

Grasping the cosmic jugular: *Golden Builders* revisited

JOHN M. WRIGHT

Some years ago I heard a British author, whose name I cannot recall, say that the education she had received in English literature was the best in that discipline available in the world. That was, she said, because she studied at Cambridge in the late 1950s under Dr F.R. Leavis. I understood what she meant. However, I believe that those of us at the University of Melbourne who had the opportunity not only to receive the transmuted wisdom of Frank Raymond Leavis through his many authorised agents (not all of whom were called Tomlinson), but also the first-hand teaching of Vincent Thomas Buckley, received the best of both worlds.

There was no precise ideological dialectic in Melbourne English—Buckley having been a cautious admirer of Leavis—but ours was a broader exposure to the full richness of English literature, particularly, I believe, religious poetry.¹ Like Buckley himself, I make the distinction here between the devotionally Christian stream of poetry, and poetry which is *religious* in the broader sense, even if its headwaters spring in Christian territory. Thus Donne, Herbert, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Yeats, Eliot.

I also could not help but believe that for critics of poetry, who were themselves also practitioners of the art, synergy was possible. And so I tended to favour Buckley, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Evan Jones over most other comers in that racked and riven Melbourne English Department of the early 1970s. (Is it too late yet for Andrew Riemer or someone else to write *Sandstone Gothic 2?*)²

Leavisism had its obvious inherent and self-perpetuating problems, narrowness chief among them. Tom Dobson, a Reader in the department and probably then in his early sixties, lent back in his chair and told a bemused tutorial group, ‘I can see a time when the whole of English literature will emerge from under the petals of Blake’s sick rose.’ He had doubtless practised the line on numerous other equally unappreciative groups over several years. Just as Maggie Tomlinson had delighted first-year undergraduates with her tartly supercilious *ad hominem* assertion that Virginia Woolf ‘knew as much about cooking as she did about eternity,’ meaning, of course, nothing worthwhile about either. No place, then, for Virginia or anyone else from the Bloomsbury set, in the literary canon of 1969. (I might confess at this point that I didn’t bother to read *To the Lighthouse* until 2003: my loss.) Department head Sam Goldberg, with his close allies Jock and Maggie Tomlinson, constituted a senior group within Melbourne English to ensure the views of Leavis were enshrined as departmental orthodoxy. It must have been amusing to watch them all modify their views on Dickens when in 1970 Leavis belatedly permitted that great novelist to take his place in the Great Tradition. But in 1970, 20 years old and studying English II, I was too much in awe of my tutor, Professor Vincent Buckley, to take much interest in such developments.

By 1975-76 the Leavis fashion was in terminal decline. So when, at about that time, Chris Wallace-Crabbe described me in his smiling way as the last of the Leavisites, I tried but couldn’t quite find a complimentary angle. (It had to do with my reading habits, he told me during the Vincent Buckley conference in February 2009. They have probably always been

too narrow and perhaps too obsessive.) Perhaps I, too, had after all been almost as much an unconscious disciple of Leavis as I was a conscious one of Buckley.

Vincent Buckley was my mentor for a life of poetry. He actually did me the service one day in 1970 of advising me in that quiet, polite and entirely assured way of his that the poem I had showed him wasn't one, 'Mr Wright, this is not a poem.' 'If you want to write poetry,' he then said, 'go outside to Royal Parade, sit on one of those nature strips in the centre of the road and describe what you actually see.' From virtually that moment, I found something of a voice and publication followed. He was a brilliant teacher, which certainly cannot be said of all distinguished scholars.

As for Vin's own voice, it still has a quotidian ring in my head, through his poetry. Whether running, cycling, walking, or just drinking quietly on the verandah, I bump into his lines. At a time when literary and cultural studies so often make more of the reader than the text, it is well to remember how poetry can actually work in our imagination. Certainly that imagination remains our own, however much enriched—and, yes, we are the readers—but it represents a triumph of text when the middle-aged person carries remembered lines joyously through life. The environment of Vincent Buckley's poetry is inside me, sharing interstices with that of Lowell, Eliot, Yeats, Shakespeare, Plath and many more. '[I]n life as in literature', writes James Wood, 'we navigate via the stars of detail...' (64). So I am not talking here about the analysis or deconstruction of poetry but the way it informs our very consciousness: the heart monitors.

