

Moments of Intersection: Causes for Gratitude

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Sometimes the direction of a life can be set by someone well outside the sphere of ‘close’ relations. If I have had a long and (mostly) happy career as an academic, I owe it above all to Vincent Buckley’s intervention on my behalf in 1953, the third year of my Honours B.A degree. As a member of the first 1951 cohort of Commonwealth Scholarship holders, I had come to Melbourne University from a small country boarding school where I’d been something of a star pupil, unexposed to the kind of academic competitiveness I was to encounter at university. My English teacher had been an enthusiast: from him I acquired a wide and loving knowledge of traditional English literature and a healthy respect for the need to care about the way I used language, but not a great deal of capacity for analytic thought. More of the latter came from my history teacher, and my academic performance was initially better there. My abandonment of a planned double degree in History and English (indubitably the most prestigious of Honours degrees in that era) was due to a failure of nerve in the face of deserved but perhaps unduly negative criticism of an essay from one of the most eminent of Melbourne University’s historians. It wasn’t a good essay: partly because I didn’t really care about why the Reformation succeeded in Scotland, partly because it had to be written at home during the vacation because I couldn’t afford to pay extra fees to stay in Janet Clarke Hall, and the Portland Library was not well-resourced with historical reference texts on the Reformation. The truth is that the criticism crystallised my uneasiness about my capacity to handle university study. I was running scared, and learning Anglo-Saxon, the requisite for pure English, seemed to offer a haven where the acquisition of information might be rewarded for itself, without demands for strenuous thinking.

I was prepared to reserve that for the Literature component of pure English, because a couple of exciting things had happened there during the unhappy-with-History year of 1952. In random library browsing, I had come across F. R Leavis’s *New Bearings in English Poetry* and it had introduced me to a new world of engagement with poetry as something that *mattered* beyond the domains of either aesthetic pleasure or literary history. (It remains I think his best work, written before adventurousness hardened into dogma). The storm which would later split English Departments around Australia into bitterly hostile Leavisite and anti-Leavisite groups had not yet broken, and I was at liberty to admire *New Bearings* as my own discovery, although there were already some underground tremors in the English Department, intensified by intergenerational tensions as a new group of young academics flexed intellectual muscles gained in overseas academia against what they saw as an entrenched culture of conventional ‘appreciation’. There lingers in my mind a slightly bemused group of third year Honours students struggling to understand that they were being invited by Sam Goldberg to participate in ousting Spenser from the canon of writers deserving serious attention.

‘Serious’ is perhaps the key to the attraction of Leavisite criticism (despite the high value it placed on wit, it was not particularly receptive to comedy). It probably explains Buckley’s early connection to the central group of Goldberg and Jock (T. B.) and Maggie Tomlinson, a connection seen for instance in his participation in the production of the *Melbourne Critical Review*, from 1965 simply *The Critical Review*. The essays on individual poets he published there (many collected in his 1968 *Poetry and the Sacred*) reflect a considerable coincidence

between his poetic affinities and the Leavisite re-ordering of the poetic canon: Wyatt and Donne, for instance, as superior to Herbert or Wordsworth.

A passion for Yeats, however, was idiosyncratic, as was Buckley's interest in Australian poetry. Indeed it seemed as if in this context, as in much of his later life, it was Buckley's fate to be associated with a group or institution towards which he was at times ill-at-ease, even antipathetic. In 1984 John Docker's *In a Critical Condition: Reading Australian Literature*, gave a highly partisan account of his experience of the Melbourne English Department in the late 1960s as split between two equally authoritarian camps, 'the Goldbergiters and Professor Vincent Buckley and his followers, who were, or wanted to be, Irish, went in for creative writing, were interested in contemporary Australian and American poetry, and were very political in a kind of throwback Cold War way' (9). Leaving aside questions of malice and historical accuracy about the date at which the Cold War ceased to be active, Docker nonetheless touched on an important difference. Leavisite criticism was profoundly English and profoundly Protestant. Buckley's affiliations to Ireland and to Catholicism, however troubled the latter, were bound to create tension.

