The Burning Bush: Poetry, Literary Criticism and the Sacred

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What has become of the ancient understanding of the poet as prophet or *vatis*, a vessel or servant of sacred meanings? In the 1960s, Australian poet and literary critic Vincent Buckley, somewhat at odds with certain prevailing models of modern, secular education, described the poet as a 'religious being, concerned with human life and an actor in its drama, [brought] to create works which themselves carry his religious being, fortify creation and exist as, in a sense, sacred spaces' (*Poetry* 9). Forty years later, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the role and reach of the poet in Australia and elsewhere spans a diverse number of possibilities: postmodern secular jester, political advocate, enchanter, spokesperson for a small number of like-minded spirits. This essay explores the contribution of Buckley to ideas about literature and the sacred, most particularly in his critical volume *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), and in his poetic sequence *Golden Builders* (1976). Pre-eminently a poet and a literary critic, Buckley is not a systematic theologian, nor a religious scholar. What he brought to his work was a poetic practice connected to his critical exploration of poetry and its relation to the larger issues of sacredness in the contemporary world.

Two main approaches to the question of sacredness and literature are taken in this essay. Firstly, the essay takes the form of a conversation/meditation on the sacred conducted between Robin Grove and Lyn McCredden, both former pupils and colleagues of Buckley at the University of Melbourne.[1] Drawing on Grove's long personal and professional experience with literature, music and dance, the essay begins from the criticism and poetry of Buckley, broadens to include analogies from these arts, and finally places Buckley's work in the larger cultural context of art as sacred exploration. Grove turns for analogy to the work of T.S. Eliot, and to the practices of dance, in order to illuminate just how Buckley's notions of the sacred, and sacred spaces, might be understood.

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L: Robin, I want to begin by thinking about a number of recent proposals from Australian writers about sacredness in relation to the literary. Perhaps the myth of the poet as prophet, seer or *vatis*, and of literature as implicated in the sacred, has not been completely overthrown today? Can poems (not *all* poems) still be thought of as 'sacred spaces,' as Buckley wrote? And what might be meant by this?

In 2006, poet Dorothy Porter wrote exuberantly in what are now poignant terms: 'I've always felt that a poet's words, participating in an ancient, magical and incantatory tradition, keep the poet alive forever' (3). Porter was a well-known, provocative and adventurous poet whose poetry had ambitions, and whose metaphors tapped the ancient, even atavistic purposes of poetry. She was in love with the tropes and characters of ancient Egypt and Crete, as much as those of the contemporary world. A very different poet, Judith Beveridge, writes of the

enchantment of poets in their relationship to 'the dark maw of words' (xv). These are provocative words from a poet whose quiet, Buddhist-inflected writings would have some suspicion, I imagine, about the nature of that enchantment.

R: Beveridge's metaphor—'the dark maw of words'—opens up a question for me about the nature of those sacred spaces claimed by Buckley. It's a powerful phrase. But what is the nature of these 'sacred spaces'? We need to differentiate between the different possibilities in these metaphors. 'Sacred spaces' might suggest vacancies, places we call sacred but which are potentially empty. Or one might read it as sacred *places*, places of plenitude. We might want to keep both of these possibilities alive here. Is it a rich and fertile place, or a place of—perhaps—some deception, confusion? There is the possibility, in Beveridge's words, that the 'enchantment' of the poets is a self-hypnotising spell that also falls over other people.

This might be compared to the way T.S. Eliot evokes the dangers and beauties of poetry, for example, in East Coker, Section 2 (*Four Quartets*), where the meditation dwells on the enchainment of past and future. And that's a phrase that works in two ways as Eliot handles it. In the French, *enchaînement* is the word for the linking of steps, in the dance, one to another. It is about a kind of creative beauty. Whereas 'enchainment' in English has to do with being bound, being in bondage. In Eliot's poetry, you can't quite separate the two meanings. Reading it on the page, and especially hearing it read, you don't know whether it's going to be one meaning or the other. If you take it in the French meaning, you would see it as a song or dance that is attempting to connect, to make peace with God and his creation.

L: In a very different context, critic and novelist Andrew McCann, in his essay 'The Obstinacy of the Sacred,' negatively places the category of the sacred as a Romantic hangover, dismissing 'the mysticism of David Malouf' and 'Patrick White's modernist transcendentalism' (23) as forms of escapism from the real issues of Australia and its colonial heritage. McCann concludes with the argument that in Australia, 'The sacred is at once a powerful symptom of postcolonial disquiet, and a path of flight that promises to lead beyond this, and beyond history itself' (158). McCann is not alone in clearly opposing the conjunction of political and material frameworks with 'sacred' interpretive categories. In contrast, what is moving about Buckley's mid-twentieth century understanding of the poet as shaped by sacred forces, is that it seeks to grapple with just those political and material realities in which all human life is embedded.