I doubt it is fashionable to make such points but poetry seems to be as capable of embedding itself in the rhythms of one's daily life as pieces or passages of music. When I recollect snatches of *Clair de Lune*, *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*, *Oh Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*, the Rolling Stones' 'Angie,' Dylan's 'Mr. Tambourine Man,' or Kristofferson's 'Me and Bobby McGee,' I may or may not reflect on meaning; I may simply enjoy the sensory experience. It's about texture, our emotional standard of living, for want of a better phrase. In a simple sense, I would say that for me poetry is an intrinsic element of the inner life, operative everywhere, a defence at times against banality or oppressive routine. Yeats's wild swans will delight men's and women's eyes elsewhere than Coole and in subsequent centuries. After even the worst bushfire there will be epicormic buds. Poetry revivifies.

Let me provide some examples from Vin's *oeuvre*:

For the ageing process: 'Now, in the deeper quiet of my age,/ I feel thirty years/ Turning my blood inward' (*Collected* 53-4). And, later in the same poem ('Stroke'): 'A body shrinking round its own/ Corruption, though a long way from dying' (54). Vin was still years short of 40 when he wrote these indelible lines. But, as others have noted, especially Penelope Buckley and biographer John McLaren, his own mortality was never far from the forefront of his consciousness, thanks in part to faulty medical diagnosis when he was a young man. When I feel conscious of growing older, of being unable to read much at all without glasses, or of finding some particular hill even harder to run up than normal, Buckley's lines offer a curious, private comfort. For me, if poetry served no more than this kind of personal purpose by leaping unsolicited into my consciousness, that alone would be sufficient to justify its study.

For pathos:

and from the killing pressure on the brain
 half-blind himself. Managed
 the sentence he had not meant to speak.
 ‘Aagh Paddy. To see you like this.’
 After that, speechless. The son-in-law silent,
 roving back in his skull. My father
 weeping with one side of his grey mouth. (XII, Collected 167)

It is the hauntingly accurate observation of this last line that makes the preceding lines memorable, although the ‘roving back in his skull’ may be seen as a distinctively Buckleyan metaphor.

For **unbridled optimism**, from ‘Blake in the Body’:

It was light leaping
 All through the house; the unpruned vine
 Reached to the roof-angles.
 In the long tilting stiff-grass paddocks
 With ecstasy you heard the ploughboy
 Say ‘the gates are open, father’.
 The gates are open.
 The twinned harrows’ tines shone like earthshine. (*Collected* 166)

Even the simple request, ‘please open the gates’ almost inevitably invites these lines into my consciousness, a small and usually private joy. ‘The gates are open’, I sometimes say to my wife, Jennie, as she is about to drive off to one of her art classes. ‘The gates are open./ The twinned harrows’ tines shone like earthshine.’ Sometimes, she shakes her head at me.

Or:

At the window
 risen from the dead I sat
 thinking of the sea-horse
 dropping his children like seeds about him
 keeping an eye on them, so they float
 riderless in the water, drawn about him. (*Collected* 185)

The riderless sea-horse is an utterly memorable image of the resilience of life, gesturing as it does to the glory of evolution.

For **erotic love**, equally intense as Lowell’s ‘Oh my *Petite*,/ clearest of all God’s creatures, still all air and nerve’ (‘Man and Wife,’ *Selected* 52).

Shall I at will recall you
 As you went past me
 the hair moved on your shoulders
 the straight waist hardly walking. (‘XIX,’ *Collected* 175)

Curious, perhaps, that ‘at will’ because I need make no effort to recall these precious scraps of poetry. And ‘the straight waist hardly walking’ springs unbidden to mind quite often when I walk down a city street: it is at once intensely personal and oddly anonymous with the beauty of one signifying the beauty of many.

