

Vincent Buckley: The City and the Sacred

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In *Poetry and the Sacred*, while discussing Mircea Eliade's notion of 'sacred place', Vincent Buckley describes what might well be the task of 'Golden Builders':

For the majority of poets of today, the creative task is to *test* those privileged places – and privileged persons, moments, and events as well – for sacredness: *do* they offer an opening towards the transcendent? Will the testing of their specific feeling, the exploring of their possible significance, open them up towards the transcendent, or will it merely return the poet to the involuted rounds of his own consciousness? (75)

What happens in 'Golden Builders', of course, is that the city reciprocates the test: rather than remain a place that is tested for sacredness, Melbourne becomes a place, a rhythm that tests the sacred. The city, that is, will not allow the sacred to settle down. What also happens is that, as city and consciousness enter each other, transcendence is remodelled as a mode of immanence.

Published in 1976, 'Golden Builders' opens:

The hammers of iron glow down Faraday.
Lygon and Drummond shift under their resonance.
Saws and hammers drawn across the bending air
shuttling like a bow; the saw trembles
the hammers are molten, they flow with quick light
striking; the flush spreads and deepens on the stone.
The drills call the streets together
stretching hall to lecture-room to hospital. (46)

This opening gives the sequence its rhythm, which becomes its 'resonance', which becomes its perception. The sequence, to use its own terms, is full of shredded fragments of carbon, drifting sounds, floating bits of memory, flashings of voice, and lights hanging open. It 'spreads and deepens' as it moves between the 'glow' of its Blakean 'earth rising' possibilities and the 'flow' of a city, and a psyche, under reconstruction, 'stretching hall to lecture-room to hospital'. Keyed by 'the chop and change of the machines', the sequence stretches rituals of building to rites of ideology to processes of memory to dreams of displaced persons to litur-

gies of scientific experiment to etiquettes of dying and not dying to ceremonies of what was once belief. And within this rhythmic site/sight it performs a search for the grave of Christ.

'Golden Builders' can be read according to various contexts. In the context of Buckley's writing, the sequence continues his long-standing preoccupation with imagination and place. (See, for example, 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry' and 'Imagination's Home', as well as the interview with Jim Davidson, in which Buckley explains how, with 'Golden Builders', he was looking for poetry that was 'locally mimetic'.) 'Golden Builders' also confirms and extends a development away from the almost episcopal cadences of *The World's Flesh* and *Masters in Israel*, through the more personal but still formal voice of *Arcady and Other Places*, to the freer form and open breathing of *Golden Builders and Other Poems*. This development is itself partly a response to the influence of American poetry during the sixties. In his 1979 piece, 'Ease of American Language', Buckley acknowledges such influences in terms of open-form and naturalness of speech. In a comment that says much about his own emerging idiom, he describes the 'special naturalness' of American literary speech:

The quality is one of perception, which is largely a matter of intimate and prolonged sensation, the sensation of *noticing* being used as the focus for the other, more clearly animal sensations; a matter of sensation, and of pace in its expounding (that is to say, its uncovering, its outlaying); hence of idiom, since the enterprise is to a certain degree mimetic, and will have to depend on the availability of a language which is close to the bodily particularity of things and of their common local names; hence of the rhythm which will deliver that idiom and the thinginess which it enfolds. (Buckley, ed. Kirkby 138)

Seen within a wider context, the drama of deconstruction and destabilisation which constitutes 'Golden Builders' might be said to register the impact of the revolutionary sixties, a period that might be characterised as 'anti-theological', at least in the sense in which Roland Barthes uses the term:

by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), [writing] liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law. (147)

Melbourne, at least in this piece, is neither sufficiently centred nor sufficiently coherent to sustain metaphysical and dogmatic imaginings. This in turn suggests a precise theological and Catholic context for 'Golden Builders': the period immediately after Vatican II, when vertical and horizontal models of theology wrestled for control of God. At this time Buckley himself withdrew from organised

Catholicism, and his poetry began writing Catholicism as sensate memory more than transcendent belief. Indeed, if one of the effects of Barthes's 'theological' is to erase the heterogeneity within theology, Buckley's career is a reminder that theology is more complex and differentiated than many critics believe. Outlining his position at the time of Vatican II, Buckley speaks of a shift from 'aprioristic thinking' to 'existential speculation' (*Cutting Green Hay* 231), recalling his decision to take 'an anthropological approach' to institution and self in view of his sense of a failure of belief (236). Buckley's 'anthropological approach' is very different from James McAuley's ontotheological approach to belief. Buckley's theology, influenced by Suhard and Congar, is more existential than McAuley's, and this accords with his emphasis, in 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry', on the interpenetration of the metaphysical and the social. Significantly, Buckley's criticism of Vatican II renewal was that it failed to address the de-sacralised imagination (*Cutting Green Hay* 292).

