when now, on wry wheels still revolving, the tall dust showers back  
 and tongue-numbing Death stills a screaming among the jagged images,  
 you distain to strip your victims' costly armour, bright with fire and duco,  
 or even to step forth, visible briefly in your delusive harness,  
 glass cubes whirling at your tread, the kinked spear of frenzy in your hand.

Do you appear, though, bodily to your vanquished challengers  
 with the bar face of the boy who was large and quickest at it,  
 the hard face of the boss and the bookie, strangely run together,  
 the face of the expert craftsman, smiling privately, shaking his head?  
 Are you sometimes the Beloved, approaching and receding through the glaze?  
 Or is this all merely cinema? Are your final interviews wholly personal  
 and the bolt eyes disjunct teeth blood-vomit all a kind mask lent by physics?

We will never find out, living. The volunteers, wavering and firm,  
 and the many conscripted to storm the hours of meaning  
 have stayed inside, with the music. Or else they are ourselves,  
 sheepish, reminiscent, unsure how we made it past the Warrior  
 into our lives – which the glory of his wheeled blade has infected  
 so that, on vacant evenings, we may burn with the mystery of his face,  
 his speed, his streetlights pointing every way, his unbelief in joking.

Les Murray, *The People's Otherworld* (1983) in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 200-201.

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### From ANIMAL NATIVITY

The Iliad of peace began  
 when this girl agreed.  
 Now goats in trees, fish in the valley  
 suddenly feel vivid.

Swallows flit in the stable as if  
 a hatchling of their kind,  
 turned human, cried in the manger  
 showing the hunger-diamond.

Cattle are content with this calf  
 must come in human form.  
 Spiders discern a water-walker.  
 Even humans will sense the lamb,

He who frees from, the old poem  
 turtle-dove and snake

who gets death forgiven  
 who puts the apple back.

Dogs, less enslaved but as starving  
 as the poorest humans there  
 crouch, agog at a crux of presence  
 remembered as a star.

From *Translations from the Natural World* (1992). In *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, p. 374.

## MOLLUSC

By its nobship sailing upside down,  
 by its inner sexes, by the crystalline  
 pimplings of its skirts, by the sucked-on  
 lifelong kiss of its toppling motion,  
 by the viscose optics now extruded  
 now wizened instantaneously, by the  
 ridges grating up a food-path, by  
 the pop-shell in its nick of dry,  
 by excretion, the earthworm coils, the glibbering,  
 by the gilt slipway, and by pointing  
 perhaps as far back into time as  
 ahead, a shore being folded interior,  
 by boiling on salt, by coming uncut over  
 a razor's edge, by hiding the Oligocene  
 underleaf may this and every snail sense  
 itself ornament the weave of presence. (16)

Les Murray, *Collected Poems 1961-2002* p. 360.  
 From *Translations from the Natural World* (1992).

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## THE MITCHELLS

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole  
 they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise  
 I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.  
 Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white.

bursaria blossom, under the noon of wattles.  
 The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam  
 box with a handle. One is overheard saying;  
 Drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.

The first man, if asked, would day I'm one of the Mitchells.  
 The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm,  
 and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement,  
 say I'm one of the Mitchells. Of the pair, one has been rich  
 but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything

They say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

Les Murray From *Ethnic Radio* (1977) in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, p. 117

### THE POWERLINE INCARNATION

When I ran to snatch the wires off our roof  
hands bloomed teeth shouted I was almost seized  
held back from this life

O flumes O chariot reins  
You cover me with lurids deck me with gaudies feed  
my coronal a scream sings in the air  
above our dance you slam it to me with farms  
that you dark on and off numb hideous strong friend  
Tooma and Geehi freak and burr through me 10  
rocks fire-trails damwalls mountain-ash trees slew  
to darkness though me I zap them underfoot  
With the swords of my shoes

I am receiving mountains  
piloting around me Crackenback Anembo  
the Fiery Walls I make a hit in towns  
I've never visited: smoke curls lightbulbs pop grey  
discs hitch and slow I plough the face of Mozart  
And Johnny Cash I bury and smooth their song  
I crack it for copper links and fusebox spiders 20  
I call my Friend from the circuitry of mixers  
whipping cream for a birthday I distract the immortal  
Inhuman for hospitals

to sustain my jazz  
and here is Rigel in a glove of flesh  
my starry hand discloses smoke, cold Angel.