In 1952, however, what mattered to me was my discovery of Australian poetry as something in process, going on around me, with living poets publishing and arguing and generally acting as if literary history was something to be shaped by them in the here and now. Buckley played an important role in this revelation when he lectured on R.D. FitzGerald's *Moonlight Acre*, the collection that had won FitzGerald the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal in 1938. Just how this had arrived in a syllabus that also included, if my memory is correct, *Anna Karenina* and *King Lear*, or why it should have been *Moonlight Acre* rather than Judith Wright's *Woman to Man* or Kenneth Slessor's *One Hundred Poems* is a mystery. I discovered these anyway in the wake of the enchantment with Australian poetry engendered by Buckley's lectures, just as I discovered Furnley Maurice, the Jindyworobaks, A.D. Hope and James McAuley—pretty much whatever I could lay hands on. And in following the trail of Hope and McAuley into their critical writing, I became aware that Australian poetry was a battleground in which Hope and McAuley had cast themselves as cultural warriors against the forms and philosophies of the modernism that had ousted bush ballads and narratives from their place of cultural privilege.

Fired with enthusiasm, I announced that I intended to write my Honours thesis on 'A.D. Hope and James McAuley and the Problem of Tradition in Australian Poetry.' I was unprepared for this to create consternation in the Department, from whom I required approval of my topic. They might well have objected to the overweening ambition of the project, but all that one of my tutors could enunciate in protest was 'But there's nothing written on this!' On the point of surrendering as a dutiful daughter should, I approached Mr. Buckley (whom I would never have dreamed of calling Vin in those days of student decorum). He not only went in to bat for my right to the topic, but agreed to supervise me. He did quite rapidly and quite rightly persuade me that the project was too large, and that Hope's position, his defence of the 'discursive mode' and of traditional form, offered less challenge than McAuley's more radical demand for formal verse as inherently connected with a certain kind of philosophical/moral position. McAuley's mischievous days of Ern Malley hoaxing were well past. He was undergoing a poetic conversion entangled with his conversion to Catholicism and leading him away from the poetry of *Under Aldebaran* that had made him interesting to me in the first place.

Supervision in those days was a rather haphazard business, but Buckley gave generously of his time and ideas. Even more to the point, as a friend of McAuley he obtained a copy for me

of the then unpublished fruits of McAuley's poetic conversion, the sequence called 'The Hero and the Hydra'. The manuscript came with a letter from McAuley wishing me well with the thesis. With consummate ingratitude I used the manuscript to reach the conclusion that his enterprise was entirely misguided critically and was doing considerable harm to his poetry. I even turned into a judgement of this new poetry his own dismissal of stoicism as 'Blind light, dry rock, a tree that does not bear' ('The Tomb of Heracles,' *Collected* 59).

Torn between pride and anxiety I presented this conclusion to Buckley, who bore it with sufficient equanimity for me to be encouraged to submit the thesis. Possibly he agreed: he certainly made a rather similar judgement of McAuley's 1964 magnum opus *Captain Quiros*, calling it 'persistently prosaic and pedagogical' (*Cutting* 178).

The thesis meanwhile gained first class honours and the Enid Derham Prize and was, I later gathered, a crucial factor in my emerging at the end of the following year with the Exhibition in Honours English that gained me immediate appointment to the newly fledged English Department of the University of New England.

I had little contact with Buckley for some time thereafter. When I returned to the Melbourne Department in 1956, he was already in Cambridge. When he returned in 1957, I was already planning my departure to the University of Glasgow and the scholarship that I was to fecklessly abandon for matrimony and Sheffield. In the years of scrambling through maternity and part-time work that followed I had little time to attend to much except my own concerns but I have two memories connected with Vin (as I had by now come to call him). In 1959, there was one of those oddly uncomfortable episodes that used to happen in Departmental tea-rooms in the days when these institutions existed and academics actually sat in them and held conversations. I was at the time visibly pregnant with my first child, something that seemed to breed uneasiness in some of my older colleagues. I was also wearing a rather elegant Italian blouse adorned with unicorn heads. Someone who shall remain nameless suddenly declared that it was very inappropriate for me to be flaunting unicorns 'in my unvirginal condition.' Taken aback, and aware of a dangerous tendency to tearfulness 'in my condition,' I merely blushed until Vin spoke up from his corner to the effect that he could think of nothing more appropriate for a pregnant woman than to wear the unicorn as a trophy—what did we think happened after the virgin had tamed the unicorn? He gave me an encouragingly warm smile and ambled out of the tea-room, while conversation rapidly shifted direction.

