

# Spaces in the Poetry of Vincent Buckley<sup>1</sup>

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I remember Vincent saying you could sometimes tell, when a person came into a room, that he hadn't come in thinking. Vin<sup>2</sup> wasn't like that himself. There was always something in the space inside the head and it often contrasted or conflicted with the assumptions and atmosphere prevailing in the room. The argument of this paper is that the forms and functions of space in his poetry change in ways that mark its larger changes. Even the initial given distinction between self—or mind, or what is in the head—and what is outside, is eventually partly dissolved.

In Buckley's poetry before *Golden Builders* spaces tend to be occluded, their boundaries protective, oppositional. Walls dam emotion, prevent entry, or charge a closed space with energy. Space to *be* must be striven for; space to be oneself:

I, somehow I, climb come  
Self-hauled by a straining bush, by  
Sideways flint, by  
(Even)  
The wind,  
Hauled, like a sideways crab, up,  
Suddenly to be held ... ('Good Friday and the Present Crucifixion,' [Arcady] 59)

In life, the best present you could give him was to clear a drawer and tell him he could use it for his papers. Shared spaces might be fiercely contested; he would commend 'fighting your corner' as a mark of moral courage. (The rats in 'Golden Builders II' are dignified as Spartans, heroes of 'Ghosts, Questions, Places, Stories'.) Yet some of the 'corners' or closed off areas in the early poetry are relatively unexamined. What lies behind them is avoided or visited only with self-distancing irony.

*Golden Builders* breaks some of the constraints of the earlier work as it charts the breaking open of a city. Pain is exposed, claustrophobic violence behind closed doors is named. The dismantling of the city so affects what is inside the speaker's head as almost to annihilate it: he retreats into its furthest corner, the 'old brain', only to find a source of nightmare to match what is happening outside. ('O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.') Yet the destruction releases great energy for a new engagement with the city. Spaces open into mutual awareness between groups. Gaps are welcomed as openings for growth. Boundaries fail, at times nightmarishly, but also at points of equipoise where what is in the head and what is outside seem to hold each other steady, almost become interchangeable: 'you count on the light-switch / Staying unmoved, the lemon-flower stalk / Not moving on the glass's rim' ('Practising Not Dying (ii),' 159).

*Golden Builders* brought experiment with physical dimension. The Canadian poems envisage space as unbounded distance, almost without landmarks. It is experienced in near-silence, in something close to non-being. In *The Pattern*, Buckley undertakes a slow delicate reverse journey through both space and time, from the Australian present to his haunted tribal past in Ireland, making out the links between the two source countries that in his earlier poetry were kept apart. Boundaries become lines of connection. In his last books, domestic spaces are revisited with a new ease while poems about Ireland and his Australian youth sit freely together. 'Fighting your corner' gives way to a co-presence, of self and other, being and non-being.

Buckley's poetry closely follows the trajectories of his life. My paper aims to respond to that closeness by combining analysis with reflection, focussing on the poetry but drawing aspects of the life alongside. For example, the empathy he showed in both life and poetry with his father's experience of being blocked and entrapped gives a peculiar charge of feeling to the lines in *Golden Builders* quoting Blake:

In the long tilting stiff-grass paddocks  
With ecstasy you heard the ploughboy  
Say 'the gates are open, father.' (166)

The stiff-grass paddocks are more Romsey than they are Blake's fields. We put 'the gates are open, father' on Patrick Buckley's headstone as the thing Vin would most want to have said to his own father.

'Spaces' can hardly be discussed without reference to barriers and boundaries. Nor can 'space' be given a single or stable definition given the changes and transitions in the *oeuvre*. The point of this essay is to consider some of the ways in which the definitions of space change within those.

