

ON MUSICIANS AND POETS

**GOLDEN BUILDERS: WILLIAM BLAKE'S IMPACT
ON TWO POSTWAR MELBOURNE ARTISTS**

Vincent Buckley: Poet and Critic

George Tibbits: Architect and Composer

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What are those Golden Builders doing? Where was the burying place
Of soft Ethinthus? near Tyburn's fatal tree? Is that
Mild Zion's hill's most ancient promontory, near mournful
Ever-weeping Paddington?

These lines from Plate twelve of William Blake's *Jerusalem* are used by Vincent Buckley as the epigraph to his sequence of Melbourne poems, *Golden Builders*. This sequence was first published by *Poetry Australia* in 1972 and was first broadcast on ABC radio before its publication. The Melbourne composer and architect George Tibbits heard this first broadcast and, in conversation, said:

I had been asked by John Hopkins to write a piece for the 1972 Gold Series Concert as a result of Nigel Butterley's promptings. At this time Old Melbourne was being destroyed by high-rise developers. Vincent Buckley's poem went right through me. I wrote to him and he sent me the typescript.

Within a few months Tibbits had produced a cantata for soprano soloist, choir and chamber ensemble which was performed and recorded in 1972 with Marilyn Richardson as the soprano. This was a unique moment in Australian cultural and artistic history, where William Blake's radical vision simultaneously touched two twentieth century artists who were both deeply engaged in redefining Australia's religious and social landscape.

Buckley had been at the centre of the Catholic revival in the mid fifties in Melbourne; by the sixties and seventies he found himself increasingly at odds with all 'dogmatic definitions about God'. In a *Meanjin* interview in 1979, he declared, 'I recognise Catholicism as a great religion, with some claims on me, but not on my allegiance.' Deeply in harmony with Blake's own challenge to the institutional structures of the church of his day, in *Golden Builders* Buckley is, through his creative imagination, in search of the animating source of his spirit. Blake's question 'Where was the burying place/ Of soft Ethinthus?', is an expression of Blake's search in *Jerusalem* for the resurrection of a religious vision which does not separate

itself from the fallen world. In Blake's pantheon, Ethinthus symbolises the mortal flesh and is one of the daughters of Enitharmon, and Los, (respectively, Spiritual Beauty and the inspiration of the poet). In *Jerusalem* Ethinthus has been punished as a criminal and buried near Tyburn, the site of London's famous gallows, not far from where Blake lived. Blake's question becomes Buckley's own, echoing through the whole poem until the last, unresolved line: 'And my Lord's grave? His grave?'

Where, Buckley implicitly asks, writing out of the huge modern metropolis that is Melbourne, can the resurrection of my own vision begin? And the answer is partially given in the details of *Golden Builders* as a whole, which unflinchingly draws its creative life from images of urban destruction and death, including the death of Buckley's own father.

George Tibbits, architect and composer, had been at the centre of the campaign to save old Melbourne from desecration. Tibbits described the Melbourne urban evolution at mid-century in the following words (this is a paraphrase of a conversation):

Before the war Jewish Kasher butchers were moving into Lygon Street. This was also the time that new Italians were just coming in. Both immediately before and after the war the Housing Commission saw itself as responsible for redeveloping what it saw as these slums. By the mid fifties the Commission began experimenting with industrialised building methods, namely producing huge concrete panels off site which would be used to assemble quick high rise apartments. The so called 'Urban Renewal' of the late fifties and sixties sparked off huge battles in Melbourne. Many old buildings were knocked down and substandard high rise were put in their place. There were then plans to knock down and redevelop four hundred hectare sections around Old Carlton and Fitzroy. However, the context of the Vietnam war helped to change rigid Anglo-Saxon attitudes to progress and to government at this time. *We won.*

Tibbits was indeed one of the leading voices to persuade government to change its policy and allow Old Melbourne to continue to exist in much of its colour and social diversity. Tibbit's musical setting of *Golden Builders* powerfully dramatises the strains and tensions of inhabitants facing dislocation and the destruction of their environment. Mediated through Buckley, it carries into the twentieth century Blake's jagged rhythms and his horror at the impact of industrial revolution on the city of London, and on the imaginative faculty of its inhabitants. Blake wrote: 'I see London blind and age-bent begging thro the Streets/ Of Babylon, led by a child.' Elsewhere in *Jerusalem* he wrote:

... of the iron rollers, golden axle-trees and yokes
Of brass, iron chains and braces and the gold, silver and brass
Mingled or separate: for swords; arrows; cannons; mortars
The terrible ball: the wedge: the loud sounding hammer of destruction

The sounding flail to thresh: the winnow: to winnow kingdoms
The water wheel and mill of many innumerable wheels resistless.