Vehicles that run on death come howling into  
our street with lights a thousandth of my blue  
arms keep my wife from my breath from my species  
the jewels in my tips 30

I would accept her in  
blind white remarriage cover her with wealth  
to arrest the heart we'd share Apache leaps  
crying out *Diszygy!*

shield her from me, humans  
from this happiness I burn to share this touch  
sheet car live ladder wildfire garden shrub -  
away off I hear the bombshell breakers thrown  
diminishing me a meaninglessness coming  
over the circuits 40

the god's deserting me  
but I have dived in the mainstream jumped the graphs  
I have transited the dreams of crew-cut boys named Buzz  
and the hardening music



to the big bare place  
 where the strapped down seekers, staining white clothes, come  
 to be shown the Zeitgeist  
 passion and death my skin  
 my heart all logic I am starring there  
 and must soon flame out 50  
 having seen the present god  
 It who feels nothing It who answers prayers

From *Ethnic Radio* (1977) in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 122-3.

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## AN ABSOLUTELY ORDINARY RAINBOW

The word goes round Repins,  
 the murmur goes round Lorenzini's,  
 at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers,  
 the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands  
 and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club:  
 There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile  
 and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk  
 and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets  
 which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing: 10  
 There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches  
 simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps  
 not like a child, not like the wind, like a man  
 and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even  
 sob loudly – yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him  
 in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,  
 and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him  
 stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds 20  
 longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo  
 or force stood around him. There is no such thing.  
 Some will say they were shocked, and would have stopped him  
 but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,  
 the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected  
 judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream  
 who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children  
 and such as look out of Paradise come near him 30  
 and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops  
 his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit –  
 and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand  
 and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;  
 as many as follow her also receive it

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more  
 refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,  
 but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,  
 the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out 40  
 of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,  
 hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea –  
 and when he stops, he simply walks between us  
 mopping his face with the dignity of one  
 man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street. 47

From *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969) in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 28-30.

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#### From THE BULADELAH-TAREE HOLIDAY SONG CYCLE

3.

It is good to come out after driving and walk on bare grass;  
 walking out, looking all around, relearning that country.  
 Looking out for snakes, and looking out for rabbits as well;  
 going into the shade of myrtles to try their cupped climate, swinging by one one hand  
 around them,  
 in that country of the Holiday . . .  
 stepping behind trees to the dam, as if you had a gun,  
 to that place of the Wood Duck,  
 to that place of the Wood Duck's Nest,  
 proving you can still do it; looking at the duck who hasn't seen you,  
 the mother duck who'd run Catch Me (broken wing) I'm Fatter  
 (broken wing), having hissed to her children.

4

The birds saw us wandering along.  
 Rosellas swept up crying out we think we think; they settled farther along;  
 knapping seeds off the grass, under dead trees where their eggs were,  
 walking around on their fingers,  
 flying on into the grass.  
 The heron lifted up his head and elbows; the magpie stepped aside a bit,  
 angling his chopsticks into pasture, turning things over in his head.  
 At the place of the Plough Handles, of the Apple trees Bending Over,  
 and of the Cattlecamp,  
 there the vealers are feeding; they are loosely at work, facing everywhere.

They are always out there, the forest is always on the hills;  
 around the sun are turning the wedgetail eagle and her mate, that dour  
     brushhook-faced family:  
 they settled on Deer's Hill away back when the sky was opened,  
 in the bull-oak trees way up there, the place of fur tufted in the grass,  
 the place of bone-turds.