The world of *The World's Flesh* is something of a terra nullius for the rhetoric to blow through: a few mostly symbolic spaces are invoked—tombs, churches, the eucharistic space prepared in the receiver's body for the Host, 'a room / Which only you may enter' (*The World's Flesh* 30)—but it is mostly wind, earth, sea, light, dark, earth, trees and fathers. There is an unnamed house which mysteriously fails to 'hold' the wind:

O winds, winds, lay siege to this cold house,  
Where souls hide sickening behind grey panes.  
... nothing here has walls  
To hold the escaping dark continuous wind. ('Winter Gales,' 2)

What lies behind the invocations becomes a little clearer in a poem in *Masters in Israel*:

Light wake early in this house;  
Blackened pot, and roof, and chain,  
Walls and light-encroaching mouse,  
All be trampled by that grace;  
Tortured woman, tortured man,  
Turn within your spirit's space,  
Waking into daily pain. ...

Outside again, the pain will call  
 Her body to its desperate pass,  
 And he with strangling hands will curse  
 The flight of bees from wall to wall. ('Various Wakings,' *Masters* 5–6)

The stylistic advances into clarity are obvious but there is still avoidance: I take the speaker's plea, 'Bone of my bone', to be urging his ancestors to relieve the pain of his parents, but its syntax is intractable. He ends:

And, Wind of my adoring, come  
 Under the vine-leaves to their heart ...  
 That under the enfeebled stars  
 They may feel happy and at home.

This now-symbolic Wind is to do what the wind in 'Winter Gales' was asked to do and the 'cold house' is half-identified, but at a remove.

In poems where he explicitly remembers his childhood, there is an invisible barrier between the house, which is not entered, and the life outside. In 'Borrowing of Trees' the trees—the 'timber wall' ([*Masters*] 7)—protect the outdoor space where it is safe to breathe; a less protected area is shared in 'Criminal Court' with other children by 'the creek' (*Masters* 3). Even when he visits as an adult, the nearest thing to a real encounter with his father is also placed outside. 'Father and Son' records a spoken and unspoken conversation in the jerky rhythms of the jinker, with a balance of communication and its inhibition. The two men are held together in a small bodily space but have the vista of 'five common miles, and back' ([*Masters*] 9) to relieve their claustrophobia. *Inside* is dangerous, *outside* relatively safe.

That opposition is subtly elaborated in 'Stroke', in his third book *Arcady and Other Places*. Here his father is dying in a cot inside a ward inside a hospital. This enclosure seems a place for intimacy:

So small a licit breathing-space  
 Brings each inside the other's dream.

But the son holds his stance 'with a stiff face'; the father lies 'strapped to a bed',

... a cot from which only a hand escapes. (51–52)

The small space holds them slightly, finally, apart. In the more pungent, freer language of *Last Poems*, this is their inheritance:

... *Ned Kelly's father and my grandfather?*  
*Ordinary people my arse. They were chained foxes.* ('Oral History,' 438)

'Once', in section III of 'Stroke', when the boy is 'sitting out / At night', the father is beside him, two outsiders seemingly joined in a silent reverie. There is an element of near-paralysis in this scene too—the frost, 'the horse / Tethered, the stars almost moving'—and in the watcher:

A cross-legged kid with a brooding nose  
 His hands were too chilled to wipe,  
 A book whose pages he could hardly turn,  
 A silent father he had hardly learned  
 To touch ... (53)

The contact is minimal, the father barely there, but it is recalled as an important moment associated with the father if not shared, while in section VI they do share something: ‘Once, on the Kerrie road, / I drove with him through fire’ (57). Emotional contact takes place outside walls. The one place in the *oeuvre* where Vincent represents himself as looking into his father’s face (as distinct from ‘restless noticing’ 56) is when he wheels his father out of the hospital to see the trees (58).

One simple reason for the absence of rooms in these childhood memories may be biographical: Vin shared a bedroom with his brother. No one room was the territory of any person. But in later periods, when he revisits his childhood, rooms do appear together with his mother and her anguish. In the earlier stages they are locked away. Outside the house there is a measure of freedom from anxiety in which to contemplate his father.

While the landscape in section III of ‘Stroke’ is laid out with markers of community (church, police station), it is observed and felt as *private space*: to a large extent this remains true for Australian landscape in his poetry. Space is defined as public in a city. He left home to start secondary school in the city and returned increasingly as an urban stranger. In this character, a poem in *Arcady and Other Places* does take him inside the family house. His parents try, politely, to engage his interest:

I stare  
 At the rust encroaching on the walnut branches  
 Or the pile of litter where the biggest pine tree  
 Used to stand, before my absence killed it.