These are obviously interrelated, interconnected contexts, and this paper seeks to address one such interconnection by entering the field where theology and literature cross. My working assumption is that this intersection is one of reciprocated influences, that Buckley's theology is as much an effect of his poetry as his poetry is an expression of his theology. There is a close correlation between Buckley's reading of American poetry as a rhythmic interaction of sensation, perception and language and his attraction to Eliade's study of sacred place. The move away from the transcendent rhetoric of the early poems towards the later 'idiom of sensation' corresponds to the move from vertical to horizontal theological imagining, just as the shift from theology to anthropology resembles what David Carter has described as 'a strain at the 'humanist centre' of the poetry between the impulse towards generalizable, representative metaphysical truths and the force of subjectivity' (67). There is also a sense in which Buckley's commitment to sensate subjectivity reciprocates his emphasis on 'religious awareness' rather than 'religion'. To put it in very general terms, it might be said that Buckley's poetry and religion share an option for immanence.

In his 1971 essay, 'Poetry and Pollution', Buckley compares the emergence of ecological awareness after the death of God with the emergence of immanentist religions after the death of sky-gods, remarking that 'it is characteristic of immanentist religions that they offer few easy exits towards transcendence. Their drive is *into*, not *through*, phenomenal experience; and it is there that they locate occasions for reverence (and terms for ritual)' (41). Having, in characteristic fashion, suggested a large and semi-theological context for his discussion, a context in which 'a religion of vertical aspiration becomes succeeded by a religion of horizontal feeling', Buckley initiates a specific discussion of literary treatments of the city. He firstly generalises that, since the Romantics, the city and civilisation have often been seen as polluting natural growth and human feeling. He then moves to consider four modern poets whose work, he claims, exhibits a reluctant acceptance of the city as formative of imagination. The four poets he examines are Hughes, Levertov, Ginsberg and Snyder. Of Ginsberg Buckley says that he is the

only one of the four who 'seems to have his imagination liberated by city life; and he, interestingly enough, is the one who draws most openly on the name and example of Blake'; Ginsberg is engaged in an effort 'to create a new mode of naturalness . . . a new innocent mode of apprehension of the modern city' (44). Finally Buckley proposes that the changing appreciation of the city is partly a consequence of changing poetics, citing Philip Gleason's argument that 'the Black Mountain thesis about the poem as a field of energy is also a thesis which uses poem, landscape, and human body as analogues for one another' (49).

My purpose here is not to pursue Buckley's general argument about the city in literature. I want simply to note that this picture of interreaching rhythms, resonances and resemblances is a rehearsal for 'Golden Builders'. And I want to ask what happens when the analogising landscape includes but does not privilege the human body of a church.

There is a moment when 'Golden Builders XVI' arrives at a hollowed church and there seems about to abandon its search for Christ's body. Whereas Webb's 'Derelict Church' (Webb 212) uses dereliction as a contradictory sign of saving presence and McAuley's 'Parish Church' (McAuley 228) uses an empty church as the occasion for solitary, stubborn belief, 'Golden Builders XVI' denies the church belief, presence and power by incorporating it entirely into the speaker's act of sensate memory. What was once a remembering ritual becomes a memory of a ritual:

Between morning and evening
 each street changes like a river
 fabric and facing go
 in splashes and spurts of rubble
but All Saints William St
 holds fast
 like the one bluestone in a burnt field.

The rear wall hollow as a shell,
 wax set against the stone grain
 incense in the pores of plaster:
there we made our search for Christ's body
the Holy Thursday procession went
 scraping its confident rough Latin
 till it packed up like a dole queue
 down the side wall. Bodies
 that wanted song and space
 singing inside their cramp
moved into the baroque stances,
marble and sensual will.

There I wrote my

proto-poems under the drab stained glass
and the Lithuanians with squared shoulders
stood each Sunday for their anthem.

Arched and bluestone poverty
it got into the skin. Remember me,
the organ sang, and I

stone, stained glass, hollows in the wood
kneelers, remember me.