R: McCann's approach seems to me to be peremptory. Judging Australian literature according to whether or not it puts enough weight on Indigenous experience is not adequate…there's an ideology behind that, rather than a very open reading of available literary material.

L: Yes, I think that's a very interesting point. What's at stake in McCann's essay *is* ideology, as opposed to the literary, the aesthetic, the experience of other ways of thinking of the sacred. There's a crudefying that goes on when one just brings together in that oppositional way ideology and history, as opposed to the sacred.

R: I think many of us have learned that for Indigenous Australia, the land is both the stage and the actor in the sacred history. It's not just a passive thing at all. The land is something we move through three-dimensionally. What you see, as you look down one valley, say, are the mountains in the distance; but you move around there, and it takes on another form. And it's in something like that sense that the land is a sacred being, a sacred actor on its own stage.

It's a little like the experience of visiting Haworth, in the Brontës' Yorkshire, when you walk into the moorland landscape just behind the parsonage. For years I'd only visited when

everything was covered in snow, but to go there when it hadn't been snowing… I came there one summer day and for the first time walked around, and suddenly realised that this was the experience that Brontë had, almost every day, of walking into this embracing landscape where, at all points around you, it's like being caressed by the landscape, and invited onwards.

L: Except in the winter [laughter] when it's brutally excluding!

R: Yes, except in the winter! But this did come to me when thinking about the Indigenous sense of the Australian landscape.

L: I wonder though, Robin, whether in defence of McCann, despite his not doing enough to bring out that sense of the power and the active nature of the Indigenous sacred, his focus is really on *white* Australian literary production. So it's the Maloufs and the Patrick Whites and the Judith Wrights, and the guilt that he sees there. And that's where McCann gets quite critical of their uses of the sacred.

R: Yes, I'm more in sympathy with that.

L: But what you have been saying here does raise a very important issue about sacredness and ideology. McCann's position does underplay the agency, the constructiveness, the power of that Indigenous sacred (diverse as that is), because it insists on focussing on white responses and power. It doesn't give enough credence to the action and power of Indigenous knowledges.

R: Yes. It would be wonderful to actually get some discussion of the ways in which Indigenous dance has developed over the past 20 years. Bangarra has just been celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, and it's by no means the only group there now. There are quite a number of dance groups, from here and the Torres Straits, who do wonderful work. What's fascinating is that there has been a kind of curling backwards of the wave. First, it was a matter of Indigenous dancers moving away from their home ground onto the white stage; being acclaimed, rightly, and making up new things for this context, producing very strong dancers. But then, as the years went by, there's been, to my sense of it, a kind of withdrawal of the tide, up, into itself again, as more white Australian dancers just take up as a matter of course the possibilities we've seen from Bangarra, for 15 years or more. That's become part of the training of white dancers, which is lovely.

L: And at the popular cultural level, there's The Black Arm Band. It's a loose affiliation of Indigenous and white performers, instruments and songs, in English and Indigenous languages—Archie Roach, Paul Kelly, Jimmy Barnes. There's that kind of cooperation, and mutual feeding and respect. Jimmy Barnes singing in Gumatj, no less. And they play at Hamer Hall, at the Melbourne Festival, but also in many of the Indigenous outstations around Australia. It's thrilling. It's speaking to so many people. The sacred doesn't seem very far away from song here, does it? The sacred as a growing acknowledgement and honouring of ancient peoples and cultures, but also the growing desire actively to learn from those cultures, to contemplate the connections between past and present in a non-arrogant way.

But there's still our first question: What is being claimed in these diverse understandings of the poet as prophet, bard, priest; or variously, as participant in the magic or enchantment of poetic processes? As I think your description of Indigenous dance has shown, Robin, poetry and dance do have long histories, in Western, Arabic and Indigenous cultures, of affiliation with sacred knowledge. In Australia this tradition—or fluid set of beliefs and practices,

perhaps—can be seen variously in non-Indigenous writers too, writers such as Christopher Brennan and his early twentieth century, cosmopolitan mysteries; in John Shaw Neilson's Romantic nature mysticism; and in the more institutional and often agonistic relations to Christianity of mid-twentieth century poets such as Francis Webb, James McAuley and Vincent Buckley; as well as the next wave of poets—Les Murray, Gwen Harwood, Kevin Hart, Noel Rowe. Poetry has also been informed by Buddhist understandings, in the work of poets such as Harold Stewart, Bruce Beaver, Robert Grey, Robert Adamson and Judith Beveridge.