Half-projecting his obscure guilt onto them, he is not so much a speaker as a silence. As he leaves

They stand,  
 Timid, waving to watch me go, barely  
 Visible in the window’s copper sheen (‘Parents,’ 61).

Their presences are fixed together inside and growing fainter. The house where he grew up can still be entered only with remorseful irony. Even the window is reflective rather than transparent.

Finally, in ‘Burning the Effects’:

a whole lumber-room,  
 Heaved out of doors, struggles to return  
 Some showing for a life’s delirium ... (90)

In the strong line-stop of ‘struggles to return’, the dead effects resist being ‘cleared away’, but the son pursues the logic of his father’s life—or his own emotions—and commits the father’s inside life to the open bonfire:

Nothing of it is absolutely mine,  
And he who hoarded it owned nothing. Free.

The demarcations in these poems mark out a territory of avoidance.

If landscape woke the sight, the city stimulates the public speaker: the rhetorician's voice dominates the first two collections and to some extent the poems own the voice that drives them as belonging to a public man: a Writer. At Melbourne University he does have something of his own, if still not 'absolutely': a room. Such rooms are marked-out private spaces in the public institution, where the teacher is employed and the writer is empowered. In 'Late Tutorial' the speaker's room is a semi-public space, controlled by the teacher who admits the students to it, yet inhibiting for him and also them. There is a gap between the students' shy expectations of their teacher and the visionary rhetoric inside that teacher's head. His head becomes the private space that they are not admitted to. There, he is poet, seer, healer:

And should I say

'O man is sick, and suffering from the world,  
And I must go to him, my poetry  
Lighting his image as a ring of fire,  
The terrible and only means I have ... '

The talk would die in loud embarrassment,  
The books be rustled, and the noses blown  
In frenzy of amazement at this short  
Still youthful puppet in academic gown. ([*Masters*] 11)

If he should admit the students to his inner space, where he situates 'the world', he must deal with the social consequences, and he chooses not to. The demarcations are clear, the irony appealing, but the internal rhetoric is not subjected to scrutiny. There is self-protection in the protection of the inner space.

That poem's space is conflicted. But in 'Impromptu for Francis Webb' the imagined room is dedicated to one task, writing, to become a pressure-cooker of energy, an expanding micro-universe:

The frost-bitten fingers write; the room grows tall  
With dread or exultation at the hand  
Designing in words its own topless wall. ([*Masters*] 15)

There is a clear heroic echo of the topless towers of Ilium, the noble writing ancestry of Marlowe and Yeats. Excitement courses through the poem, lifting up its over-general imagery into the strong empathy of one writer who feels threatened by the world for another writer whose experience of threat is greater still: 'All images of envious nature try / Their powers on your room, and will not fail' ([*Masters*] 18). The room is fortress and betrayer, the invading powers both inimical and saving. In this poem, Buckley gives himself over to his own furious belief in the salvific function of poetry and the room becomes the space for its enactment.

In other poems, written not long afterwards, the teacher-writer's room acquires a third function as a space for private meetings. In 'Love Poems 11', the room becomes a space to *be* in a new way:

From the strong, sweetness:  
 In every word you speak  
 Low-toned or laughing in my room,  
 As in your arms, I seek  
 My honeycomb. ([*Selected Poems*] 35)

This place of joy for two, however, can become a prison for one:

But then, a brief tense hour, and you are gone  
 Walking in sunlight; and I walk my room,  
 A man driven yet paralysed in one. ...

Table and books and chairs, the cabinet  
 Recoiled, the papers carelessly thrown down,  
 Blank window, voiceless door ... ([*Selected Poems*] 'Love Poems 5,' 28)

At this still early stage, the room is a clearly bounded space for teaching and writing and for private meetings: important but at times oppressive. The poet-teacher lives out his contradictory public roles within that semi-private space.