13

The stars of the holiday step out all over the sky  
 People look up at them, out of their caravan doors and their campsites;  
 people look up from the farms, before going back; they gaze at their year's worth of  
 stars.  
 The Cross hangs head-downward, out there over Markwell;  
 It turns upon the Still Place, the pivot of the Seasons, with one shoulder rising:  
 Now I'm beginning to rise, with my pointers and my Load . . .'  
 hanging eastwards, it shines on the sawmills and the lakes, on the glasses of the Old  
 people.  
 Looking at the Cross, the galaxy is over our left shoulder, slung up highest in the east;  
 there the Dog is following the Hunter; the Dog Star pulsing there above Forster; it  
 shines down on the Bikies,  
 and on the boat-hire sheds, there at the place of the Oyster; the place of the Shark's Eggs  
 and her Hide;  
 the Pleiades are pinned up high on the darkness, away back above the Manning;  
 they are shining on the Two Blackbutt Trees, on the rotted river wharves, and on the  
 towns;  
 standing there, above the water and the lucerne flats, at the place of  
 the Families;  
 their light sprinkles down on Taree of the Lebanese shops, it mingles with the  
 streetlights and their glare.  
 People recover the starlight, hitching north,  
 Travelling north beyond the seasons, into that country of the Communes, and of the  
 Banana:  
 the Flying Horse, the Rescued Girl, and the Bull, burning steadily above that country.  
 Now the New Moon is low down in the west, that remote direction of the Cattlemen,  
 and of the Saleyards, the place of steep clouds, and of the Rodeo;  
 the New Moon who has poured out her rain, the moon of the Planting-times.  
 People go outside and look at the stars, and at the melon-rind moon,  
 the Scorpion going down into the mountains, over there towards  
     Waukivory, sinking into the tree-line,  
 in the time of the Rockmelons, and of the Holiday . . .  
 the Cross is rising on his elbow, above the glow of the horizon;  
 carrying a small star in his pocket, he reclines there brilliantly,  
 above the Alum Mountain, and the lakes threaded on the Myall River, above the  
 Holiday.

Les Murray, *Ethnic Radio* 1977 in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 138-146.

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From TOWARD THE IMMINENT DAYS: For Geoff and Sally Lehmann

2 (lines 27-33)

I think of a day too great for the calendar numbers  
That, faintest in winter, grows like a buried moon,

a radiant season swelling through the horizons  
beyond September, mortality crumbling down  
till on summer mornings, a farm boy can see through the hills  
the roots of pumpkin-vines knotting clean under New England.

3

Singing. All living are wild in the imminent days,  
I walk into furrows end-on and they rise through my flesh  
burying worlds of me. It is the clumsiest dancing,  
this walking skewways over worm-ocean that heaps  
between skid and crumble with lumped stones in ambush for feet  
but it marches with seed and steadiness, knowing the land.  
As the dogs set out from the house, minute, black, running,  
I am striding on over the fact that it is the earth

that holds our mark longest, that soil dug never returns  
to primal coherence. Dead men in the fathoms of fields  
sustain without effort millennial dark columns  
and to their suspension, the crystal centuries come,

But now I am deep in butter-thick native broom  
wading, sky-happy, a cotton-bright drover of bees.  
As I break out of flowers, the dogs who have only  
chaos for language, and territory dense in their fur,

mob me, leaping, and I am too merry with farms  
not to run with them, to trample my shadow on sticks:  
outpacing dignity, I collide with sheer landscapes  
dancing with dogs in the rain of information.

4

In my aunt's house, the milk jug, beaded crochet cover  
tickles the ear. We've eaten boiled things with butter.  
Pie spiced like islands, dissolving in cream, is now  
dissolving in us. We've reached the teapot of calm.

7 (lines 169-171)

What lasts is the voyage of families down their name.  
Houses pass into Paradise continually,  
Voices, loved fields, all wearing away into Heaven.

From *Poems Against Economics* (1972), in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 38-43.

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## THE WARM RAIN

Against the darker trees or an open car shed  
 Is where we first see rain, on a cumulous day,  
 A subtle slant locating the light in air  
 In front of a Forties still of tubs and bike-frames.

Next sign, the dust that was white pepper bared  
 Starts pitting and reknitting into peppercorns.  
 It stops being a raceway of rocket smoke behind cars,  
 it sidles off foliage, darkens to a lustre. The roof  
 of the bush barely leaks yet, but paper slows right down.

