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## Singing Mastery : the Poetics of Vincent Buckley

Vincent Buckley was going to speak at Writers' week about W.B. Yeats and rhythm.\* Yeats was a constant in Vincent Buckley's thinking, and in his affections; and rhythm, with that particular turn to its meaning which Buckley always gave it — a notion as much biological as metrical — he thought the most compelling aspect of poetry. But because Vin Buckley's mind was both ruminative and revising, one cannot presume that what he said at various times about either would have been the same as what he may have said today. What I would like to do is simply to touch a few of those spots where he revealed what he valued in Yeats, and to say something of why I think Buckley himself is a writer of distinction. And I do so with his own caveat in mind: "I confess to mistrusting, even to abhorring, all forms of reduction in the study of literature."<sup>1</sup>

Buckley, like most of his contemporaries, has experienced both the approval and the disapproval of critical assessment. On the way over on the plane I was thinking of this, wondering, as Napper Tandy did of Ireland, "how did he stand" at the moment? As I had with me the Penguin *New Literary History of Australia* at least a few answers were close to hand.

Bruce Bennett's chapter, for example, assigns Buckley his playing colours when he notes the two teams that line up behind Les Murray's often quoted division of Australian poets into Boeotians and Athenians, the country team as it were versus the metropolitans. It's not a division that I've found very illuminating, perhaps partly because I find it difficult to get out of my mind the image of John Styx, King of the Boeotians, singing his lugubrious and prolix aria in Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. In any case, the credentials to make that team would seem to include at least a willingness to talk seriously from time to time about cows or other animals, talking quite a lot about one's family and its guilt at being white, slipping into commodious metaphors as into a pair of ample shorts, and although one hammers universities quite a bit, it is really alright to know a lot oneself. In this team Les Murray is both captain and vice-captain, Geoff Lehmann and Geoff Page fit young roving forwards, David Campbell and Judith Wright the stylish wings, and Mark O'Connor raring to play in any position that happens to be vacant. All fine poets in different ways, who are not particularly served by this schematising. Those who line up on the Athenian side are apparently captained by A.D. Hope, the muscleman of the metropolis, a sort of well-read Jacko. This team, I'm afraid, is both heavily male and predominantly Anglo-Celtic, even if Vicki Vidikas and Fay Zwicky bring to it a touch of exotic panache. One can't help feeling that Athens-Carlton has rather

\* This article was originally given as a paper during Writers' Week at the 1989 Perth Festival. Vincent Buckley was to have spoken on W.B. Yeats and Rhythm. When Vincent Buckley died suddenly Vincent O'Sullivan agreed to come and speak on Vincent Buckley and W.B. Yeats.

more glamour to it than St. Kilda-Boeotia, and Vin Buckley of course is very much in the former, being what Lew Richards would call a player with a head to him. Other critics in the new literary history place him in other ways. Judith Brett relegates Buckley's major significance to the forties and fifties, an extraordinary piece of muddled chronology. Brian Matthews places him quite properly as a university wit, and in other places Buckley is named variously as Metaphysician and regionalist, bringing together what James Tulip calls "a rare combination of imaginative, social and religious interests". Chris Wallace-Crabbe includes some of the poetry in his chapter on autobiography, noting Buckley's intense response to place and occurrence, to "landscape as palimpsest".<sup>2</sup> Over recent years I recall his coming under fire in different places as humanist, as elitist, as Eurocentric, as relentlessly intellectual. I would like to begin my own few remarks with that central value he put forward in giving a lifetime to poetry, whether to writing it, writing about it, or teaching it.

It is interesting, I think, that at the time Buckley was most immersed in traditional belief — the time, that is, when he was writing his collection of essays, *Poetry and the Sacred* — he regarded poetry as a sacred act even for the poet who may have moved from strongly held convictions, and away from any belief that coincided with communal doctrine. This was 1967, only a few years since he had written those poems which defined him at the time, and which for many, I expect, keep on defining him more than anything else as a committed Christian, those poems of devotion that are virtually prayers, extensions of ceremony, devotional exercises.