For the promise of summer:

It should be hot today
 the sun quivering
 the wind flat on the magnolia,
 every ounce of the earth rising. ('XIX,' *Collected* 175)

And then I think of Robert Lowell's 'blossoms on our magnolia ignite/ the morning with their murderous five days' white' ('Man and Wife,' *Selected* 52). I have not been able hear or read the word magnolia or to see one without thinking of Lowell and that tuned-engine verb 'ignite.' And this is one phrase we use at home, not just in relation to the solitary magnolia but just about any other newfound blossom. What delights me about the Buckley quote is the understated optimism embedded in the subjunctive voice: 'it should be hot today.' It would be less powerful if rendered 'it will be hot today' because *probability* carries more sensual force forward to 'every ounce of the earth rising.' With the *expectation* (rather than the certainty) of heat in these lines comes inevitably a matching expectation of sensuousness, even outright eroticism, because they conclude the *Golden Builders* poem which contains the lines I've already quoted: 'the hair moved on your shoulders/ the straight waist hardly walking.'

For **what I will call religious grief**: 'O Cardigan, Queensberry, Elgin: names of their lordships./ Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: Shall I find here my Lord's grave?' ('I,' *Collected* 153).

I could continue such deconstruction but I wish only to explain how these lines—'stars of detail'—glitter for me. To employ a Pauline notion, they represent a free gift of creative grace. I have never studied music, but I believe the way Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque* affects me is more similar to the effect of poetry than different. This is much more than simple liking. If I had never studied under Vincent Buckley, I would still have had some strong connection with literature, but doubtless of a less focused and rewarding kind. As a teacher he guided me into the works of Yeats, Eliot, Lowell, *inter alia*.

Buckley's poetry has never received the recognition it deserves. At least in part that is because he was an Australian poet writing at the time when Australian poetry was only just beginning to receive scholarly attention. Buckley himself was a pioneer in this regard, suggesting that Australian literature was worthy of being studied as a separate subject in the English department. It is worth noting that his first collection *The World's Flesh* was published in 1954, only three years before his *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian*. There seems to have been only mild interest from some of his English department colleagues. No wonder that, beyond Judith Wright (and later Les Murray), there was little chance of anything like an international reputation for Australian poets of the third quarter of the twentieth century.

Radically new in the early 1970s, his *Golden Builders* sequence exudes extraordinary freshness today. At the risk of sounding like a Leavisite, this is surely among the finest Australian poetic achievements of our lifetimes. It represents an immense step from the dense, troubled 1950s verse of *The World's Flesh* with its unresolved burden of Roman Catholicism. In *Golden Builders*, we hear the voice of a wiser poet, who has survived the religious battlefield of the 1950s and 1960s to emerge into the true deeper quiet of his age.

The very lack of self-conscious and assertive *Australianness* vests Buckley's vision with audacious breadth: for all his love of Ireland, *Golden Builders* is ineluctably Australian. I rate it in the same breath as two great works which undoubtedly influenced it: 'Meditations in

Time of Civil War' and *Life Studies*. And it bears comparison, too, with the best of *Four Quartets*. As an aside here, let me note that while on occasion Vin's critical observations could be arcane and complex, his deconstruction of the good and bad bits of Eliot was succinct. I think for him the true tally was about 2.5 *Quartets*. As for the opening of 'The Dry Salvages,' that was, Mr. Eliot, not poetry at all!

Buckley's canvas in his 27-poem *Golden Builders* sequence is never less than the entire meaning of life, his life, our life by association, comprehended through painstaking observation of details such as the 'dull turrets' of the school in Faraday Street or the uncle who

brushed his foxy hair
sideways on his skull, walked
from the knees, with a camel's lope,
down all streets to the Sarah Sands. ('VIII,' *Collected* 162)

His own special brand of irony is critical to the *Golden Builders* vision. That irony is seldom exercised lightly but drives hard towards the poetic homestead. '...Everything/ leans on this bright cold. In gaps of lanes, in tingling/ shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines' ('I,' *Collected* 153).

