

LANDING THE SACRED

for Jim Tulip

Noel Rowe

Somewhere near the beginning of my memory I find myself on windy ground. I must be little more than a toddler, playing on what appears to be a large, open paddock. The wind is running up behind me, catching my shoulders, then rushing out ahead of me. The grass (it seems so tall) is always bending away from me. And in this memory I have picked a dandelion flower (we used to call them 'Santa Claus') and am blowing on it until its globe breaks up and out into a myriad of tiny seeds. I am trying to retrieve as many as I can from the drifting air. It isn't easy. But it feels good: the movement of the wind, the movement of my hand, the staying power of earth, and the dandelion seeds, so there and so out of reach, like tiny parachutes of hope.

In telling this memory I am, of course, already doing more than represent an actual childhood experience. In the one movement of knowledge I am interpreting the thing remembered and I am being interpreted through the remembering act. I am exercising the receptive and active powers of memory and, because I am assuming these powers are interdependent, I am reaching out to touch a place where my inner and outer geographies meet. Nothing new under that sun: most people acknowledge that memory is a creative, poetic act (and some people even realise that memory can only make good poetry if it attends to what is, almost, there) and it is now almost a cliché to suggest that when we begin to draw a landscape we begin to draw ourselves. But what happens if we take our analogicals and play with them a little longer? Is it possible that, in drawing a simple scene of wind and dandelions, I have been drawing not just an image of a landscape, not just an image of a self, but also an image of the sacred?

Even though the dandelion story is only a tiny fragment of memory, it contains some large ambivalences: absence and presence, distance and intimacy, large and small, drifting and held, abandonment and hope. What if these ambivalences, so close to contradiction, were making and unmaking my early instinct for God?

That did seem interesting, at least in the mid 1980s when I began thinking about it. I was at the time studying under Jim Tulip, who had been developing courses in Australian literature, religion and culture at the

University of Sydney. Tulip was (I hope I remember this correctly) using Paul Tillich's work on religion and culture, particularly the notion that religion is not a separate category of experience but a dimension of depth within all experience. In this way he was challenging that opposition of religion and culture which he saw as so Australian and he was questioning the easy description of Australia as a 'secular' country. Tulip was also teaching the difficult poetry of Francis Webb, poetry which captured me with its tattered eloquence. Webb's is a poetry that uses religious symbolism to speak of compassion, but breaks this symbolism in order to take it closer to its suffering subject. In body as well as in spirit it gives itself over to crucifixion. This was a crucial discovery for me. Having decided to stay in Sydney and study Australian Literature rather than go to Rome and study theology, I was hoping that theology and literature might enter into conversation. I could not, however, see that this was possible unless theology gave up its faith in big, high words. What I found in Webb's poetry¹ were the kind of wounded revelations I was looking for: 'The tiny, not the immense,/ Will teach our groping eyes.' ('Five Days Old'); 'Light is the centre of our darkness. I am to tell you/ Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding...' ('The Chalice'). Here was a way of returning to 'sandy tongue-tied barren ground' ('Banksia') and recovering the sacred.

I felt at the time (I still feel) that the sacred was in need of recovering. I felt that, at least in my own Catholic tradition, the religious imagination was sick to death, that the rational and theological component of that imagination had assumed such authority and dominion over the poetic component that it was preventing embodiment, refusing incarnation, actually desacramentalising and desacralising the imagination by giving it over to that covert form of literalism which emerges as dogmatism. Perhaps I saw 'culture' as something of an antidote to 'religion', but I became very interested in possibilities that were then emerging. Jim Tulip was reflecting work that was taking place in the AASR Conferences and St Mark's Review, as well as the work of international scholars like David Jasper, Giles Gunn and John Coulson. Elizabeth Cain was conducting workshops in Australian Spirituality at the Aquinas Academy, workshops which provided a Jungian reading of landscape symbolism and respected the sacredness of personal experience. David Millikan had done 'The Sunburnt Soul' (though Caroline Jones, who has a more patient and profound respect for stories, was yet to do a better job evoking Australian spirituality in 'The Search For Meaning'). Peter Malone was conducting workshops on Australian Theology and reflections on these were emerging in the journal *Compass*.² Harris, Hynd

and Millikan had edited *The Shape of Belief*, which contained Les Murray's 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia'.³ Veronica Brady had, in *A Crucible of Prophets*, attempted a reading of Australian literature which was, in the same breath, theology and literary criticism.⁴ Vincent Buckley was out *Cutting Green Hay* and suggesting that the failure of Vatican II was that it had updated its sacramental theology without finding a way of renewing its sacramental imagination.⁵