Seeing that man is set upon his journey  
From dark to light, from the diminished light  
To what alone restores it . . .  
("Four Stages of Evening")

These are poems, all doctrinal emphases apart, which run a gamut of contending voices, a *melange* where the personal voice, as it was then called, was defined for the time being in a swirl of echoes — the diction of hymns, the rhythm even of *Abide With Me*, capable of jostling the same poem that concludes with Dylan Thomas:

Where strings of pity tie the tongue  
And all our whispers end in flame.<sup>3</sup>

Buckley later came to dislike these poems very much. He disliked them as too careful, too rhetorical, and too much tied to what he later regarded as programmatic. As he put it in conversation, "I used to write too neatly — the neatness produced the over-resonance." Part of it, too, was his growing distaste for poems which were what he called "full of attitudes", the kind that can easily be talked about in seminars because what one can discuss as ideas saves one the difficulty of talking about *poetry*. Instead of "strong opinions, strong orientations", he came to prefer "a network of contradictions".<sup>4</sup> He approved of Yeats' asperity in demanding what he expected to be a barrel of consistent opinions.

In terms of belief then, of commitment, of the expectations of language, those poems in *Masters in Israel* are a far cry from the position that he described a few weeks before his death as that of a "Catholic agnostic".<sup>5</sup> One might say of course that the more important word there is still Catholic, the sense that the adjective abides while the noun is provisional. I'm reminded of Buckley's remarking in an essay that "when I think of Arnold's predilection for . . . comprehensive nouns, my preference for the adjective is strengthened".<sup>6</sup> A slightly unexpected remark when we're inclined to think, and as we've usually been taught, that the adjective is the

flighty relation in most statements, the dressing up as it were while the body of reality is there in solid, solid nouns. To shift the emphasis as Buckley did is to take an important philosophical turn, to subvert the cast of mind that quests for the definitive word, the abiding truth, and to opt for flexibility. His own late phrase to describe himself denies the absolutes of *a* Tradition, if by that we mean something compellingly revealed, yet it doesn't loosen his claim on the traditional. For 'the traditional' has much to do with what he thought about poetry, and particularly with what he meant by the rhythm of a writer.

It is clear I think that mostly when Buckley spoke of rhythm he didn't have in mind *simply* the metrical disposition of language, nor that enchanted suspension from the ordinary which Yeats believed rhythm produced. One might of course say rather a lot about Buckley's own verse along those lines, how his early poems so often carry the impress of Yeats in ways that are immediately recognisable:

Spirit that has its counterpose  
In rock, or wave, or balanced tree,  
Sensed once in her, made now the choice  
Of Time that is his own ally.  
(“And Yet Her Spirit Calls Us”) <sup>7</sup>

The mere fact of using octosyllabics drives the rhythm to echo Yeats. But Buckley deliberately moved from that lyric and derivative catch to the voice as coming much too easily, as too patently demonstrating what he called his “softness”. He worked at the harder, plainer line that he perfected in his last three books, solving the problem as he described it “of slowing my poetry down”, avoiding anything as he said that looked “too neat”.<sup>8</sup> Usually, though, it was of something quite wider he spoke when he touched on rhythm.

Buckley once said in an interview “I think that people develop or fail to develop a very strong rhythmic sense in life”. There are times in reading him, whether in verse or prose, when one thinks perhaps of that now unfashionable philosopher Henri Bergson, his running the notion of evolution alongside the artist's personal development, so that rhythmic or artistic time, as he called it, circumvented the mechanistic time of nature. There's a whole line of predisposition that such a way of thinking entails, a way which would include Yeats quite as much as it would, say, Robert Frost. As Buckley applied it to himself, “it just so happened that when I started to feel the wonder of the world most acutely, when I was very young, this wonder started to express itself in miniscule rhythms and with perceptions that I now take to have been poetic”.<sup>9</sup> There is a direct relation between thinking like this, and thinking two other things which follow from it: that rhythm implicates one in something larger than oneself, and that this is also, if not the basis, then at least a key to religious thought.