In 1963, I happened to come into the departmental corridor just in time to see a young woman leaving Vin's office, but turning her head to look back into the room. There was an intimacy in the body language that made me think 'Oh . . .' because I knew her to be a student, having taught Penelope Curtis Middle English a year earlier, when I had been impressed by her intelligence in making intellectual connections, if less so by her tendency to connect her clothing with safety pins rather than buttons, something that seemed almost outlandish in such a beautiful and clearly middle class girl. Even in the days before the phrase sexual harassment got written into the text of our lives, I tended to disapprove of staff-student relationships, if only on the ground that they too often, like the proverbial rough games, ended in tears. But there was something very disarming in the grace and intensity of that gesture. 'Not my business,' I thought and went on my way unnoticed.

The following year, I moved to Monash University, and although I occasionally encountered Vin at book launches or poetry readings thereafter, it would be 1985, long after his marriage to Penelope, not so long after the return from their sojourn in Ireland, that I found that he was one of the judges on the panel I was to convene to judge the first Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry. The third member of the panel was Barrett Reid, for many years the poetry editor of

Overland, but then terminally ill. Vin, too, was in poor health and I felt apprehensive as we assembled at Heide for our first and final meeting, partly from anxiety about their wellbeing, but even more because I had not equipped myself with any knowledge of whether there was any past ‘history’ between Vin and Barrett that might be a source of tension, a predictor of irreconcilable differences. In the event, I need not have worried, as they treated each other with great courtesy, though perhaps more cautious than cordial. If there was not a great deal of personal rapport, there was a shared commitment to doing their best by the poets. Poetry publishing was less common then than it is today and we did not have a large field to contend with. Its quality, however, was considerable. Nonetheless, we made our way with little dissent until we reached the last two contenders: *Your Shadow* was a third collection from Kevin Hart, regarded at thirty as a risen star in both the academic and the poetic firmaments, while from the long-established and highly-respected Rosemary Dobson came a tenth collection, *The Three Fates*, which had already been awarded the 1984 Grace Leven Prize for Poetry. We went backwards and forwards for some time, resisting a cowardly impulse to compromise on everyone’s third choice. Vin inclined towards Hart, Barrett towards Dobson. I thought it was insoluble and we should just confront that fact and make the two joint winners. Which we did. Which did not please the Premier, presumably because it diminished the razzmatazz of the big announcement of the one and only winner. The edict went out that there were to be no more such equivocations—and so 1985 stands as the one and only instance of a poetic dead heat in the Premier’s Literary Awards. I have taken part in the judging process several times since and remain sceptical of such finality, convinced that it’s often the case that any one of the three shortlisted books left standing at the end of the judging process deserves to win and on another day might do so. But since a decision must be made, I toughen heart and mind with the knowledge that poetry is getting recognition and at least one poet is going to benefit.

My last encounter with Vin was purely textual. Throughout 1992 I was working on selections for the commissioned anthology that would be *The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems*. With the luxury of support from an Australia Research Council Grant, I was able to cast my net widely, encountering on library shelves poets I’d never heard of and was delighted to meet. Some of the greatest surprises, however, came from poets whose work I thought safely categorised. Two of these astonished me with late love poems of extreme delicacy and simplicity. One was Christopher Brennan, whom I’d thought of as a poet of large and somewhat heavy gestures, even of rant in the case of *A Chant of Doom*. The other was Vincent Buckley, whose late poems had finally appeared as *Last Poems* in 1991, scrupulously edited by Penelope Buckley from the material left at his death in 1988. My sense of his poetry, I realised, was out of date, still back with the strikingly rich, almost incantatory, lyricism of *Golden Builders* (1976). If I had not missed *Late Winter Child* in 1979, with its much more direct sense of the carnality of ‘flesh and blood,’ its quieter and subtler sense of the sacred, I might have been more prepared for the pared down mystery of love’s simultaneous separateness and connection that informs ‘I have you poised in the mind.’ Perhaps I am particularly susceptible to that poem, for I read this

Seen always leaving rooms
With small twist of the knee
As the door closes, and a linen
Freshness left across the air (*Last* 183)

and for a moment I am back in 1963 in a dreary corridor, watching a girl leaving a room, turning her head to look back at a lover—who, being a poet, stored such images to turn them eventually into words—for which an anthologist would one day be extremely grateful. And

gratitude, I see, seems to be the common thread that binds together these scattered moments of recollection.

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