To mention Vincent Buckley is to remember that many of the critiques and procedures constituting Australian theology are already implicit in Buckley's work during the 50s. The notion of place - at once psychological and geographical, sensual and spiritual - which informs 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry' is equally responsive to incarnational theology and Australian culture. Buckley's writing remains one of this country's most finely balanced ventures into theology and literature.⁶ So perhaps there was nothing new under this sun of 'Australian theology' that rose with the 80s. Yet I think the interest in religion and culture was more widespread and less suspicious, finding a greater degree of favour with leading theologians and with mainstream theological institutions. My own interest was no doubt encouraged by the theologies of evangelisation and inculturation which had developed after Vatican II and which represented, particularly in missiology, the possibility of dialogue between gospel and culture. It was related to a growing realisation that Aboriginal cultures involved a complex spirituality which had yet to be recognised by the Christian churches (Ted Kennedy's work was well known, Eugene Stockton and Frank Fletcher were publishing some of their early writings in this area, and Patrick Dodson was beginning to be heard). It might also, I would guess, have been influenced by the fact that this was a time when many religious orders, seeking to renew and even refound themselves, began seriously to explore connections between church and world, between their own evangelical origins and their contemporary circumstances. And certainly it shared in a much larger feeling that religious language had lost its power because it had severed its connections with experience and story (and if this feeling was a reaction against the dogmatico-theological tradition, it also held, within its appreciation of religious imagination, the seeds of renewal). Whatever the reasons, I think it is true to say that in the early 80s the areas variously described as 'Australian Theology', 'Australian Spirituality', and 'Australian Literature, Religion and Culture' were attracting a great deal of attention and generating a great deal of creative energy.

I have to say I had my doubts. Literature and culture were being taken into the theological discourse, but they didn't seem to be having much impact. Theology's vocabulary stayed in place. Theology's epistemological hierarchy stayed in place, with theological doctrines providing the ultimate validation for metaphors. Theology's teleology kept ever forward and upward in a story that must always arrive at hope, with Christ, however disguised, always as its most real beginning, middle and end. I also had a lurking anxiety that it was all being too quickly done, that it was not precise enough, patient enough, participative enough, and small enough to be a work of profound imagination. Still, I wanted to be part of it.

In 1985, at the invitation of Fr Michael Mullins SM, I began a course called 'Australian Religious Consciousness' at the Catholic Theological Union, Hunters Hill. It was a course which used Australian poems to articulate some of the important questions in Australian culture and encouraged students to examine these questions by way of correspondences and so discover their theological predispositions. Looking back, I would say it was not a remarkable course because it didn't really have what such a course needs: a mode of embodiment. It was academic and hardly experiential, it was schematic and comprehensive, and it knew where it was going - and because that is not (usually) a good way to write a poem it is not (usually) a good way to create a course in, a process of, religious imagination. Still, it gave me an affection for words like 'conversation' and 'correspondence' and a conviction that belief exists in the (conversational) spaces that connect (and disconnect) personal, cultural and biblical stories. In 1986 Erin White began teaching the course with me and together we changed it, giving much more emphasis to story and symbol. We also changed the name to 'Australian Religious Imagination' because I wanted to back away from the rationalist connotations of 'Consciousness' and because Erin, who had studied Paul Ricoeur, insisted that theology was itself a work of imagination. We also changed the beginning of the course, and this paper is really about that change.