More often than not these days, 'religious' is used pejoratively, the overworked 'spiritual' being much preferred as a kind of compromise position. But I contend that Vincent Buckley's best poetry is both religious and metaphysical: the cosmic jugular is usually within grasp. (So it is a matter of serious critical concern that Les Murray failed to include even one Buckley poem in the 1986 *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*. Murray's audacity is breathtaking in compiling what he describes as 'a survey of Australian religious poetry of all kinds' [xi]. Perhaps Vin's religiosity was too difficult to embrace. But what then of Michael Dransfield or Evan Jones, neither of whom would ever have claimed to be a religious poet, but both of whom feature three times?)

Actually, I suspect that Vin himself had misgivings about being categorised as a 'religious' (or indeed any other *variety* of) poet.³ When I asked him in 1971 whether he was a Catholic, the answer was 'I am an ethnic Catholic'. That was enough briefly to silence this too inquisitive undergraduate. An ethnic Catholic. But the resignation in his tone could not be missed. It would not be until I read *Cutting Green Hay* in 1990 that I understood anything of what might perhaps be termed Buckley's Catholic revisionism, in which he and other members of what they dubbed 'the apostolate' explored their faith. 'We were concerned, we said, with the redemption of the world as a whole' (282). It was a much more complex engagement with the theology and practice of the Holy Roman Catholic Church than that of the newly converted James McAuley. 'It was the declaration of a beginning, not the spelling out of a whole philosophy' (283). Not for Buckley the imminent eschatology of McAuley inspired by the Revelation of St John. In much of McAuley's writing and lectures metaphor turns almost literal and—to re-cast a line of Robert Hughes in a review of McAuley's book *The End of Modernity*—the professor turns parish preacher. Difficult, too, to imagine McAuley delivering a paper entitled 'The Strange Personality of Christ.' Were he alive today, I think Buckley would be familiar with the work of John Dominic Crossan. Crossan was a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar, where academic theologians spent much time talking precisely about the strangeness of Jesus, which is evident from a careful reading of the Gospels.⁴ In *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography*, Crossan discusses the probability of ravaging

dogs beneath the cross (123) and discusses Easter in terms of process, i.e. ‘how many years was Easter Sunday?’ (159).

Decades before Crossan, Vincent Buckley was asking religious questions in an anthropological context. These were not confined to papers such as ‘The Strange Personality of Christ’ which, in some respects, presaged the Jesus Seminar. In *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), he drew on Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. I have belatedly come to understand that the early pages of *Poetry and the Sacred* allow us a better way of apprehending *Golden Builders*, which he was probably beginning to conceive at about this time. (I am, of course, aware, too, that readers unattracted by theology are likely to read this work, indeed most of Buckley’s poetry, differently). Indeed, Buckley almost writes himself a new formula, which might help to explain just why the long sequence is at once so much more focused and far-sighted than the earlier poetry:

I do not think it tendentious to maintain that the religious impulse, as I have broadly defined it, persists in a remarkable and perhaps astonishing way in poetry, so that we may say that, even in a desacralised society like our own, there are some poets who, *as a mode of life*, concern themselves with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred. (17)