Within these contexts, Buckley's *Poetry and the Sacred* makes a telling and early contribution to this broad and plural stream of sacred poetics. Leaning on the work of Eliade, and before him, Otto, Buckley comes closest to his definition of sacredness with the now quaint-sounding term 'hierophany' (from the Greek roots 'hieros,' meaning 'sacred' or 'holy,' and 'epiphaneia,' meaning 'appearance').[2] Buckley first quotes Eliade, before going on to debate with him:

> Man [*sic*] becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly other than the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed *hierophany.* (Eliade, qtd in Buckley 13)

Pointing to the dialectic in Eliade's thought, 'a dialectic which at some points narrowly avoids becoming a contradiction' (14), Buckley nevertheless embraces *hierophany* as for him the most useful term, enabling him to embrace 'a paradoxical coming together of sacred and profane' (14). Buckley engages with that strand in Eliade's work, that drawing together of sacred and profane. Eliade had written:

> …we must get used to the idea of recognising hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual and social life. Indeed, we cannot be sure that there is *anything*—object, movement, psychological function, being, or even game—that has not at some time in human history been somewhere transformed into an hierophany. (Eliade, qtd in Buckley 13)

Reading Eliade's words written in the 1940s requires adroit historical imagination. The context in which he wrote was that of world comparative religions, and as a structuralist historian. When he writes 'we must get used to...', and 'we cannot be sure that there is *anything*...' Eliade is shaking the tree of Western Enlightenment thinking, a tree rooted in this division into discrete differences, a division which allocates the sacred to regions of transcendence, the apolitical and the immaterial. Australian intellectual and cultural life has more than enthusiastically upheld this distinction between the secular and the sacred, establishing it institutionally and in the many forms of secular thinking which are, at their mildest, embarrassed by religion. At its most virulent, this fundamental view seeks to obliterate the reality: that Australia—the place of Indigenous peoples and their beliefs; inhabited from the eighteenth century onwards by Irish Catholic peoples (among others); and now home to Islamic, Buddhist, and other religious peoples—cannot choose to see itself simplistically in the terms of old modernity, as a white, secular nation.

R: But I can't see that *any* Christian or Jewish theologian today could describe the sacred as wholly separate from the profane. I think Buckley hastens away from such a position too, but he does contemplate this separation momentarily, I think.

L: Yes, but the early and ongoing contribution of Buckley's thinking about the sacred and the profane can be seen when we think about the many contemporary modes of understanding 'the one within the other,' don't you think? We can now imagine a genealogy (of differences and connections) of this imbrication of sacred and profane, of transcendent and material, of universal and historical: Indigenous 'dreaming'; Christian notions of 'incarnation';[3] literary and religious understandings of hierophany; Romantic doctrines of immanence. In Australian literary contexts, Tim Winton's very popular fiction gestures towards this double or compounded or poetic mode of understanding, even in the titles of his novels, *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music*, *Breath.* Patrick White before Winton pointed again and again to the sacred in the ordinary, earthed and material.[4] There are many differences and distinctions between these literary formulations of course, and they present differing sacred processes, but they are all premised on a sense of the sacred as a dialectic. It's a dialectic between terms for sacred and profane which shift and refuse to remain one or the other.

But what contribution to these questions does the critical and poetic work of Buckley make? Buckley—a complex man, a Catholic, a Professor of poetry at the University of Melbourne, an intellectual figure of great importance to Australian literary studies in the mid years of the century—needs to be read both within his historical context and within this ongoing debate about literary language and its relation to the sacred. In a rich and informative 2005 essay, 'How to Gossip with Angels: Australian Poetry after the Gods,' Noel Rowe writes about Buckley's poetic practice as moored in a theology of *incarnation*. Rowe calls Buckley's approach 'theopoetic,' and argues that the poetry clearly exhibits a shift across the four decades of his writings, 'from theological to anthropological models of the sacred' (180). Re-reading Buckley's critical and poetic work across the 1950s to the 1980s, we can see some of this movement Rowe describes: hearing a believer's voice among the immovable institutional pillars of church, nation, university, literature; to his important critical contributions, including *Poetry and the Sacred*; to his later, radically self-questioning volume of poetry, *Golden Builders and other poems* (1976).

