Exploring Certain Environmental, Social and Economic Questions in Les Murray’s Poem “Cockspur Bush”

Mustafa Makkah


Literature is an example of language in use, and is a context for language use. Studying the language of literary text as language can therefore enhance appreciation of aspects of different systems of language organization. The application of linguistics to literature has aroused much discussion and heated debate and continues to do so. But, as interest in language study and teaching revives across the whole curriculum, questions are raised concerning appropriate ways in which language can be studied and how it can be integrated with the study of literature to contribute to foreign-language teaching and learning.

The main objective of this approach is to explore in some ways in which language and literature study can be integrated. It can provide the means whereby the student of literature can relate a piece of literary writing to his own experience of language and so can extend that experience. To a considerable extent, literary texts can provide interesting language problems to solve and can teach much that is of real value in understanding the language system. The approach, however, does not claim to say ‘everything about a text’, but it claims a reasonable and explicit one. It is hoped that undertaking this way of language-based process, language skills of a learner will primarily be reinforced and extended to the increasing awareness of and sensitivity to the deviant code often employed in literature that is communicatively resourceful.

The following Murray’s “Cockspur Bush” tells about a certain kind of grass that grows annually in several regions of Australia. Murray becomes fascinated by the resonant imagery of a lush green and rolling landscape of the
countryside with its forests and animals. These physical surroundings inspire many of his best poetry. He has said, “When I discovered poetry, I discovered the kind of writing I really wanted to do, which was as much about mountains and animals as it was about humans, and I just started following it up.” (Bourke, 1992: 7). The grass that occupies wide area of landscape becomes delightful scenery that represents one of the magnificent natural features in the countryside. Bush is actually a low woody plant with several hard stems coming up from the root and with many branches and usually grows from the ground. For at least a hundred years white Australian have found easier to talk accurately about each other than about the strange continent they had seized. They did not yet have words for many things they found in the vast continent. They had only a migrant language called English. They had no body of traditional knowledge, such as the Aborigines had, about the country. They had no myths or beliefs to help them make sense of the country. They all too often saw everything as just “bush”. The word then produces various compound words: bush ballad dealing with aspects of life in the Australian bush; bush breakfast: a rough breakfast while camping in the bush; bush house: a rough shelter in the bush; bushman: a pioneer; bushranger: one able to look after for himself in a rough country, a criminal who hid in the bush; bush tucker: food as eaten by one living in or off the bush; cattle-bush: any of various Australian trees or shrubs on which cattle may feed in drought period; and so on.

Bush in this poem is geographically a stretch of land covered with bushy cockspur, a species of *Echinochloa crusgalli* widespread in warm temperate regions of the continent. Murray has even been called “poet of the bush” or “a great poet of cows” for his best-known celebration of his “spirit country”. He left his hometown, Bunyah (a prime dairy, a lush green and rolling landscape), for Sydney in 1957, but he has kept in touch with the country and often drives up the Pacific Highway from Chatswood to Bunyah. Finally, after twenty nine years of exile in the metropolitan centres and after having established his reputation as the most distinguished poet of his generation in Australia, the Murrays returned to Bunyah in 1986 to repossess the spirit country, the place which his own ancestors had sought, obtained, and lost.

Coming home! It was right. And it was time.
I had been twenty-nine years away
after books and work and society
but society vanished into ideology
and by then I could bring the other two home.

(The Daylight Moon, 61)
Les Murray, whose poem is the object of this essay, is an extremely prolific author. David McCooey in Webby (2000: 171-172) points out that Murray’s best work was possibly done in 1970s, but the 1990s shows his international reputation has exceeded that of any other living Australian poet. From 1965, when his first book was released, to 2000 he has published eleven different books of poetry, two verse novels, three books of reviews and essays, a large-format prose book and in addition he has edited two anthologies of Australian poetry. His poetic gifts are in abundance: an endless store of experience from wide reading and direct observation; a keen sense of contemporary world; a dazzling command of rhythm and control of register, tone and idiom; and through a vivid imagery and ability to evoke landscape, mood and abstract concept (Bourke, 1992: 3; Matthews: 2001: xi-xv).

The following Murray’s poem was composed by mostly passive verb phrases. At the clause level, changing from the active to the passive involves rearrangement of two clause elements and one addition: (a) the active subject becomes the passive agent, (b) the active object becomes the passive subject and (c) the preposition by is introduced before the agent. The prepositional phrase (agent by-phrase) of passive sentences is generally an optional element. Cockspur Bush consists of nine sentences, eight out of nine are passives.