Returning, then, to that *Golden Builders* question-cum-refrain: ‘Shall I find here my Lord’s grave?’ This is a fine and perplexingly simply phrased question to shape a poetry which reveals how the sacred lurks within the everyday. Taken more literally, the question resonates with what was in the 1960s the challenging theology of Bishop John A.T. Robinson in *Honest to God*. Will I find his grave here specifically? Even for the keen gambler (and Vin was absolutely that!), it is probably a poor bet that Christ is buried in Carlton. India would be the better chance. For Buckley, it seems, the real answer is here, but not just here. Rather, everywhere. And the nub might be that finding the bones of Jesus would by no means constitute an end to meaning. Of himself and his peers in the 1950s, Buckley writes in *Cutting Green Hay*: ‘We saw the world and the church as both full of sacredness’ (244). (The poet’s gradual and anguished lapse in Catholic faith brought a perhaps paradoxical intensity of focus on what Eliade called hierophanies where there is ‘a paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane’ (14). But it seems to me that it is this very lapsedness that helped to liberate Buckley’s muse. The *Golden Builders* sequence is at once effortlessly lucid, complex and yet accessible in a fashion he achieved in only a few of the earlier poems, most notably ‘Stroke’. It is as if most of the rhetorical gestures and clutter have been stripped away to enable the asking of more searching and fundamental questions. They are asked, too, in the diction of the natural speaking voice in contrast to the formal, mannered, sometimes forced tone of much of his earlier poetry. With *Golden Builders* Vincent Buckley finally achieved his full poetic stature and, blessedly, there was yet more to come.

POSTSCRIPT

At the conference, I became aware that I had not spent enough time reading *Last Poems*. One poem in particular, ‘Seeing Romsey,’ came alive for me as other speakers read and discussed it. The opening line prepares us for a telescoping of memory that is *felt* rather than merely seen, as it were, in the mind’s eye or recollected (not in tranquility): ‘I see Romsey through a hole in the wind’ (*Collected* 452). And this brilliant metaphor makes itself immediately clear. It is precisely right. The voice, I suggest, could only be Buckley’s. And the Romsey he sees is ‘like a model that has grown to its full height’ (452). That’s because these intense memories are from childhood:

The tree near me is the one I climbed
 fifty-three years ago. I smell *roses* on the fence
 where once the whole air was brushed with cypress.
 Proust's madeleine, nothing. (452)

It has to be 'fifty-three' not, say, fifty, because the view through the hole in the wind is unerringly accurate and detailed. And then the audacious move to 'Proust's madeleine, nothing.' Indeed, in this context, she is dwarfed to lower case. A statement of intent builds:

...Even the smell
 of trains that haven't run here
 for forty years. Smelling strong as they slow down.
 Smell of the comics they brought each Saturday

to a concentrated fierceness:

Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,
 or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs
 or that great heap of blossom in Yeats' window.
 Nothing to this. (452)

These lines are irresistible and unforgettable in such a way that for me the simple phrase 'nothing to this' will always conjure images of Vin raging against the dying of the light, as seen through 'a hole in the wind.'

So much weight falls on the primal 'nothing' that the word itself echoes back to 'nothing will come of nothing' in *King Lear* (Act 1, scene I, 90-92) and the lover's solipsistic 'nothing else is' in Donne's *The Sun Rising*, but the word can only carry such import in 'Seeing Romsey' because plainly the speaker has always himself been deeply moved by Madeleine, the hyacinths and lilacs and Yeats' heap of blossom. His is a memory concentrated by a lifetime of art. But no-one else's experience can equal one's own, which is much of the poetic point being made here (and in this paper).

It is a little unfortunate, then, that the poem reaches this climax three-quarters of the way through and wilts towards the end: 'I smell the printer's ink, and books,/ and dust that flashes when the raindrops hit it/ as it takes the rain into itself' (452). That repetition of 'it' followed so soon by 'itself' amounts to a falling off or attenuation of the vision. But, finally, what is achieved in 'Seeing Romsey' is so finely achieved that this criticism is reduced to a cavil. Perhaps that tentativeness in the final three lines serves to accentuate the brilliance of the first twenty-three? I will never be able to see the word Romsey again, let alone drive through the place, without thinking: 'I see Romsey through a hole in the wind.'