So it keeps track of you,
unbreathing in the brick waste,
and the kids come faithfully and lay there
bunches of lilac, smelling of cats. (*Golden Builders* 65–66)

Does the church 'hold fast' amid the changing streets? For a moment the poem seems ready to recall Christ's promise that his Church, built on the Petrine rock, would last (Matthew, 16: 13–20), but the picture of the church still standing 'like the one bluestone in a burnt field' is immediately qualified by 'The rear wall hollow as a shell'. This suggests a tomb (as does the final laying of flowers) and so prepares for 'there we made our search for Christ's body', while 'stone grain' and 'pores of plaster' turn the hope of sacred flesh into something too hard for the supplicatory wax and incense. Moreover, the ritual being remembered is that which occurs at the end of the Holy Thursday Mass, when the sacramental Body of Christ is taken from the tabernacle, as in ritual time Christ is being taken from the Garden of Gethsemane and handed over for crucifixion. The poem remembers a time when the Church entered into mourning, but it does not itself enter into mourning. If there is nostalgic potential in the memory of 'confident rough Latin', it is displaced by the simile, 'till it packed up like a dole queue'. The simile marks one of those fissures in a text which reveal more than its surface admits. The poem's surface is one of memory, of a church that once gave ritual and poetry and still remembers the speaker, but the simile suggests that something is not working in the spiritual economy, that the house of meaning is a hollow wall, and that Christ's body is being removed.

For this is not a church that mediates the spiritual and sensual: its images of embodiment are too hard and heavy to satisfy the metaphor of incarnation that sustains Buckley's poetic. Its bodies 'wanted song and space' – 'wanted' ambiguously signifying desire and lack. Its bodies were 'singing inside their cramp', as if the church itself is the cramp. Its bodies 'moved into the baroque stances,/ marble and sensual will', which is another version of that condition which distinguished the Buckley forefathers, hard bodies holding hot spirits in. And if the place of these bodies is also the place of the 'proto-poems', those early poems committed to incarnation (or, at least, the idea of incarnation), the use of 'proto' does more than acknowledge an early poetry: it implies that such a poetry no longer 'holds

fast'. At one level the poem immediately qualifies this by introducing the notion of the church's active memory, suggesting the way in which a religious and cultural tradition can continue to 'name' even those who have intellectually disowned it. However, it is more accurate to say that this memory is interactive: by repeating the 'remember me', the poem draws a circle of belief in which organ, speaker, stone, stained glass, and 'hollows in the wood/ kneelers' together remember and are remembered. Even as it is thus acknowledging the church as a rhythmic space, it begins undoing this: those 'hollows in the wood/ kneelers' reprise 'The rear wall hollow as a shell', hinting again at the grave and digging it into the very gesture of prayer, while the church which 'keeps track of you' is found to be holding fast because it is 'unbreathing in the brick waste'.

The application of 'unbreathing' to the church, in a sequence articulate with images of the dead and dying, aligns the church with the cemetery. The cemetery makes its explicit appearance in the ninth poem, 'Fitzroy, Carlton', which begins:

Even in the cemetery
 where the crows and magpies
 stood for hours on the bunched tops
 of the few trees, they've put
 flat green metal shields
 like shock-troops
 along the railings. The highrise flats
 are guarded from the dead.

Who will guard me from the dead? (*Golden Builders* 57)

Buckley here predicts what Cixous will do with the cemetery when she tells how it is the inaugural scene for her writing and claims: 'To begin (writing, living) we must have death' and 'Writing is learning to die. It's learning not to be afraid, in other words to live at the extremity of life, which is what the dead, death, give us' (Cixous 7, 10). There is a sense in which Buckley's writing begins with the death of the father, which he writes out in 'Stroke', the sequence that dominates his previous volume, *Arcady and Other Places*. This is, significantly, the volume where his poetry breaks free of the dogmatic pretensions that marred his first two volumes. But it is still searching for 'signs of resurrection' in the father's dying face. In 'Golden Builders' the search is for signs of earth rising, of music rising, of memory rising. The search for signs of resurrection has become a search for the grave and this search ends with the final line, which is a question: 'And my Lord's grave? His grave?' (*Golden Builders* 81). But is the grave empty and/or occupied? 'Golden Builders' does not say. It does, however, suggest that the church will not guard its speaker from the dead. The streets of association lead back from the grave to the empty tabernacle to the cemetery, even if along the way they disclose moments when the earth opens and the city shines. My guess is that the grave marks the death of the sky-god and the rise of immanence.

'Golden Builders', that is, is a fraction rite in which the transcendent Word is broken and distributed among words. The god who wrote the book of nature has been taken into the city and subjected to its diversified breath. In this way 'Golden Builders' embodies the idea, proposed by the postmodern atheologian Mark C. Taylor, that deconstruction is a particular realisation of incarnation:

The main contours of deconstructive a/theology begin to emerge with the realization of the necessary interrelation between the death of God and radical christology. Radical christology is *thoroughly* incarnational – the divine 'is' the incarnate word. Furthermore, this embodiment of the divine is the death of God. With the appearance of the divine that is not only itself but is at the same time other, the God who alone is God disappears. The death of God is the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar. Incarnation *irrevocably* erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script enacted in the infinite play of interpretation. To understand incarnation as inscription is to discover the word. (Taylor 103)

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