At the time of *Arcady and Other Places*, a large part of Vincent's life was in shadow and many poems were kept unpublished. For publication he became oblique and assumed the masks of mythology and satire. Apart from the poems about his father, his imagined spaces are those of utopia, eutopia and dystopia. His mythological landscapes are invested with a deepened sensuality:

I find with slow hand the black cherrywood  
 Deep-skinned, smooth, as though grained with runnels  
 Where the long drop of water slides. ('Cherry Tree in Fog,' 87)

His political poems pay close attention to body language but the city-scapes are everywhere and nowhere: 'the streets go crazy at his lifted hand' ('Youth Leader,' 93):

Like a boy fetched out of nightmare  
 ... the grand old man  
 Blinks on a surfeit of smoky light ... ('Return of a Popular Statesman,' 95)

Public spaces are generalised into anonymity, showing only crowds and public figures. These spaces are delocalised rather than shut away.

Two poems in the collection *Golden Builders* show a refinement of the techniques in *Arcady* and seem to be an extension of that book. If myths haunt his landscapes in *Arcady*, these poems 'see' a kind of bodily displacement of the living by the dead. 'Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions' ends by 'thanking God' for 'the few poems / that are the holy spaces of my life' (125) and its particular holy space vibrates with hauntings: a visible release of inner presences. The speaker imagines his friends crying out:

What is that inside you  
 that makes your shadow flicker on the grass?  
 Heatless and demanding presences,  
 I will endure you; but you shall not be my gods. (124)

The dead contest the space within his body, even interfering with its shadow. In ‘Christmas Cold’, which first places him alone with his mother inside the family house, she tells him that ‘the friend of her girlhood is dead, / the Monsignor ...’.

‘They buried him today  
 In Kyneton, among the family ...  
 ... they’re all out there ....’ ...  
 I can’t turn round; I feel  
 her eyes look through me through the window ... (126)

It’s a new kind of separation. Instead of the parents being seen through a glass darkly, the speaker—his back apparently turned—has himself become the glass through which she sees another.

When this perception is revisited in *Last Poems* there is a subtle difference that marks a larger change:

the dead who have come back  
 to shine in the windows,  
 the living indoors who  
 will sit like shades in the chairs,  
 their skin blown in by smiles... (‘It is like a work rhythm,’ 469)

There is no longer any certainty as to who is ‘really’ there and who is the dislodging ghost: dead and living are both real, both ghostly; they co-exist almost transparently to one another.

*Golden Builders* marks the great transition. He began this sequence—which caused much excitement as it started to come out—when the sight and sound of his old bluestone Jesuit school being demolished opened his attention to all the demolition and rebuilding in his city. It uses many forms, which create their own lines of separation, while internal lacunae appear and the city is broken apart. It is a poem of mutability in musical and spatial terms: ‘In gaps of lanes, in tingling / shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines’(153). The machines have their own weird music, wonderfully interpreted by George Tibbetts, and the first perception is that, as its walls—sound barriers—come down, the penetrating noise of demolition unifies the city. Spaces that were separate are now linked: ‘the hammers are molten, they flow with quick light / striking; the flush spreads and deepens on the stone. / The drills call the streets together ...’ (153).

The poem launches itself from Blake’s *Jerusalem* and is Blakean in its macro and microcosmic perspectives, seeing, each in the other, ‘the city’—Melbourne, conceivably Jerusalem—and ‘the old city’ (161) of the human brain. In the two ‘Practising Not Dying’ poems the speaker lies in the posture of death trying to compose what is left to him, his consciousness:

And you say  
 Over and over  
 As if paying tribute money  
 'The environment is inside me'.

But you know the street  
 Is full of false notes,  
 That you lie in the centre  
 Of rectangles, spaces of sound. ('VI,' 159)

The 'rectangles, spaces of sound' do much to articulate this poem's sense of space as being like and painfully unlike the cosmic spheres—one within another while their music drills its way through every barrier. Repeatedly the sections focus on the impact of destruction on the brain: the brain being the last space to retreat to and the worst place to find being demolished. In fact, brain and skull are more insisted on throughout the *oeuvre* than rooms.