Cockspur Bush
I am lived. I am died. 1
I was two-leafed three times, and grazed, 2
but then I was stemmed and multiplied, 3
sharp-thorned and caned, nested and raised, 4
earth-salt by sun-sugar. I was innerly sung 5
by thrushes who need fear no eyed skin thing. 6
Finched, ant-run, flowered, I am given the years 7
in now few berries, now more of sling 8
out over directions of luscious dung. 9
Of water crankshaft, of gases the gears 10
my shape is cattle-pruned to a crown spread sprung 11
above the starve-gut instinct to make prairies 12
of everywhere. My thorns are stuck with caries 13
of mice and rank lizards by the butcher bird. 14
Inches in, baby-seed screamers get supplied. 15
I am lived and died in, vine woven, multiplied 16

Methods
Rational grounded procedures were used to reveal its distinctive linguistic features of the functions of the passives and particular lexical types. Text analysis
Text Analysis

Cockspur bush is an annual grass that grows seasonally and spreads over a wide area in warm temperate regions. Sentences ‘I am lived. I am died’ are placed in the first line declaring the cockspur’s seasonal existence among other various species of grass in the respective areas. It comes during the wet season and simultaneously grows in the wide regions that it usually occupies ‘I am lived’. It fades and then comes to an end ‘I am died’ after a certain period of time growing widespread in an extensive treeless tract of land ‘ to make prairies / of everywhere’. The first line ‘I am lived. I am died.’ (1) is primarily considered the parallelism between the sequence of verbs and the temporal order of events they represent. It is their sequential order, their temporal relationship is similar to the one that connects the successive events the verbal sequence refers to.

The last line (16) is two sentences that are in the first line ‘I am lived. I am died.’ were combined and then followed by prepositional phrases ‘in, vine woven, multiplied.’ What happens to the cockspur bush when it grows and reaches its harvesting time is successively illustrated from the second line from the top to the second from the last in which birds of various kinds get involved in the particular events accordingly. Ground thrush of eastern and southern Australia is a native kind of Australian passerine birds, while European song thrush is another kind that has been introduced into Australia. Most of thrush family is moderate in size, gifted as songbirds and not brightly coloured. Finch is any of numerous small, often strikingly coloured passerine birds, as the red-browed finch of eastern Australia, goldfinch and greenfinch have also been introduced into Australia. The majority of this species have heavy and conical seed-cracking bills. Another kind of bird is screamer that comes from South and Central America. Mouse is a small animal that is covered in fur and has a long thin tail, a field or a house mouse lives where food is stored. Lizard is any reptile of the order of Sauria with a rough skin has four short legs and a long tail. The most advantageous users of this kind of grass are a herd of cows kept on farms to produce milk (dairy cows) or beef and sheep for its meat (mutton or lamb) and its wool made of a thick coat. Both animals graze in the fields of cockspur during its growing time and in its own respective farms in the form of nested grass (processed form) that possibly mixed with protein, even with salt specially for cow, to help them grow and stay healthy. None of the animal names mentioned, but they are implied.

A combination of different kinds of living creatures shows Murray’s concern and interest of his living surroundings. Various kinds of birds seem available only in different parts of Australia including original ones and those that
have been introduced into Australia. A creature that is covered with feathers and can fly of poultry and game species is present among creatures of mammalian and reptilian species. These creatures deal with their own respective matters that are related to the living season of cockspur bush. They mingled together to form how the different parts of a text are connected and give fascinating insight.

The third sentence (lines 2-5) has several passive verbs ‘was two-leafed, grazed, stemmed, multiplied, sharp-toned, caned, nested, and raised’ with one optional agent by-phrase ‘by sun-sugar’. The same by-phrase happens in sentence number 4 (line 6) ‘by thrushes’ and sentence number 7 (line 14) ‘by the butcher bird’. Sentence number eight (line 15) ‘get supplied’ is a copular sentence or pseudo-passive which looks like passive, but cannot be expanded by an agent.

Sentences number 1 and 2 (line 1) have past participles as adjectives (‘lived’ / ‘died’) that are preceded by ‘be’ (‘am’ / ‘am’). The past participles give information about the subjects of the two sentences (‘I’ / ‘I’). These sentences are also called stative passives. Sentences number 5 (lines 7-9), 6 (lines 10-13), and 9 (line 16) are central or true passives. So are sentences number 3 (lines 2-5), number 4 (lines 5-6) and number 7 (lines 13-14). The difference between the two groups is that the former (sentences number 5, 6 and 9) has non-personal agents (agent-less passives) which are the most common type of passive that leaves the subject of the active counterpart undetermined. The latter (sentences number 3, 4 and 7) has personal ones. Sentence number 8 (line 15) is a get-passive sentence which puts the emphasis on the subject rather than the agent. The get-passive is avoided in formal style and even in informal English, it is far less frequent than the be-passive.

An eminent feature of this poem is the symmetry of its scenic arrangement; it begins and ends with the active subjects ‘I’ and be ‘am’ followed by past participles ‘lived’ and ‘died’ as adjectives. Within this frame other symmetries are included. In lines 3, 4 and 5 the passive subjects are ‘I was two-leafed, I was stemmed and I was innerly sung’. There are another striking examples of symmetrical recursion in lines 7 ‘I am given’, in 11 ‘my shape is cattle-pruned’ and in 13 ‘my thorns are stuck’. The last two examples are synecdoche, the use of the part for the whole, ‘my shape’ and ‘my thorns’ mean the speaker ‘I’. Shakespeare uses synecdoche when he says that the cuckoo’s song is unpleasant to a ‘married ear’, for he means a married man (Perrine, 1874: 561). A language-based analysis of the text in terms of its distinctive linguistic features reveals the functions of the passives and other particular lexical types.