A favourite Buckley phrase in *Poetry and the Sacred*, in relation to the processes of the sacred, and specifically the poetic processes, is 'completion' or 'self-completion.' He argues for '…man's [*sic*] recognition of and response to forces outside him, and superior to him, which prompt his self-completion' (16). Further, in relation to conceptions of the poet as prophet, or truth-teller, Buckley attempts several formulations for this understanding. For example, when speaking of the poetry of Roethke, Buckley describes his poetry as 'extending and completing in language a contract with the world which is religious in nature' (18). And in response to certain mid-twentieth century intellectual demythologising or de-supernaturalising movements of thought, around Christian incarnational theology, Buckley pulls back against those who 'assimilated God to the historical process, so that there is no world outside history which can be the object of aspiration' (20). However, in the same essay in *Poetry and the Sacred*, 'Specifying the Sacred,' Buckley can ask himself if poetry in a secular world is merely an 'atavistic survival' (20). Rather than answer himself, and others, with the hubris so often attending notions of self-completion and prophecy, Buckley concludes his essay by pointing to the persistence of poetry for many people; but also by pointing to his own doubt about the role of the poet. It is what he calls 'the fantasy' of poetry, 'the very self-doubt of the poet [that] is testimony to the writing of poetry as a sacred act and an aspiration to self-completion' (20).

R: I want to take up this stress on 'self-completion' in Buckley's early discourse. Even 'the contract with the world', which is adumbrated here—I think there are real distinctions to be made between the different writers' stances. I would not see them as all saying much the same thing. They're saying actually very different things. When I think of ...[pause]…the music that is sung throughout the later parts, especially, of the *Four Quartets*, but coming out in each of the quartets—in the echoes of 'Burnt Norton,' the dark cold and empty desolation of 'East Coker,' and the groundswell from the beginning in 'Dry Salvages,' I think what we are getting there is something that answers *not* to the description of a self-completion; Eliot is not completing himself in some way here. It is rather what he talks about in a couple of his essays as *a release from* the burden of the self. He gives a wonderful account in 'The Three Voices of Poetry': the poem begins, he writes there, not as an emotion, and certainly not as an idea. It begins as a sort of rhythm, as a psychic experience which one has not yet got any words for, and there may not be any words. The poet may not have any words, is not dealing with words at this stage. The poet is trying to find release from 'the demon,' from which the only release is to get the demon born (Eliot, *On Poetry* 89-102).

L: And that birth may be in the language of a poem, or it may be in other forms?

R: Yes, or possibly in something more incantatory than we would normally think of as a poem.

L: I wonder though—Buckley does have a strong sense of the psychic rhythms, and the incantatory in poetry, doesn't he? You're not opposing him to Eliot here? I don't read Buckley's 'self-completion' as something simply hubristic, the powerful action of the poet who completes himself.

R: Nevertheless, I think it's unfortunately phrased. I think it sounds too much like that. Though I don't think that's the part it plays in his thinking.

L: Self-completion—it's a very odd word these days, isn't it? People today question any possibility of completion. Any centred or utterly final moment of the self. It has a dated feel to it.

R: I was thinking about it in relation to *Wuthering Heights*, which I'm writing about at the moment**:** the way in which, in that novel, completion is never achieved. And the various strategies that are used to withhold the feeling...that that's the end. Or that here's the beginning. Everything is kept mobile in different ways. Completions...Question-mark…Most famously of course in the last sentences of the novel. But right from the beginning, since in order to understand what is happening in Chapter One, you have to have read the next thirty chapters. And when you go back from Chapter 31, when you've reached that, and you see that there's where you actually started with Lockwood. Everything else that has happened has happened in those terms…

L: Mmm…so, postmodernity does not have the option on the incomplete self, and the fragmented.

R: Not at all, not at all…

L: And even Heathcliff… [Heathcliff's demand is recounted in Chapter 29], saying he will strike the side of the coffin and dissolve with her…that's another metaphor, another attempt at self-completion, isn't it?

R: Yes, and it's impossible. And that's what the last sentences of the novel are about: 'How could anyone imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth?' (338).