The poem asks in many ways whether a man can survive his loss of habitat. In section XV the speaker has to vacate his room. He warns it: 'Don't watch me. I need / not to be watched' (170), but when he goes, 'the room tilts', dismantling itself to seem like death. One danger such a man faces is dissociation, and already in the fourth poem a figure is introduced as 'the watcher' who is only vaguely identified with the speaker, both of whom 'see nothing' (157). It might seem that the pavements and walls are the barriers that demolition will remove but when the figure reappears in 'XIX' as 'the poet / the Montale watcher-figure' (175) the suggestion is rather that poetry itself is one symptom of a malaise that runs through the whole human process of construction and destruction.

For the sequence is profoundly ambivalent. Another unifying principle comes into being in response to the sound: a digging up, a reconstruction of discrete memories buried in the city. Section II juxtaposes memories of the struggle for room to live. In a 'small crouched brick house', 'in the blank stone furnace', rats once made their home but the speaker remembers how he smoked them out and killed them. More recently, on a 'cleared space', he attacks the centipedes: 'I kill them with a spade between the bricks' (154). He affects to keep this violence private while publishing it here, encapsulating the anomaly of poetry within the rest.

Again and again the violence behind walls is exposed, if only in the speaker's mind—the imprisoned dogs whose existence the dean denies, though 'all weekend the wind brings / ... their pause and gulping cry' (169), the abortion, the delusional murder: 'Pieter, when he came back into the room ... Crying / "Have I killed you, brother ... ?"' (158). Barriers themselves suggest violence: 'flat green metal shields / like shock troops' (163). One powerful drive through the sequence is the feeling of relief as well as adrenalin-rush when what was hidden is exposed to air—'Purblind walls / peeled back like an onion-skin' (158).

Memories are released in the face of the destruction of the places that contained them and among these is a deep sense that some are sacred. The old bluestone church could accommodate the private ('Bodies / that wanted song and space / singing inside their cramp,' 171); the sexes who 'lie in love on the grave mound' (183) may be desecrating both or conversely enjoying a Blakean freedom; but the girl almost too shy to buy the petrol to immolate herself, who kills herself in

public having nowhere else to go, is violated. The speaker's raised imagination is itself violated by imaginary graffiti intruding on the most private space of all:

Any day, walking from room to room,  
You'll see FOETUS  
scrawled on a concrete wall  
in black. (174)

All this upheaval produces great engagement with the city. Streets that were just 'the streets' in the 'Political Poems' now have names: 'Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon' (153). The colonial history behind them is invoked—'On this day / we laid this stone' (153)—only to be overlaid with other histories from elsewhere:

But  
friendly Marco            at 3 a. m.        drunk crying  
into Lygon Street's unending funnel  
*this shit of a country* (176)

'Vasco, Croat Socialist', 'Roman, Ukrainian, / proud as a Turk' (163); 'the Greek clubs', 'the State Library', 'the side door of St. Francis' (168): these individuals and their haunts are laid out laterally, in a geography that represents sequential group arrivals and segregations. Their adjacent lives are brought into connection through a stirring up of memories as if the barriers between them had been physically removed. A great deal of the breaking down and new connection in the poem is in fact mental:

Round the stone corner ...  
she burnt herself to death...  
... That night  
I was drinking, to the background  
of soft halloo-ing Irish music,  
arguing Vietnam. (158)

All Buckley's allegiances, personal history, poetic themes and preoccupations are brought into the poem as somehow invested in the city: in that sense he invests himself in it.

The countering disconnection of city life and memory itself is registered in disparate forms divided and numbered into sections. Within many of those appears another kind of division simulating gaps of lanes and spaces between bricks: internal line gaps and irregular spacings. Life appears in these spaces and flows across them, rhythmically, as reflections and feeling fill the silences; physically, as the city lies open to lawless propagation: 'seeds caught in / brick crevices'(173); 'birdsongs drift like seeds in the air' (184); 'through the window, a globule / Of hot weld ... / A seed from the uprooted spiky bush' (156). These spaces acknowledge the unknown, the not-yet life. Although the final sections mark a retreat into a stunned existentiality, the poem is open and experimental on a quite new scale.