I used to start the course with a meditation on James McAuley's poetry, beginning with 'Envoi' as an example of how the depiction of the Australian continent is as much an effect of McAuley's imagination, with all its astrigent, negative hope, as a geographical observation. I would then use a poem like 'Wistaria' or 'Pieta' to show how, as it fashions its own landscape of the heart, McAuley's poetry performs variations on 'A futile heart within a fair periphery'. But I was looking at a very big object called 'Australia' (even if I was resisting all temptations to quote Exodus and think

I had found a desert spirituality). Then I remembered the way Elizabeth Cain used to ask people to draw a landscape and how she has been able to interpret this as a sign of their spirituality. I had done some of this work with her. Indeed it was while working with her that I had remembered the dandelion. I had also done a drawing of the farm on which I grew up and I was finding that every time I read this drawing I found more meaning (a bit like a good poem). I became more and more convinced that I was looking at my deepest place, that psycho-physical positioning which is also the point at which my inner and outer geographies converge.

To enter this place I stand before a large camphor laurel tree. To my left is the building I call 'my mother's house' and to my right the one I call 'my grandmother's house'. As I move between these houses the fences begin. By now I am on a track which leads out through the swamp and then to the hills. Even as I try to convey this geography as if it were a bare fact, stories attach to it. The camphor laurel: it seemed always to be there, I loved the sound of wind in its leaves, my grandfather, coming back from town, would hide lollies in its branches for me and my brother to find, and once, chasing a cat, I caught my chest in its fork and might have suffocated had my mother not climbed the tree and rescued me. My mother's house: although she supported my education, my mother never quite believed you could read a book if there was work to be done, and once she handed me a tea-towel and said, 'God will reward you, son.' My grandmother's house: she let me do what I wanted, and I spent many hours playing in her spare room. The fences: my father never seemed to finish them, there always seemed to be a rail or two that needed fixing. The swamp: snakes, but also a secret place my father knew where he could find swamp orchids for my mother. The hills: shoulders shaped to the side of earth, my mother and father picking beans and peas, the smell of summer and the sound of cicadas. It is then possible to do a reading of the place and its stories which is, I would argue, theological or perhaps it would be better to say 'spiritual'. The camphor laurel may promise an everlasting presence, but it still feels something of an appetite for sacrifice. My mother's house is a symbol of duty, while my grandmother's is a symbol of pleasure, and one of the dilemmas I felt most powerfully was the tension between doing the will of God and doing what I wanted. (I am, of course, selecting, in order to fit the stories into a reading: my mother also played a cunning game of cards.) My father's unfinished fences may have taught me that I cannot contain God, just as his swamp orchids may have left me always wanting to bring beauty back and very fond of Isaiah's:

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of one who brings good news,
who heralds peace, brings happiness,
proclaims salvation... (Isaiah 52:7.)

And those hills, where my parents submitted to the will of farming life and stumbled towards the hope of one day being free of debt, will always symbolise a kind of calvary for me.

That's a very limited, I mean 'censored', reading of my drawing, but it is enough to show how a poetic reading of earliest remembered place can uncover holy ground. (I'm not going to talk about the snakes, although they were big ones.) We began each course with this exercise, then did similar work on 'mother' and 'father' symbols, then asked students to see how their symbols of 'place', 'mother' and 'father' were talking to each other. This conversation is, I would argue, the ground in which a person's sacral imagination can grow.

I happen to believe a person's sacral imagination responds to the revelatory fragment rather than the comprehended whole, to the particular physicality of place rather than to the general abstraction of land. I happen to believe the sacral imagination is more a function of the poetic imagination than of the theological imagination (Norman Lindsay might have called it the 'celibate' imagination) and that because Australian theology is so much a work of theology it finds it difficult to attend to one small, vulnerable, emotional, physical, apparently unimportant place. I happen to believe that theology has such an investment in the Big Story and the Supreme Truth that it is at a disadvantage when it wants to enter culture: it never quite seems at home with 'sacred dishevelment' and its words appear awkward and bulky in the company of 'The tiny, the pitiable, meaningless and rare'.⁷

I could, of course, have become too attached to my way of doing 'place'. Certainly in the ten years that I continued, in various places, to conduct this workshop, I met many people for whom this touching of earth became a way of opening their eyes. And just as certainly I became sceptical of the way Australian theologians began using 'the Land' to consolidate their own position. At this point I probably need to stress the obvious. Firstly, I realise that one creature's scepticism is another creature's enthusiasm. Secondly, in concentrating on this issue, I do not intend to imply a overall scepticism towards Australian theology. Thirdly, I do not even intend to imply a complete scepticism towards Land spirituality per se. I simply want to argue

that it is becoming an easy way of avoiding or forgetting what I take to be an even more fundamental spiritual need, to imagine the Land as a place.