L: So, this self-doubt regarding the role of the poet and of poetry, let alone their claim to connect with the sacred, spills over into consideration of literary writing, and the literary in relation to the technical processes of writing and the choices of the poet. At the conclusion of the opening essay of *Poetry and the Sacred* Buckley writes:

> For poetry is an act and an art which combines the forming of a verbal statement with the completion of a rhythmic movement both on the page and from within the psyche; and it usually does so by heightening imagined or observed particulars to the condition where they have a force as symbols. If this art and act are atavistic, they are also surprisingly difficult and complex. In fact, they serve something of the purpose of a sacralising act; they are resorted to in order to set aside certain experiences or places or people or memories as representatively revealing ones—in however attenuated a form, sacred ones. (20-21)

There is arguably something modest about the phrases 'resorted to' and 'in however attenuated a form,' an acknowledgement of relative value which informs them. Poetry has its completions and its complexities, but poetry, Buckley suggests, should be understood as a sub-category or exemplar of fuller, richer, sacralising acts. Such poetic acts are prompted by sacred understandings, as well as sharing in their significance through literary forms. Literary language-making can participate in the sacred, but it is not the originating force, Buckley seems to be saying. If poetic language, at its zenith, can lay claim to presenting an attenuated form, of what larger reality is it a form? Buckley is suggesting that poetry in its very processes is capable of mimicking (or representing) the sacred, reaching toward it, being imbued with its significances, creating graspable forms of it, of granting a sacred gravity to the work of the poet, but that it is not synonymous with the sacred, and nor does the poet take on the mantle of the divine. In such formulations Buckley reveals both the desires of the poet for completion, even election, in sacred processes; but equally, he acknowledges the limits of such desires, and their proper place within a scheme of truth much greater than even poetry can encompass.

R: But while I think that Buckley's sense of 'the forming of a verbal statement with the completion of a rhythmic movement both on the page and from within the psyche' is similar to Eliot's account of generation, I think in comparison Eliot is even more self-occluding—not concealing the self exactly, but the self hiding the self. Self is that which stands between us, and being able to see through to the person, as it were.

L: What you're saying here really brings up again the question of the power of the prophetic poet. That there can be, in one aspect of the myth, the power and the completion of the poet in what they are doing, and how they are relating to their audience, for instance. Whereas what you're saying in relation to Eliot is quite a different process. It's about that breaking open, moving beyond those forms to something else. But Buckley does have a glimpse of that insight, of these very different understandings of the prophetic, don't you think?

R: Oh yes, after all, he would have read the Eliot material. Eliot also talks about the burden…in several different images…coming back to this idea several times. He usually speaks of it in terms of a burden, but sometimes as a haunting. The poet is haunted by something, whose face and name and figure is not known but is nonetheless a constant

presence, until resolution's found by achieving the poem. A temporary lifting of the burden of guilt and boredom that lies on all of us.

L: Oh, my goodness…isn't it awful to put those two things together, out there on the table, just like that! [laughter]. But this is a very different understanding from Eliot, isn't it, of that approach which—perhaps more forgivingly—understands human beings as fleshed, political, living, breathing creatures, and the sacred as not somehow just unknown and external to humanity. The sacred as intimately interacting with us in our humanness. In our bodily and our historical lives. A refusal to make the historical and the political and the material oppositional to the sacred? I think this is what Buckley is concerned with, and what critic and poet Rowe sees in Buckley's work as theopoetics. I'm interested in these incarnational aspects in Buckley's work.

R: I think again there's a wonderfully simple and haunting formulation by William Blake. Do you remember where he says, in a jotting which is repeated several times as you read through the collected poems: 'Thou art a man. God is no more. Thine own humanity learn to adore.' It's tricky.

L: I find myself [laughter] very uncomfortable with that.

R: It can be read both as saying the old regime is finished, and god, that old god, is no more. We've got rid of the old god. Thou art a man…You can say that in front of a mob of French revolutionary enthusiasts. But if you read it the other way, thou art a man, so is *God.* That's what the incarnation means, and for that very reason, god is now inside us…it's about immanence.

L: It's a very brave saying, isn't it? It's saying secularity reigns, so what are the consequences? What are you going to learn at the end of your secular knowledge?

R: Well, it's saying that there is nothing but the secular world. But that world is sacred. It curls back on itself. Because what is the correct apprehension of 'a man,' a human? It's to adore the human.

L: And Blake sees humanity as a long way from knowing how to adore the human? Knowing how to embody that adoring spirit. It's beyond irony, his saying, isn't it? It's a provocation ...

R: Yes, I think it's one of the kernels of Blake's writing.