Hurrying parcels pearl but don't now split  
 crossing the carparks. People clap things in odd salute  
 to the side of their heads, yell wit, dance on their doubles.  
 The sunny parallels, when opposite the light, have a flung look  
 like falling seed. They mass, and develop a shore sound;  
 fixtures get cancelled, the muckiest shovels tack up.

The highway whizzes, and lorries put spin on vapour;  
 soon puddles hit at speed will arch over you like a slammed sea.  
 I love it all, I agree with it. At nightfall, the cause  
 of the whole thing revolves, in white and tints, on TV  
 like the Crab nebula; it brandishes palm trees like mops,  
 its borders swell over the continent, they compress the other  
 nations of the weather. Fruit bumps lawn, and every country dam

brews under bubbles, milky temperas sombering to oils.  
 Grass rains upward; the crepe-myrtle tree heels, sopping crimson,  
 needing to be shaken like the kilt of a large man.  
 Hills run, air and paddocks are swollen.  
 Eaves dribble like jaws and coolness is a silent film, starring green and mirrors.

Tiny firetail finches, quiet in our climber rose, agree to it  
 like early humans. Cattle agree harder, hunched out in the clouds,  
 From here, the ocean may pump up and up and explode  
 around the lighthouses in gigantic cloak sleeves, the whole book  
 of foam slide and fritter, disclosing a pen shaft. Paratroops

of salt water may land in dock streets, skinless balloons  
 be flat out to queue down every drain, and the wind race  
 thousands of flags. Of we may be just chirpings, damped  
 under calm high cornfields of pour, with butter clearings

that spread and resume glare, hiding the warm rain  
 back inside our clothes, as mauve trees scab to cream  
 and grey trees strip bright salmon, with loden patches. (39)

Les Murray from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996), 93, and *C.P.*, 442.

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## 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.

Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words  
and nothing's true that figures in words only.

A poem, compared with an arrayed religion,  
may be like a soldier's one short marriage night  
to die and live by. But that is a small religion.

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;  
like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete  
with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?

You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;  
You can't poe one either. It is the same mirror:  
mobile, glancing, we call it poetry,

fixed centrally, we call it a religion,  
and God is the poetry caught in any religion,  
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry  
is in the poem, a law against its closure.  
There'll always be religion around while there is poetry

or a lack of it. Both are given, and intermittent,  
as the action of those birds – crested pigeon, rosella parrott –  
who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.

Les Murray from *The Daylight Moon* (1987), *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 265.

Also available at: [www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/4657/poetry/memory/murray/religion.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/4657/poetry/memory/murray/religion.html)

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## THE BROAD BEAN SERMON

Beanstalks, in any breeze, are a slack church parade  
without belief, saying *trespass against us* in unison,  
recruits in mint Air Force dacron, with unbuttoned leaves.

Upright with water like men, square in stem-section  
they grow to great lengths, drink rain, keel over all ways,  
kink down and grow up afresh, with proffered new greenstuff.

Above the cat-and-mouse floor of a thin bear forest

snails hang rapt in their food, ants hurray through several dimensions:  
spiders tense and sag like little black flags in their cordage.

Going out to pick beans with the sun high as fence-tops, you find  
plenty, and fetch them. An hour or a cloud later,  
You find shirtfulls more. At every hour of daylight 12

appear more than 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,

beans upright like lecturing, outstretched like blessing fingers  
in the incident light, and more still, oblique to your notice  
that the noon glare or cloud-light or afternoon slants will uncover 18

till you ask yourself Could I have overlooked so many, or  
do they form in an hour? unfolding into reality  
like templates for subtly broad bean grins, like unique caught expressions,

like edible meanings, each sealed around with a string  
and affixed to its moment, an unceasing colloquial assembly,  
the portly, the stiff, and those lolling in pointed green slippers . . .