If it has heroes, they are the demolitionists:

They mount their platform    they lean on their shovels and sing  
the hammer sound wavers across them ...

Tell me there, brother, do you have information re the New Order?  
 Is that the word of life you tap on the steel core?  
 Is it the salt sea you bring tingling with each irregular stroke?  
 Are these platforms you stand on mounts for a new sermon?  
 In the sun, in the storm's eye, is the future Christ crouched? (179)

For all its ironies, section XXII is the most substantial and the most triumphantly in command of its own energies. Indeed, the workmen's platforms seem the most stable foundations in the city. The large indented blocks of verse look and feel like building blocks for some construction whose final shape is not yet known and even the possibility of future sacred spaces is not discounted.

The innovatory print-spaces through much of the collection *Golden Builders* are part of a general relaxation of form brought by American poetry to this country from the late sixties. In 'Youth and the Old Woman', gaps within and between lines carry as if on a light wind the intermittence of memory and speech, outside the bounds that held his mother invisible before. In the Canadian poems gaps further distance: 'Through the curved window, line / line seamless horizon' ('Northern circle,' 110). These poems are as quiet as the series *Golden Builders* was not. They are stilled by an intensity of cold. When Vin arrived in Edmonton in January he slept for the first week in the only room on campus without double glazing and they gave him very little bedding. The experience of almost freezing, and the gratefulness of glass, are major factors in these poems in which windows refine silence and snow is almost warm: 'I am earthed here / indoors, in the snow heaped / like white sand' ('North-West Winter,' 115). Space seems interchangeable with time, unlimited except by coastlines and reflections. In their near-immobility, the Canadian poems contain some of the most exquisite phrasing in his work: 'a heron's foot lifting the marsh-water' ('Coming from Oregon,' 144); 'the cigarette / tears at your lip'; 'winds like ropes falling'; 'shadow of the milk/ flowing into the cup'; 'a sighing whisper in the egg' ('Northern circle,' 111, 115, 112).

'Lightning and Water' and *Late Winter Child* open up rooms as domestic spaces: winds blow their curtains. The poetry now suggests fleeting analogues and metaphoric connections between one kind of space and another, as in this unusual image for birth in *Late Winter Child*, in which being and non-being are related mysteries:

(so ... in the clear space  
 by this wall, the cat will leap  
 and fill the sight completely  
 as a door opening  
     open darkness beyond it). ('XXI,' 210)

This book inhabits ambiguity, alive to seemingly opposed conditions: absence/presence, distance/intimacy, as in phone calls between Ireland and Australia:

I reach into your voice  
 with dread  
 though you're close to me  
 as the blue vein in my arm. ('IX,' 198)

Ambiguities thread in a lifelong way through his relationship with Ireland, which began in unknown ancestry and an inheritance repressed before it entered him. One feature of it seems associated with the early glimpses of domestic misery and rage in ‘Various Wakings’, the ancestors in ‘Stroke’, ‘For hatred jumping every wire fence’, and the grandfather, ‘small, loveless, sinister’ (55). Painstakingly, in *The Pattern*, Vincent uncovers these feared emotions and their possible transition into himself by tracing their sources in Ireland itself and its terrible post-fifteenth-century history. This book marks a second critical shift.

Its achievement is to uncover the ‘general / fish-web of fathers’ (224) behind his own: to come to see himself not as a personally offended inheritor of a culturally denied injustice, with its rhetoric of ‘my people’, but as part of a complex historic process. Its precise tracings of Irish history and geography are matched with the precise records of suffering kept by the inflictors of it: ‘The land, too, / heard with Elizabethan voice’ (‘Gaeltacht’ 224). The book engages with the unknown through the lineaments and details of what can be known: it is an exercise in courage and restrained passion that extends its reach through time and emigration to the struggle of his grandparents and parents here. They were moving into the unknown and he is moving in a contrary, also unknown, direction to close the gap between the two great allegiances of his life. The mythical and imaginary—standing for what cannot be known—appear at ease among the facts:

a hag’s country  
because of the gaps in the land’s  
contours ...  
But in the twilight lanes their hair  
moved and dipped like manes  
of light beside the banks of fuchsia. (‘Rousings of Munster,’ 228–29)

Within this history the culture of his immediate forebears becomes less threatening, less something to be defended with anger and concealed shame: ‘They kept their heads low ... talked occasionally ... in a world-defying, wife-hating babble ... their sullenness a burden to be carried secretly ...’ (‘Gaeltacht,’ 226). In full context, that culture can be acknowledged.