We're familiar with Yeats's celebrated claim in his essay on *Magic* in 1901 “That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.”<sup>10</sup> His claims for “the great memory”, the fact that it might be tapped by symbols and its various currents invoked, may even be the single most important belief that his poetry declares. It is a view that rides easily enough beside Jung's archetypes, and with those many descriptions that anthropologists and philosophers applied to mythology — a mode of thinking that Suzanne Langer called “a subject greater than any individual . . . a sphere of activity in the real world, because what it symbolises belongs to the real world”.<sup>11</sup> Yeats, in a Wildean turn of phrase, designated modern science as the critique of myths, telling Sturge Moore “there would be no Darwin, had there been no book of Genesis”.<sup>12</sup>

Buckley found no problem in quoting one of Freud's essentially dismissive phrases about religion in putting his own position. "I feel that the intuitive, sometimes telepathic, entry into communication with other lives and with forces of the Universe is a process which . . . some scientists . . . [and] certain kinds of writers are best at, and I think this is the key religious act: to try to experience, to understand and sometimes extend what Freud called the 'oceanic feeling'." "There are," he added, "probably better names for it."<sup>13</sup>

Buckley, one might notice, entertained a more considered attitude to science than many poets, a point that became clear when he expressed his scepticism about the more extravagant claims of literary theory. It was at a time when one of his colleagues liked to quote Paul de Man's self-stroking apothegm that "the poetician is now the equal of the poet", and when a fellow-professor's book repeated that now rather *passé* claim that theory was a quasi-science. But as Buckley pointed out, any overriding theory "would have to be a theory of language, and if it is a theory of language it would have to be a theory of the brain. Academics do not seem to worry about this sort of thing, but if I was going in for language theories I really would learn some physical science, in fact I would *need* to learn a lot of various sorts from neurology to bio-chemistry, but my theoretical colleagues don't do that." The specific instance he gave was in discussing that basic tenet of structuralism, the binary structure of thought. "There is no scientific reason to suppose that things must be divided in a binary way. That is just a metaphoric convenience."<sup>14</sup> But he did not buy into such arguments, I think, because he found them irrelevant. He would neither read nor write better because of them. Also, I think, the fact that Buckley had such committed political views about Ireland, and that he saw literature as a communal social force, drove him towards not a naive mimeticism, but to a view he shared with both black and Eastern European intellectuals — his refusal to concede an epistemological wedge between experienced life and an insulated theory of text.<sup>15</sup>

But to take up again that phrase of his, "the forces of the universe", which he had used also in his essay "Specifying the Sacred". He speaks there of "the impulse to establish the sense of man's life and his human relationships as being . . . bonded with forces in the universe, which have their correlations in his own psychic life". There is a nest of related convictions that sentence carries with it, which might be crudely put into the formula, rhythm = religion = poetry = the sense of oneself. The terms might be arranged in any order and their cogency still holds, a chain of convictions as serviceable to the agnostic as to the believer. For the activity of poetry is inevitably attuned to the mental structure that permits it: "It might be thought . . . that the very self-doubt of the poet is a testimony to, if not a proof of, his almost unwittingly persistent commitment to the writing of poetry as a sacred act and an aspiration to self-completion".<sup>16</sup>

I believe that was a view Buckley continued to hold, which is why that adjectival 'Catholic' remains so potent. As a kind of liberated modifier it implies very little about one's relation with the Church at a specific historical moment, although any biographer of Buckley will have to attend carefully to why, and how, one of the strongest voices in Australian Catholicism so altered course in those few years that preceded *The Golden Builders*, and why any reasons he publicly offered are only partially complete — such remarks as "I would say, in general, my growth has been a growth from dogmatism, cockiness, ideology into certainty."<sup>17</sup> Or the bald enough generalisation that "There is a certain phoniness in the denominational stance."<sup>18</sup>

Yet to a reader of his poetry, the persistence of "Catholic" has to do with the fact that primarily Buckley is an "incarnational" poet, if I might be allowed that word too without doctrinal strings. It is a word he himself used of both Blake and Yeats. It defines the kind of poet who sees his own thoughts, his own experience, as inevitably implicated in that network of energies which relates him to both the

living and the dead; that places him within configurations of history and the immediate that are unique as one experiences them, and mythic as one interprets them: life, he'd say, as rhythm, our moving within patterns we exemplify, but do not invent, and only partly control.