Wondering who'll take the spare bagfulls, you grin with happiness  
- it is your health – you vow to pick them all  
even the last few, weeks off yet, misshapen as toes. 27

*Collected Poems 1961-2002, 112-3.*

### Appendix 3: Poetry by David Malouf

#### THE CRAB FEAST

I

There is no getting closer  
than this. My tongue slips into  
the furthest, sweetest corner  
of you. I know all

now of your secrets.  
When the shell  
cracked there was nothing  
between us. I taste moonlight

transformed into flesh  
and the gas bubbles rising  
off sewage. I go down  
under mangrove roots and berries, under the moon's

ashes; it is cool  
down there. I always knew that there was more  
to the Bay than its glitters,  
knew if you existed

I could also  
enter it; I'd caught so deeply all  
your habits, knowing the ways  
we differ I'd come to think we must be one.

I took you  
to me. Prepared  
a new habitat under the coral  
reef of my ribs. You hang there, broken like the sun.

25

II

Noon that blinding glass did not reveal us  
as we were. It cast up variant selves  
more real than  
reflections, forms

with a life of their own,  
stalk eye a periscope  
that determined horizons, Doultou claws  
that could snap off a thumb.

I liked that. Hence the deep afternoons  
with pole and net, the deeper  
nights when I went down after the tropic



sun. Hence too the Latin

names, a dangerous clawhold. I wanted the whole of you, raw poundage  
in defiance of breathlessness  
or the power of verbal charms,  
on my palm, on my tongue. 41

### III

This is the Place. I come back  
nightly to find it  
- still, sleepy, sunlit, presided over

by old-timers, waterbirds whose one  
thin leg props up clouds,  
the ruck of open water

ahead, and the blue on blue the land wades into after noon.  
These then the perspectives:

matchwood pier, a brackish estuary  
that flows on into  
the sun, a rip of light over the dunes.

I enter. It is all  
around me, the wash  
of air, clear-spirit country. It goes on

all day like this. The tide  
hovers and withdraws. Under the sun, under the moon's  
cross-currents, shadows

fall into place  
and are gathered to the dark. This hunt  
is ritual, all the parties to it lost. Even the breaths

we draw between cries  
are fixed terms in what is celebrated,  
the spaces in a net

Among mangrove trunks the fire  
-flies like small hot love-crazed  
planets switch on,

switch off. They too  
have caught something. A chunk of solid midnight  
thrashes in the star-knots of their mesh. 70

## IV

You scared me with your stillness and I scared  
 myself . Knowing  
 that everything, even the footsoles of the dead, where your small mouths  
 nudged them, would feed

the airy process of it.  
 The back of my head  
 was open to the dream  
 dark your body moves in. I hunted you

Like a favourite colour,  
 indigo, to learn  
 how changeable we are, what rainbows.  
 we harbour with us

and how I should die, cast wheezing into  
 a cauldron of fog.  
 That was the plan:  
 to push on through

the spectrum of that perfect  
 primary death colour, out  
 into silence and a landscape  
 of endings, with the brute sky pumping red.

90

## V

I watch at a distance  
 of centuries, in the morning  
 light of another planet  
 of the earliest gloom

of this one, your backward  
 submarine retreat,  
 as hovering across the seabed – courtly,

elate, iron-plated –  
 you practice the Dance.  
 I watch and am shut out.  
 The terrible privacies!

100

You move show motion sideways,  
 an unsteady astronaut:  
 step and counter  
 step, then the clash,

soundless, of tank engagement;  
 you might be angels  
 in the only condition

our senses reach them in. I observe

your weightless, clumsy-tender  
release. I observe  
the rules; cut off  
here in the dimension

of pure humanity, my need for air  
a limiting factor.  
I look through into  
your life. Its mysteries

disarm me. Turning  
away a second time  
to earth, to air, I leave you  
to your slow-fangled order,

taking with me  
more than I came for and less. You move back into  
my head. No, it does not finish here.

126

## VI

We were horizons  
of each other's consciousness. All transactions  
at this distance are small,  
blurred, unsistent. Drawn

by unlikeness, I grew  
like you, or dreamed I did, sharing your cautious  
sideways grip on things, not to be broken,  
your smokiness of blood, as kin

to the dragons we guarded  
in the gloom of mangrove trunks  
our hoard. I crossed the limits  
into alien territory. One of us

will die of this, I told myself; and one of us  
did. The other  
swam off to lick warm stones and sulk with clouds along a shoreline;  
regretting the deep

shelves and downward spaces,  
breathing easy,  
but knowing something more  
was owed and would take place. I go down

in the dark to that encounter, the sun  
at my back. On the sea-bed  
your eyes on their sticks

click white in the flattened shadow of my head.