Space here is distance traversed by his ancestors and himself: at once physical and psychic. The traversing represents a fish-web not just of fathers but of connections between separate regions within himself. As in a web, the separateness is the medium of connection. Through his growth in craft and the years spent in the country he became increasingly able to contemplate ambivalences in his own relation to Ireland and in Ireland’s relation to itself. *Memory Ireland* explores in prose a loss or repression of historic memory in Ireland that parallels that of his forebears. *The Pattern* recovers it for himself.

The outgrowth separating himself and his source country—‘no more than a membrane / of air’ (‘Membrane of Air,’ 273)—is both his and its. In the present that carries their fractured past, he acknowledges what is unresolved, ‘And I am willing to be, / as you want me, / guest, foreigner, son’ (269), and finds an answering tentativeness or courteous reserve in his host parents: ‘They served me: “that’s right all right”, / agreeing with everything I said, / creaking like leather with my strangeness’ (‘At Millstreet,’ 235). There is a cultural match. In *The Pattern* he can name what was unsaid in his earlier work, quoting words of James McAuley that summed up what the two friends deeply shared, “I’m terrified of the Ireland inside me” (‘Ceol-Beag,’ 259); and he can

name it because he has relocated that Ireland in its history, of which he is a part. ‘Ardmore Bay’ in *Last Poems*, has the ring of a heritage reclaimed: ‘The sea they’ll walk in summer, the land they’ll keep their own, / This is the Ireland no-one has to fear’ (498).

Already *The Pattern* revisits earlier poetic sites with a new freedom. The room as prison, for example. ‘Internment’ begins:

They have him squeezed into the square room  
Patrick Shivers stripped naked a tight bag  
covering his head ...  
fingers tight against the wall. (265)

Spaces and barriers are more provisional as well as more extreme. Being itself is provisional. The room becomes the bag, becomes the bursting brain. The only spaces are provided by the verse form and they seem to enact lapses of consciousness.

He revisits his parents’ house in the context of his mother’s ancestry. I take ‘Origins’ to be about his mother’s parents, its finely tactile details referring to stable, barn or shed.

Rustle of sacks, the straw-ends  
crushed in, the seasoned leather,  
mice, spittle, bread, dung, oats,  
whiskey, old papers, the sunsmell beating down  
onto the halfdoor ... (252)

The internal line-spaces allow a flow of unspoken emotion:

Here where your father gulped  
the water and sugar  
of a mother’s love ... (251)

‘Your Father’s House’ places the son and his mother first in her parents’ house, where they lived for part of the Depression, and then in the house her parents bought for them. The first house gives free passage between the life inside and out:

... even when,  
bedded down, fatigued with ancestry,  
kneeing the blankets, I heard their  
soft laughter rustling the kitchen  
and over the orchard’s dung smells  
the apple-trees made their furred sound  
of green moving  
it was as though  
I lay along the buds  
of my mother’s body ... (240)

That house is set against ‘the unlike house’ where Buckley’s parents lived out their own family dynamic of boundaries and tensions:

Room by room you circled it,  
 open as a razor; walked out  
 carrying the axe  
 into sunlight, quivered with the fowls, but  
 let me see  
 your arms froth in the entrails: fine-brown-featured  
 and tense, like a surviving Brontë. (241)

The killing takes place out of doors but the tension is felt inside. This image of his mother—though admiring—is very different from the free-floating memories in other poems about her: ‘a music / that came from nowhere / and struggled and denied no-one’ (‘Elegy,’ 246). It seems it took him several decades to contemplate in poetry her pain within closed rooms.