I brought the Vincent Buckley conference home with me. The strength of my emotion surprised me. Penelope described the experience as 'frighted,' which is right, I believe, for most of the participants. The whole business felt unfinished. Where was the debrief? And so it was that I felt impelled to write a poem which, in one sense, would summarise what I had tried to say in my paper about how poetry informs the quotidian. If this poem risks attenuating the case I make in my paper, it's a risk I am happy to take in an effort to pay tribute to Vincent Buckley's influence on my life, thought and work.

A BELATED ELEGY FOR VINCENT BUCKLEY

Lygon Street's *sallow highrise* will not achieve *pearl grey*
and, though obscene fires raze once-green hills that fringe the city
(but sparing your childhood Romsey), it will not *be hot today*

there are myths, you said, *even in our ways of walking*
especially your own subtle glide. Or the uncle's beelining
down all streets to the Sarah Sands. Or she with *the straight waist*
hardly walking

– beneath its raked-back pile of old Father William white hair
giving dignity beyond mere physical logic of stature
your head advanced in steady horizontal line, as if to ensure

the body's corrupting agenda was controlled
practising not dying while transporting its *Irish soul*,
and where did you glide post-tutorial?

often to University House (Chris Wallace-Crabbe remembers a chap
who tackled you there in sixty-eight over Vatican II and the Pope
'silly old bugger', you said, 'must have panicked')

I doubt yr colleague would have made much of *Golden Builders*,
poetry, like the sacred, offering little to truth-measurers;
and how profoundly reassuring his sempiternal secular

what though, I wonder, would be a life without poetry
little better than the unexamined one reviled by Socrates
a quotidian which, having been taught by you briefly

half a lifetime ago, is for me *hardly to be believed*
– like Judith Wright's summer not turning up *in a wave*
of rambler roses, or Lowell's magnolias failing to *ignite*

my diurnal round *with their murderous five days' white*,
even sleeping, *the old brain wound tightly as the old city*, you said
and the unconscious length of iambic pentameter is one human breath)

on your last walk from Old Arts to its Siamese-twinning successors
(a harbinger I see now: who needs the humanities?)
we'll shove them into the ugliest buildings, some architect snickers

behind his hand *steady* as an abortionist's, with tricky stairs
and poky spaces where no golden builders dare)
the environment raced within you: the heart monitors

don't watch me: I need not to be watched

now, chiefly, I remember you seated in the poetry seminar, oddly
small for the housing of such presence, such synecdoche
of head: when you tilted it ten degrees back and fifteen sideways

to make yr point through cigarette smoke (perhaps tugging an ear
before Bob Hawke officially devalued such gesture)
everyone listened, co-teacher Evan Jones pushed back in his chair

to keep you clever company, and we all watched ringside,
voyeurs, as you wrestled like Jacob with his intimate
stranger: poetry not so much profession as transfiguring light

when you reached an end of incarnation
that day after hacking branches against the fire season
crying at the furnace door was surely some new scrap of poem

One day my wife, Jennie Hawkes Wright, looking for new subjects to paint, asked me for ideas. I suggested she attempt a portrait of Vincent Buckley, whom she had never met or even seen. So it may be said that the effect of the conference extended to her as well.



Portrait of Vincent Buckley in oil by Jennie Hawkes Wright, 2009.

NOTES

¹ Buckley wrote two chapters of *Poetry and Morality* (1959) on the critical approach of Leavis. This book was the consequence of his time at Cambridge under the supervision of Basil Willey, where he attended lectures by Leavis and interviewed him. As he developed his own critical methodology, Buckley's cautious admiration was overpowered by his reservations.

² *Sandstone Gothic* gives an account of how Leavisism was prosecuted in the English Department of the University of Sydney.

³ I think it is generally easier to say what Vin did not believe than what he did, especially should any 'ism' be involved!

⁴ The Jesus Seminar was founded by the late Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan in 1985. The principal concern of this group of about 150 scholars is to assess what the historical Jesus may or not have actually said and done. Crossan's own work depicts a Jesus very much at odds with the one worshipped by conservative Christians, a strange and indeed maverick figure.

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