L: And that's so interesting in the context of Buckley's poetic sequence *Golden Builders*, because we know Buckley was so influenced by Blake. Critic and poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe describes *Golden Builders* as 'a transcendentally local poem' (88), a claim that can be read as the manifestation of Buckley's own earlier critical pronouncement: 'Poetry deals with man [*sic*] at a metaphysical level—but with man's metaphysical status reflected in his actual state, localised in his actual physical surroundings, embodied in his sensuous and spiritual reactions to his world' (*Essays*, 1).

In contrast, by the 1980s poststructuralism was teaching many of us to ask whether language —physical, rooted, local and specific as it may claim to be, or transcendent of those material realities—can ever approach anything beyond language itself. In his essay on Buckley, Wallace-Crabbe offers us two schools of thought in regard to language and the poet:

> Surely at the base of the modern poet's craft we have a choice of two positions: the atavistic one, that poems are a form of magic and thus have

> powers to transcend the ordinary limitations of discourse; or the sceptical one, that no language consists of accurate signs for parallel units of experience, so that all one can do is to construct whole poems, contraptions whose elaboration is so subtly done that it can mime a block of experience as merely linear language can never do. (90)

I wonder whether Wallace-Crabbe is offering us an overly-rational picture of the 'choice'—made by whom—poets? critics? readers?—between these two positions. While agreeing with him that these are the terms which modern poets and critics have faced, both before and after the paradigm shift of poststructuralism, might it be that poets have always been seeking—and failing to find—ways of being *both* magian *and* consummate contraption builders? In terms such as 'incarnation,' 'immanence,' 'transcendentally local,' 'magian,' 'embodied sacred,' do we not have expressions of the ongoing *desires* of poets, rather than the description of any product? If so, we might argue that the sacred is only ever manifest in *processes*: processes of desire and processes of writing; a glimpsing of the rose at the moment of its perfection, which is also the moment of its demise. Is it in the *struggle and process* to 'lift' the pre-eminently material and palpable real into a relationship with the metaphysical realm that we see the magnificent, doomed process of sacred longing? Equally, for *readers* of such poetry, is it in the choices *they* make—whether to move *with the poem's* struggle, or to choose a spiritual scepticism—that the real reading occurs? Is *choice* the right notion here?

The closing passage of Buckley's poem 'Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions', from an earlier section of *Golden Builders and other poems*, positions Buckley's high serious response—part choice, part compulsion, part construction—to his sacred calling:

> …When the bush burns to ashes
> I still must touch my forehead to the ground,
> because its radiance is in my body.
> Gods are vulgar. So are journeys.
> Ulysses sails to find a speck of blood
> in the newly woven pattern; Orpheus
> goes down to find mortality a blessing.
> I walk beside these fires because I must,
> in pain and trembling sometimes thanking God
> for what they give me, the few poems
> that are the holy spaces of my life. (*Selected,* 99)

Again we see this moving combination of humility and force in Buckley's conception of the poet. To figure one's own poetic activities in terms of ancient Greek and Old Testament images—Ulysses' journey, Moses' burning bush, Orpheus' quest—is surely hubristic to the modern ear. Yet there is humility in phrases such as 'the few poems,' and even in the image of 'holy spaces' with its indication of all that exists beyond such ephemeral and rare moments. There is also a touching humanness in the opening lines here: 'When the bush burns to ashes / I still must touch my forehead to the ground.' If Moses' bush burns with the radiance of divine presence, then of what is its burning to ashes indicative? The withdrawal of the divine? And how is the speaker here configured, still touching his forehead, in obedience and reverence, to the ground? The figure of the poet/worshipper might be read here as equal parts reverent, stoical and fated. The speaker is compelled to walk beside these fires, and the ashes, 'because I must, / in pain and trembling sometimes thanking God...'

What do you make of this humility of the critic here, as he invokes both the prophetic role of the poet in relation to the presence of the divine; but at the same time the poet's awareness that God's presence may indeed have departed? The bush burns to ash. Poetry no longer has the power it once had. It is a minority art.

R: Yes, I want to pick up on Buckley's word 'attenuated'—poetry as sharing in sacred acts or processes, in however attenuated a form. It suggests that poetic language does not have the fullness of presence that the sacred has. But further than this, I wonder whether, if there is the sense that art can be sacred, does this link anywhere with the notion that art can also be 'satanic'? One of the things that used to be said about Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy' was that it expressed her feelings about her growing up, her feelings about her father. I've never quite believed that. I think that 'Daddy' is actually about Ted Hughes, a missile flung at him, and it has the force of a curse.