At the beginning of his collection *The Pattern* in 1979 Buckley offers a range of dictionary definitions for that word, a list that instructs us in how to read the poems. The lexical emphases he picks out are these: pattern as a matrix, a mould; an example, an instance; a precedent; a decorative or artistic design; in Ireland, a patron saint's day, and by transference, the festivities of the day. The short opening title poem then places the word in its largest evolutionary stream. The writing of poetry itself, if not a return to the source, then at least is the way we are going to speculate on that return and find avenues to talk of it.

And go to: and come back from:  
the slow starved pattern  
I follow with inflamed nerves  
to discover, close to the beginning  
of all, a tadpole barely  
at movement in the clammy water.

Origin, as we know, is a dicey concept. It is a place of departure, and a place that in ancestral terms anyway proliferates as we move back. The closer we come to our origins, the more places we are taken to, the less any *one* origin is possible except under the pressure of geography or historical preference. The pattern we accept is primarily the pattern we impose, a sense of focus that is there in the act of looking rather than in what we necessarily find. As Buckley puts it,

not/one place but ten thousand:  
not a particular but a general  
fish-web of fathers : something so ordinary  
you sit half-suffused with fear  
in front of it.

But this insistence of finding home, to reach what one might call a terminal definition, to a certain kind of mind is compulsive. It is also necessary in order to leave 'the beginning' over again, to relate to it on one's own terms; to construct a framework of coherence for one's own experience — in a phrase he uses of the poet Austin Clarke, for "building his maze of short moments". When an interviewer asked Buckley some years ago about Ireland, quoting Eliot's line from "Little Gidding" that the end of our exploring will be to get back to where we came from, Buckley immediately observed that the quote was not complete: it should go on, he noted, "and to know the place for the first time". A return that he then related to "an experience of seeing actual places under an Edenic aspect".<sup>18</sup> He phrases it like this in *The Pattern*:

A first, frail paradise, where the dream  
let down like tendrils, entering  
through air the airless sponge  
that would sometime be memory.

One might say a good deal about how that last word carries for Buckley a Wordsworthian immediacy that is a living nerve into the past, a capacity for vibrations as he loosely put it in that interview, and the expanding sense in *The Pattern* that coherence and identity are both linguistic and mythic. At a time when coherence, myth, referentiality, are variously under fire, I would like simply to note two familiar propositions of Wittgenstein. "The meaning of a word is its use in the

language” — not its rhetorical figuration, as one might say, but its persistence in social commerce. And the other, “Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings”, which again places us in a communal context.<sup>20</sup> I think something like that is in Buckley’s own assumptions, driving him on the one hand towards inherited and — in Freud’s word again — ‘oceanic’ rhythms, but on the other towards individual clarity, communication, the harder and simpler line he worked to in his later poetry. For literature is not a code to be deciphered, nor is it an instruction, but an event to be shared, a pattern of festivity. This is why, I’d guess, Buckley refused to value Yeats as Yeats sometimes did himself, as a conveyor of secret wisdoms. Buckley’s Yeats is a poet of dramatic situations in a modern world.<sup>21</sup>

There are related observations one could make. One is that Buckley’s poetry is often — and I think wrongly — read as that of the cultured academic, or as that of the nostalgic Australian surrounded perhaps a little too vividly as a child by Irish people and Irish things. In other words, middle-class, Melbourne and Cambridge-centred, and yet exhibiting too a kind of latter-day colonial truculence in his republicanism, and in his resolute anti-imperialism in either hemisphere — the purveyor of a kind of Jerilderie letter written by a man who could spell and who didn’t need to shoot the police.

We are good, and getting better all the time, at interpreting writers in ways that could not have made sense to themselves, practitioners of that “discrepancy theory”, as Frank Kermode designates the kind of reading which assumes that the text is always revealing what it in fact does *not* assert.<sup>22</sup> It is a way of reading that derives principally I suppose from Levi-Strauss’s founding claim that it is impossible to be an accurate examiner of one’s own society or behaviour, that we cannot fully apprehend the structures our own lives abide by. It is easy enough to line up Buckley’s apparent dichotomies, the binary forking if you like that his thinking veered between — here (Australia)/there (Ireland), Catholic/humanist, elitist/republican, hierarchical/liberal, and so on — and then to elucidate the contradictions and subversions as one term contaminates the other. Well, one could. For the moment, I’d prefer to offer the American philosopher Samuel Wheeler’s view of this critical procedure:

“it seems to me . . . that the incoherence of a dichotomy, when it is extended too far, shows nothing about that dichotomy’s worthiness. Contradictions that arise when one follows out a chain of connection do not show that there is anything wrong with the dichotomy in discourse. To suppose so it to value systematisation and totality, rather than particular local working. (Only in mathematics do hidden contradictions mean that everything is a theorem)”<sup>23</sup>

As anyone who has taught Yeats will know, one of the difficulties of those famous drawings of interpenetrating gyres is to pull the poems back from being mere illustrations of a diagram, and to re-establish them as living exchanges where contraries do not imply disabling contradiction.

Yet in speaking of Buckley I would certainly use at some point what may seem a curious word to apply to him, and that is “transgressive”. I think it appropriate because when we read him we see how so many of his initial assumptions, whether of rhetoric, formalism, or belief, are consciously challenged by his own later work; and how much of that work crosses the grain of his contemporaries, whether fellow Catholics at one stage, fellow academics at another, or fellow Australians much of the time. What was constant if you like was that he never had the least doubt that he understood himself as an Australian by insisting that racially, genetically, it was his Irishness that defined him. Buckley’s was a conviction that is commonly distorted by those Australian critics who currently use the term “Anglo-Celt” as a grab-bag word to provide a clutch of mainly negative responses, an oversimplifying that presses

quite diverse traditions towards the one ideological disapproval. “I hate the term”, Buckley said.<sup>24</sup> He hated it for the sound pragmatic reason that it was meaningless in conveying anything he knew or felt true about being Irish in Australia. What is transgressive about Buckley is that he is less *manageable* than most other Australian poets I’ve read, manageable in that sense of being contained either by fashion or reaction against fashion, or contained by what we may previously have read of him. Put together those three books of his most important years, *The Golden Builders* of 1976, and *The Pattern* and *Late Winter Child* both in 1979, and you have, to begin with, work of remarkable technical deftness, poems impressive in their grasp not of life — I’m not loading him with simply *mirroring* anything — but of how much lived experience he finds resonant patterns to propose. These are volumes that encompass without fuss, without the drumbeat of rhetoric he came so to distrust, five hundred years of racial history, nine months of family and sexual history, and the presence of the city that was closest to him, all within that drive for coherence, and the response to diverse events when coherence fails to gel. I would argue that *The Golden Builders* in its deliberate linkages with Blake, with Baudelaire, with Whitman, is an odyssey from post-colonial ironies to an acceptance of lost faith. The first poem’s incanting the names of Melbourne streets which are also the names of nineteenth century British aristocrats and patrons, the murmuring of name upon name in a way which is quite the reverse of Yeats’s celebrated instance, introduces the sequence’s general tone of discomfort and dislocation.

O Cardigan, Queensberry, Elgin; names of their Lordships,  
Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: shall I find here my Lord’s grave?

The twenty-seventh and last poem concludes with a similar question, and with Buckley returning to where he was born.

We are travelling  
towards my timber birthplace  
and the wilderness of flies . . .  
and the dogs paused above the creek.

And my Lord’s grave? His grave?

That conclusion is the reverse, and I suspect deliberately the reverse, of the last of his “Eleven Political Poems” written ten years before, in a context one might say of assumed and still accepted certainties, verse that celebrated

. . . movements of the earth that bring me  
In constant pilgrimage to Genesis,  
To the bright shapes and the true names,

Oh my Lord.<sup>25</sup>

For all the implications of *The Golden Builders* as a title, it is a poem not of structures and enacted order, but an exercise in replacement, displacement, “earth shaken from the root/or marrow from the bone”. It is a poem of empty empire, emptying memories, a vanishing city and its communal rapport, an emptied faith, a refusal of possibilities let alone certainties. Which is why *The Pattern* and *Late Winter Child* must be read as its antistrophe, the resurrected possibilities of both child and parent, poems that are a way back from “the wilderness of flies”, and constructed from the absences of the earlier work.