Findings

Murray declares that his poetry is a celebration of those whom he speaks, those as he presents as ordinary working people, the inarticulate and the culturally
dispossessed. He even insists that those he writes for and keeps faith with are from the heartland of the 1890s Bush legend: country people relegated by modernism and the metropolis. Webby (2000: 240) describes that the 1890’s and writers associated with the bush myth have long been represented as fundamental to Australian literary studies and the national psyche more generally. The 1890s is the icon of Australian writing that represents the life and times.

Cockspur bush is the grass that has leaves and occupies a large area of land covered with its fully grown leaves for animals to graze. Feeding factories process the grass: stemming, multiplying, nesting and raising in various packing forms and sizes for animal husbandry to supply in their farming. Various kinds of birds, a small insect of ant family that lives in highly organized groups, field mice and small reptiles take part during the period of growing season of the grass. Birds of different sizes, a native grass-finch of Australia that is small in size together with the goldfinch and greenfinch that have been introduced into Australia, a native ground-thrush of moderate in size and the European song-thrush which has been introduced into Australia and the native long-toed bird, including horned and crested screamer, all get advantages of the availability of the cockspur bush in an area of ground covered with that short grass. The bird of predatory kind ‘the butcher bird’ has a peculiar position among other birds that are involved dealing with the cockspur bush. Birds are usually common birds such as finches, thrushes and screamers that take an advantage over the cockspur bush. Birds of prey are birds that hunt and kill other creatures for food such as eagles, hawks and owls. ‘The butcher bird’ in line 14 seems as if it is of predatory birds that might prey on other animals. Mice and lizards also have the benefit of the cockspur bush that their tooth decay remains stuck on sharp pointed parts of the grass. The fact of being equal in rights and advantages over the grass continually maintain among these living creatures. Subsequent events confirm that the butcher bird comes after the mice’s and the lizards’ share in the grass advantage suggested by the teeth decay of both creatures (Haynes: 1998, Cathcart: 1997).

Les Murray’s social background shows his unreserved love of his physical surroundings, the rolling countryside with its forests and animals, and this love inspires much of his best poetry. He says when he has discovered poetry, he discovers the kind of writing he really wants to do, which is as much about mountains and trees and animals as it is about humans. Bunyah where Murray was brought up is a lush green countryside that covered in healthy grass and plant of typical features of rolling landscape. His ‘Cockspur Bush’ demonstrates his full affection for the landscape covered by annual grass that grows seasonally. No such annual or seasonal terms are mentioned, but line 1 ‘I am lived. I am died’ proclaims that the cockspur bush lives only in one growing season. The following
lines (lines 2 – 15) remark on how this kind of grass grows and develops and then treated for various purposes by the living creatures that are present in the text and by the feeding-processing plants. The last line (16) restates the first line (1) by combining the two sentences that are in the first line together with prepositional phrases ‘in, vine woven, multiplied’. The restatement sums up the developing process that takes place from the early growing period until the harvesting time of the grass. The grass is now completely different from its original form as the result of feeding-processing plants that have changed it into vine woven and multiplied packing. The restatement may suggest that the cockspur bush actually lives throughout the year either in its seasonal period when it occupies and covers a large area that turns the country landscape delightful to look at or when it becomes precious commodity for animal husbandry in the farming.

A noun phrase in line 14 ‘the butcher bird’ has peculiar position among other living creatures in the text. Nouns are commonly used attributively and are thus similar to central adjectives, for examples, the railway station, a university lab and a women magazine. The basically nominal character of a noun such as carpenter in carpenter tools is shown by its correspondence to a prepositional phrase with the noun as complement: tools for the carpenter. The same happens to ‘the city council’ --- ‘the council for the city’ and ‘the maintenance fee’ --- ‘the fee for the maintenance’. ‘The butcher bird’ corresponds to a prepositional phrase, the bird for the butcher, but the relationship between the nouns becomes unclear or unpredictable. It is, therefore, unacceptable that the bird in line 14 belongs to the group of predatory birds. In addition, there is not any bird of predatory kinds in the text.

Conclusion

Murray’s Cockspur Bush has been significantly extending the tradition of Australian nature poetry to explore certain environmental, social and economic questions. It touches and is rooted in Australian nation’s real past when the early bush workers with their greatest economic achievements of the successive decades have significantly had influence on the attitudes of the whole community. It relates to the farming of agricultural practices and animal husbandry in which community’s participation has maintained a steady development of the concerned fields, in the pastoral industry and then in more sophisticated manufacturing plants, since the century before, such as the one in the poem the products of multiplied leaves and stems of cockspur. Cockspur bush significantly contributes welfare for people who deal with animal farming, dairy industry and feed manufacturing, and health of fresh or dried milk and meat (beef, mutton and lamb).


Bibliography