L: Yes [nervous laughter] you introduce a very interesting notion there—the satanic.

R: Well, if there is 'a sacred,' isn't there 'a satanic'? One of the things that distinguishes mere badness from evil is the fact that it reaches new proportions, it takes on a different kind of existence. Our normal shelter from the power that is being let loose is to try and assimilate it within our sacred categories. An habitual response of a lot of people to something evil or desperately fearful is to cross oneself, or to say, like the woman who is being strangled in that Hitchcock film, 'Christ Jesus!'

L: But you could say that that these are atavistic responses, or institutionally learned responses to something beyond one's own power…but that raises so many further questions about the category of the sacred. It's necessary to acknowledge those mid-twentieth century theorists of the sacred, such as Bataille and Girard, who confront the horrors of the world wars and the holocaust, and who lock into expressions of the sacred as violent, and blood-drenched, as linked to rituals and practices such as scape-goating and sacrifice.

R: Is 'pagan' the word we'd use here? That's one of the things I find most startling and painful in Christianity and Judaism, this vengeful God, this God who is calling for burnt offerings, for sacrifice, and who is not appeased by anything less.

L: Or is it human beings imagining that that's what God is calling for?

R: Oh, absolutely…

L: I don't believe I ever hear God saying, now you'll burn ten goats…I think of Abraham and Isaac, and the *withholding* of the knife. That's a story there, at the heart of the Old Testament. But [nervous laughter] of course there was the whole drama of testing Abraham, and there were all those plagues and floods and blood-lettings, weren't there…

R: Indeed! Nonetheless, for the sacred to bring with it, or for its shadow to be cast as satanic, doesn't seem to me to be out of touch with a whole lot of Western culture, to be what a whole lot of Western culture has come to…

L: But are you seeing that as a Western cultural category mistake, to see the satanic as embedded within the sacred?

R: My answer to that would be to go back to Blake, to remember his saying: God is no more, that old God is no more…the new God is Christ.

L: But there's also something bloody—blood-letting—about God placing Christ on the cross, isn't there? The Blakean notions of satanic mills and human evil are there, aren't they, in Buckley's *Golden Builders* sequence? The darkness, the concrete, the machinery, as well as the compulsion of human forging and changing of the landscape. That is sometimes registered as satanic in the poem, don't you think?

R: Yes, perhaps satanic is the word for it. But I don't want to suggest that industrial activity [laughter] is satanic in itself…

L: But the poem does bring together those questions of the material and the historical and the embodied world, and where the spirit might be in that—he uses the word spirit. Both human spirit, the individual spirit, but also the spirit to create, to forge and to make. But it's a poem which is worried—you might even say confused—by the powers of the human spirit and of creativity.

R: I think, on the whole, it's a more *choreographed* poem than I would have expected at that point in Buckley's career. Choreographed into formal shapes and rhythms that are in some ways modelled on the Blake originals, but nonetheless have their own character here. But around it, in the *Collected Poems,* there is a variety of other poems. *Golden Builders* feels to me like a sort of...something which might carry you to the top of a wave and down on the other side. But it seems to be arrested in the very act of forming itself. It has a repertoire of movements, of stationary points and emphatic collisions, and so on…and that came to me as a surprise when I first read *Golden Builders*.

L: Why a surprise…in what ways?

R: I had been expecting a more informal, exploratory poem…it seemed to me that Buckley's powers of observation and meditation on the world observed had been growing stronger, richer as the years had gone by. This poem I find a more formalised and posed poem. I don't mean it's posing…I mean it's more poised perhaps…it's choreographed to be the thing that it is.

L: I take those points…but yours is a very different reading, isn't it, to those critics who read it as refreshingly vernacular, local—about the sacred in the place we know as Melburnians? But would you say Robin, that part of your response to the poem can be explained by thinking more broadly about the limits of literary representation. You're stressing the repertoire, the posedness of the poem, but these things point to the limits of the literary. Language as the formulation *after* the fact, and after the exploration…This suggests the limitedness, the inadequacy, the failure of language to ever embody what we have been talking about as the sacred?

But related here to the question of form in *Golden Builders* is the ways in which it is also a quite Catholic poem in its movements, isn't it? In the sense of Catholic ritual and Catholic liturgy, that repetition and that incantatoriness.

R: Oh, indeed.

L: And that seems to be a different way of thinking about it than your word 'posedness' indicates, doesn't it?