So I keep remembering the dandelion, which is my real reason for preferring to say that it is 'place' more than 'land' (or 'before' land) which has spiritual power. Some of you might want to say that the dandelion story means other things and serves purposes other than my theology of place. That, I hate to tell you, would only reassure me because one of my reservations about Land theology is that, because it tends to treat land as an idea rather than a metaphor, it tries to confine its meaning. Land becomes the centre and the silence, the transcendent presence, the next-best-thing-to-omnipotence. I happen to think that this represents, at least for this whitefella, a temptation to spiritual materialism: it encourages me to turn the land into a sacred object so that I can tell myself that mystery is something I possess. It is to use the land as a monstrosity. There is, however, too much evidence that the Australian land will not be polished and lifted up like this: the landscapes of Clarke, Harpur, Shaw Neilson, Brennan, Lawson, Baynton, Slessor, Wright, Stead, White, McAuley, Campbell and so on and on, do not support a simply positive theology. Les Murray may have suggested that the land is big enough to bring us all down to size and teach us a spiritual laughter, but he also admitted that it can be so large as to convey indifference. And if Dorothea Mackellar could celebrate her country for 'her beauty and her terror', this could mean that Australia needs a theology of terror. However much it demands our patience and attention, this is not a land which will be easily settled by stories of hope and contemplation. As Webb indicates in *Leichhardt in Theatre*:

This is a land where man becomes a myth;
Naked, his feet tread embers for the truth:
Desert will claim him, mountain, precipice,
(Larger than life's their terror, lovelier
Than forms of mere life their forms of peril);⁸

Judith Wright's 'Bora Ring' also unsettles the land.⁹ This is a poem that all Land theologians should consider carefully lest it become a parable of their endeavours:

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring: the apple-gums

posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone: the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still.

Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.

Reading this, I am reminded that it is, in some sense, a 'Jindyworobak' poem and am tempted to consider that Land theology might represent another manifestation of the Jindyworobak mission.¹⁰ Even though theology is more international in its symbolism than the original Jindies would have permitted, Land theology might almost be said to display Jindyworobak affinities: it wants to match its language to the land. In order to do this, it borrows, perhaps incorporates, perhaps appropriates Aboriginal values and perspectives; and, in doing so, it is, like the Jindyworobaks, hardly aware that it is trying to recover a vision of innocence and immediacy, hardly aware that its appeal to an original tradition is also its admission of an exhausted history. In other words, Land theology is always in danger of wanting the prehistorical at the expense of the historical and surrendering to its own nostalgia for transcendence. However, I was going to focus on something else in this poem: 'an unsaid word'. I was going to mention that Australian theology, like Australia itself, will be a text whose surface is always being torn open by the pressure of unsaid words (words which may hold the repressed histories of Black Australia and so the guilt of Cain, but which may also hold awareness of what Webb describes as 'this death's-head continent'), words which will take their revenge on those who think they can write on the land as if it were a fresh, clean page.

Theology needs also to consider more carefully the implications of its own metaphors. Not only does a metaphor carry a surplus of meaning, but it also looks at other metaphors around it before deciding which parts of itself to reveal (in a competition for and/or cooperation of meaning). So a theology which treats metaphors as if they can be isolated and subdued is likely to undo itself. It may be a good idea to call your first chapter, 'A local church in apprenticeship to the Aboriginal view of the land', since 'apprenticeship' asks the church to let go the power of its revealed truths. But what happens if this first chapter is itself covered by the book's title,