There was a double heritage in his Irish-Australianness—all her male relatives volunteered for the First World War and none of his father’s did. Vin admired his father’s family for that but seems to have found more love and mobility in hers. He was rather hurt when his mother chose to be buried not with his father but with her parents. I think the reasons are apparent here.

The changes in Buckley’s representations of space do not suggest that he freed himself from anger, depression or terror but that through time and growth in craft he found ways of allowing these into his work without having to shut them away or thunder them into submission. *Last Poems* is as full of nightmare as it is of wit. When he revisits the struggle to find space to exist it is more difficult than before, because the mind itself has become unknown territory:

To be taught the arts of war  
 you are taken into the gapped woods  
 and left there, alone, ...  
                   You move  
 as if you are living in a map,  
 carrying your thoughts into position,  
 making room for your body. (‘Soft War Poems,’ 307)

Who could say which is dominant here, the strategy or the terrain? The poem mocks the consciousness it voices by assuming the form of an hypothesis without a given (there is no map), but it is clear as to the task: to find space to exist in the terrain by understanding it enough—or without understanding it at all.

In ‘Hunger Strike’ he engages every emotion, uninhibited by being less than fully of the country—he sees that everyone around him is less than fully that. In the Blackhall poems, just because he does not have a role as ‘guest, foreigner, son’, he *digs in* to the immediate and tactile. The mind does not escape the moment and the place but co-habits with them: there are no non-war zones. Lines if anything connect: ‘the god of boundaries / begins to walk the mearing of the ditch’ (‘Notes from Blackhall,’ 358).

With your standard heart-murmur  
 and corrugated eyelids  
 and your walking stick  
 to slash at the undergrowth  
 and prod the slimed pebbles,

you are the melancholic  
 with his arts of memory:  
 you see the earth passive  
 as if it had felt nothing  
 for aeons, not even the worm-crazed birds  
 last week, in the broken cold,  
 going up and down on it. ('Notes from Blackhall,' 362)

Despite the 'arts of memory', irony does not protect. It is the opposite of Yeats's 'sixty-year-old smiling public man'. Life, human and other, goes about its business, up and down, self-recognising and estranged.

The strangeness is found in what is close:

These new scarlet blotches  
 on the backs of my hands,  
 are they Nature? or some new  
 vellum-art of the skin? ('Natura Naturans,' 363)

*Making strange* does not cancel recognition: 'the gamebird knows me enough / to walk the few steps before me' (363). 'Why does he scare so late?' ('Notes from Blackhall,' 357). Animals and children are involved in this working out of intimacy and strangeness, in a poetry that reads as both fearless and unprotected: 'in the rashness of the close / night, you ask questions about space, / as we watch the black spread like lava ...' ('Small Brown Poem for Grania Buckley,' 392).

A rich hoard of memories of childhood, youth and Sydney surface, in which the interior of his childhood house is no longer taboo nor solely the locus of his mother's suffering. Even his brother and their shared bedroom appear: 'splayed like spiders / in our dried sleep' ('Brothers,' 447). The poet's role is jettisoned in an unframed uncontested space not unlike cyber-space, where things define their own forms:

Poets, with their room-bound acts,  
 their room-soft fingers,  
 are aimless movers. But the piper,  
 thin as a coat-hanger,  
 when he squares himself onto the chair,  
 with cuddled pipes, is bound by nothing. ('Birthday Suite for Seamus Heaney,' 376)

The musician is in the room and yet not bound.

In Buckley's best last work, the mind, the self, are disciplined to co-exist with, become open to, whatever is not itself:

you are learning  
 to walk with it, to lie against it,

your earth-tremor, your vibrato  
turning you slowly into song. ('A Poetry Without Attitudes,' 454)

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A few poems quoted from Buckley's first two collections did not appear in the *Collected* and these are cited in the normal way. All other citations use the page-numbering from the *Collected*, even though the names of the collections in which they first appeared may be given in square brackets.

<sup>2</sup> The varying references to Vincent Buckley as 'Buckley', 'Vincent' and 'Vin' reflect the variations between critical discussion, biographical information and personal reminiscence.

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