R: Well, it is a different point. But I don't think the two things are in conflict. I would see that incantatory, ritualised material as being itself a part of the dance. In a way the poem, for that reason, reminds me of Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday.' But the kind of quality I'm trying to put

against it is one that comes out in numbers of Buckley's smaller poems, which appear around *Golden Builders* in the *Collected Poems.* You might remember poem 'II' in the *Golden Builders* sequence where he is writing about a nest of rats at the back of the oven in a house the speaker is living in—and the way in which the man's violence against the rats is so surprising to the reader, when you actually realise what's happening. And then the tables are turned…he gets the rats up into formation, they're cowering back away from him, until, like Spartan warriors, a shrieking jump at his knees ends the stanza. It's not that I have a particular hatred of rats, I don't [laughter] but the *surprisingness* of that is something that *Golden Builders* is not designed to give very much of. I mean, I think it's quite a conscious decision it will be such and such a sort of poem, and it's got its poetic models. But if it's a turning point, as you suggest, it may be a turning away from the kinds of directions we thought the poet was developing. And that's interesting in itself.

L: By surprising, do you mean also to the poet? Do you mean that those smaller poems are less controlled, less in control? And does *Golden Builders* therefore fail to convince in the end, by comparison?

R: No, it doesn't fail to convince. It convinces me but stops me. I find that in reading I am quite gripped by the poem as I read it, but it doesn't continue inside me for the days and nights afterwards, in the same way that other poetry does. It doesn't, for me, have that still-growing quality that a lot of literature I particularly value has…the Eliot material is interesting here. The way it so frequently brings a sort of tremolo of movement, out of what you thought was an already finished and still image. For instance, if you're reading the first sequence of 'Burnt Norton,' 'Quick said the bird.' Once you get to that point, how amazing everything is:

> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> Into our first world, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
> There they were, dignified, invisible
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> in the autumn heat, through the vibrant air..'(189-90)

There they were, and then they're gone again. What is this 'they'? Well in a way we know they're echoes. But echoes of what? We're not allowed to know yet…

L: So you're talking at one level of a playfulness with the reader, an openness, and also a provoking the reader to explore?

R: Well, it's inviting the reader into a dance…what I feel is a quality in the poetry which is like…I don't know whether you've seen photos of Nijinsky's *'L'après-midi d'un faune'*? And that profile quality in the choreography. He makes all the dancers walk in profile to the audience. No-one's permitted to see a face or a figure full-on. So it's like a silhouette. But it's a moving, actual person. Not a silhouette. There's more to it than that. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' too is inviting the mind and the senses into a series of losing your place and recovering it…

L: At the end of 'Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions' we come to that piece where the narrator says 'When the bush burns to ashes / I still must touch my forehead to the ground,' which we mentioned earlier. This section for me does convey the power, but also the lostness of the narrator. There is a sense in which all the repertoires fall away in the end, isn't there? For the

narrator who bows his head to the ground there is an honouring of something beyond the self. Somehow, the gift of writing poetry has brought that speaker into a holy place.

R: Yes, that is amazing. But what are we to make of the burning bush reduced to ashes?

L: Yes, it's double, isn't it, opening up but also closing down the possibilities of the sacred? The burning bush should not be brought to ashes. It should burn eternally.

R: The ashes go back to Eliot of course. 'Ash on an old man's sleeve,' in 'Burnt Norton.' By the time you get to the final movements of the poem the whole enclosed world of 'Little Gidding' is brightness and blindness, giving you some sense of what those fires that have reduced things to ashes are standing against. But I don't know what to make of the burning bush in 'Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions.' The bowing has its place with other ritual images in the poem, and is very strong, but…one is just left with the burnt bush on the hands, so to speak.

NOTES

[1] Robin Grove was a long-time member of the English Department, studying there between 1959 and 1962, and lecturing there between 1963 and 2006. Lyn McCredden was a student there between 1973 and 1987, tutor from 1976 to 1988, and a lecturer, after Buckley's time, from 1989 to 1995.

[2] See *Encyclopædia Britannica Online.*
http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/265050/hierophany

[3] See, for example, Aquinas: *Creatura spiritualis est in sua essentia omnino simplex. Sed remanet in ea compositio duplex: essentiae cum esse et substantiae cum accidentibus*: The spiritual creature is completely simple in its essence, but a two-fold composition remains within it: the composition of essence with existence and that of substance with accidents (1914).

[4] See the essay 'Intimate Distance: Patrick White and the Australian Sacred' (Ashcroft et al *Intimate,* 33-68).

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