*Called to be Church in Australia?*¹¹ To employ the metaphor of vocation is, surely, to restore allegiance to a transcendence which may have little to do with 'the Aboriginal view' and to make 'Church' the end of such a call is to value the land not as itself but as a useful theological commodity. To call your chapter, 'The Land Held Holy', might seem a promising move: since the work of Otto and Eliade, the 'holy' has proved a handy meeting place for religion and culture, but what about 'Held'? Does that betray any desire to possess the land as a theological site? Not necessarily, but the chapter opens with a quotation from John Olsen describing how 'Australians lead a saucer-like existence, perched on the edge of their unruly continent and their lives are like exotic orchards which have no relationship to the wilderness stretching from rim to rim'. This could have been an opportunity to initiate a conversation between the unruly and the holy, but the wilderness in Olsen's words is quickly tamed as the author reminds his readers:

It is our place; the place where our lives are earthed and grounded. We are coming to reverence it as our own 'holy land'. As it supports and nourishes our lives, the environment enters into our very souls, as a symbol of common embodiment in this universe.¹²

To describe the land as 'an icon' seems at first fascinating:

Our land, the strange island-continent that we have come to love and venerate, has the qualities of an icon. For those who are still coming to know it, an icon has a character that makes it strangely different from other images, even forbidding and alienating. But as it reveals its secret, contemplation of its strange colours and cryptic symbolism brings a blessing and gives access to the new order of things.¹³

Yet if I subject this passage, and the chapter for which it acts as conclusion, to a suspicious reading, I begin to think there is a story of hope hidden in there. What is different, forbidding and alienating is but a passing phase (just as the entire chapter, entitled 'The Land as our Icon', reads the history of Australian culture as a linear development marked by successive stages of spiritual acclimatisation). Going back to the beginning, the ancient land arrives at its proper end, 'the new order' founded in contemplation and blessing, and just waiting for Christ to say Alpha and Omega. Someone might well say, 'What else would you expect, the book is, after all, a work of theology?'. And I would say, 'Yes, but it is reckless to build theology on a sanitised imagination.' Then I would refer to the opening pages of this book, where the first description of the author's homeland is offered:

What I saw is still imprinted on my memory: the vastness and emptiness of the outback, the thin lines of grey-green trees which marked out the tracery of empty river beds against the prevailing ochres, the homesteads linked with the outside world by a tiny yellow ribbon of road.¹⁴

And I would simply observe that this landscape, this observation which ought to be the basis of good metaphor, has not yet been read by the book which comes after it and converts it into theology.

I am not so much questioning the theology as the assumption that metaphors will be obedient; I am not saying that theology cannot interpret literature and culture for its own purposes (it would take a special poetic arrogance to say that). I am merely remarking that theologians produce subtler, and more profoundly ambiguous, readings of literature and culture if they remember that metaphors often have a lot more to say than we might expect or want, and that metaphors often hang around on corners to talk about things. They even discuss theology.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Francis Webb, *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977). With reference to this edition, the quotations can be found: 'Five Days Old', p. 150; 'The Chalice', p. 155; 'Banksia', p. 187.
- ² See Peter Malone, ed. *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1988).
- ³ Harris, Hynd & Millikan, eds. *The Shape of Belief* (Homebush: Lancer, 1982).
- ⁴ Veronica Brady, *A Crucible of Prophets* (Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981).
- ⁵ Vincent Buckley, *Cutting Green Hay* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1983).
- ⁶ Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1957). See also, *Poetry and Morality* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959). To see how Buckley develops his understanding of the relationship between religion and poetry, see: *Poetry and the Sacred* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 'Imagination's Home' (*Quadrant*, March, 1979, 24-29), and 'Ease of American Language' (in Kirkby, ed. *The American Model* [Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982]).
- ⁷ Webb, 'Wild Honey', CP 232.
- ⁸ Webb, *Collected Poems*, p. 36.
- ⁹ Judith Wright, *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. 8.
- ¹⁰ See Brian Elliott, ed. *The Jindyworobaks* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979).
- ¹¹ Denis Edwards, *Called to be Church in Australia* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1989).
- ¹² Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990), p. 103.
- ¹³ John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation* (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1992), p. 163.
- ¹⁴ Thornhill, p. 2.