150

## VII

A dreamy phosphorescence  
paddles towards me. The moon drowns,  
feeds, its belly white, its tough shell  
black. We are afloat

together. You are  
my counterweight there, I hang above you  
in sunlight and a balance  
is struck. No, the end

will not be like this.  
We belong to different orders, and are trapped  
by what we chose. Our kinship  
is metaphorical, but no less deadly for all that,

old Dreadnought; as if I wore  
black and carried death clenched in my fist. I do  
wear black. My hand is open. It is my teeth  
that seek you in the dark. And I approach bearing a death.

166

## VIII

It was always like this: you  
broken before me,  
beautiful in all  
the order of your parts, an anatomy lesson,

the simple continent  
our bodies broke away from.  
Because you are so open, because  
the whole of your life

is laid out here, a chamber  
to be entered and stripped. You have nothing  
to hide. That sort of power  
kills us, for whom

moonlight, the concept blue,  
is intolerably complex as  
our cells are, each an open universe  
expanding beyond us, the tug

of immortality.  
We shall reach it and still die.  
I will be  
Broken after you, that was the bargain,

All this  
 a compact between us, who love  
 our privacies. I play  
 my part. Bent over you I dip my hand

in the bowl, I shake my cuffs, out in the open  
 and lost. Deep down  
 I am with you in the dark. The dark secret of  
 my tongue enters a claw.

Because you are so open. Because you are.

195

## IX

It is your weight  
 that hangs upon me. How  
 to deal with it. Hooded, claws locked  
 to your body like a star

You drag me under  
 the light of this occasion  
 to others. I've dreamed you once  
 too often. So this

is what it is to drown, this suffocating  
 torpor, giving up to  
 the drug of, the drag of  
 the moon. Here is your kingdom

I feel night harden over  
 my skull. That we should have come  
 so far out of the dark  
 Together. I try to drown

Well, I hold my breath,  
 no thrashing. Blue, majestic,  
 you blaze in my thoughts. Displacing more  
 than your real weight, making less

than the usual disturbance,  
 You plunge and take me with you.  
 I go out  
 in silence, in full view

of waiters; having learned  
 this much at least; to die true  
 to my kind – upright, smiling –  
 and like you, beyond speech.

223

X

No I am not ashamed  
of our likeness, of what is in it that betrays me,  
a smell of salt

backwaters, a native  
grasp on the gist  
of things, our local patch

of not-quite-solid earth from which the vast swing of the sky  
is trackable. Night  
comes on and I am caught

with a whole life on my hands,  
in my mouth raw words,  
the taste of so much air, so much water,

flesh. It was never to be weighed,  
this dull shore and its landscape, water  
poised above water

and all its swarming creatures, against the kingdom of cloud castles  
we build with our breath.  
But words made you

a fact in my head. You were  
myself in another species, brute  
blue, a bold of lightning, maybe God.

Now all has been made plain  
between us, the weights are equal, though the sky  
tilts, and the sun

with a splash I do not hear breaks into  
the dark. We are one at last. Assembled here  
out of earth, water, air

to a love feast. You lie open  
before me. I am ready.  
Begin.

253

David Malouf, *First Things Last* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 28-37.

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## Appendix 4: All sources quoted in order of appearance

### Chapter 2: From Judith Wright

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- "An Immortal",
- "The Powerline Incarnation"
- "Senryu"
- "The Quality of Sprawl"
- "The Burning Truck"
- "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday  
Song Cycle",
- "Noonday Axeman"
- "Towards the Imminent Days"

Chapter 4: David Malouf's poetry and prose

"The Crab Feast"

"The Martyrdom in Room Fourteen"

Essay: A Poor man's Guide to Southern Tuscany

Novel: *An Imaginary Life*

Novel: *Remembering Babylon*

Short story: "At Schindler's"



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