Both Buckley and Tibbits were responding to changes - spiritual, physical and social - in the modern urban landscape of Melbourne; they both saw Blake's reaction against the horrors of the city and his quest for sources of transformation as a powerful metaphor for their own visions.

This paper will now examine more closely what Blake meant by the 'Golden Builders', and then briefly compare the responses to this image by these two contemporary Australians.

William Blake's *Jerusalem* opens with a call to awakening from the sleep induced by the world of materialism. Chapter one begins:

Of the sleep of Ulro! And of the passage through
Eternal Death! And of the awakening to Eternal Life.

This theme calls me in sleep night after night, and evry morn
Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the Saviour over me
Spreading his beams of love, and dictating the words of this mild song.

Awake! Awake! O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!

The context of this call in Blake's poem is that Albion, symbol of mankind in general and of England in particular, has become separated from his divine vision, the feminine emanation, Jerusalem. The cause of this separation for Blake, as expressed through his work as a whole, is the impact of scientific rationalism and materialism and the outward expression of these in the industrial revolution. In the illustration that Blake designed for Chapter one of *Jerusalem* (see frontispiece), he has Jerusalem and her daughters soaring up into the sky, while naked Albion sits fixed on the cliffs of Dover trapped in his isolating preoccupation with scientific proof and moral law. For Blake, these are both emblems of the egocentric mind that is tied to its own self-limiting construction of the world, responsible for conflict in the world, and closed to the possibilities of grace and joy. Albion speaks the following words:

By demonstration, man alone can live, and not by faith.
My mountains are my own, and I will keep them to myself:
The Malvern and the Cheviot, the Wolds Plinlimon and Snowdon
Are mine, here will I build my Laws of Moral Virtue:
Humanity shall be no more: but war andprincedom and victory!

Tumbling down the side of the page beneath Albion, and tangling in his text, is a spider's web or a net, the scientific and religious snares that Blake saw England labouring under in the so-called 'Enlightenment' of the late eighteenth century.

The way out of this impasse for Blake in *Jerusalem* as a whole is represented through the figure of Los, who challenges all that Albion stands for and seeks a way towards a reconciliation between warring factions in the human psyche. Los, anagram for Sol, embodies for Blake the creative impulse throughout history. Los's major achievements in Blake's vision were the binding of Urizen ('your reason') and the building of Golgonooza, the golden city of art. Los is seen by Blake as active throughout human history, constructing Golgonooza amidst the constraints and constrictions of the fallen world called Ulro. Blake's description of his city of art in *Jerusalem* clearly prefigures the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelations:

There I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God... the wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. (Chapter 21).

However the energy needed to maintain a direction towards such a completed city, are for Blake not guaranteed. A huge effort is required. The poem *Jerusalem* dramatises this effort as Los literally fights the forces of resistance; this of course was Blake's own story as a struggling artist at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In Plate ten of Chapter one, Blake presents Los challenging the reductive reasoning of the sons of Albion which he saw as a profound threat to the world of the imagination:

And this is the manner of the Sons of Albion in their strength
They take the Two Contraries which are call'd Qualities, with which
Every Substance is clothed, they name them Good and Evil
From them they make an Abstract, which is a Negation
Not only of the Substance from which it is derived
A murderer of its own Body: but also a murderer
Of every Divine Member: it is the Reasoning Power
An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing
This is the Spectre of Man...

Therefore Los stands in London building Golgonooza
Compelling his Spectre to labours mighty; trembling in fear
The Spectre weeps, but Los unmoved by tears or threats remains

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans
I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create

So Los, in fury and strength: in indignation and burning wrath
Shuddring the Spectre howls, his howlings terrify the night...

Los cries, Obey my voice and never deviate from my will
And I will be merciful to thee: be thou invisible to all
To whom I make thee invisible, but chief to my own Children...
... Reason not against their dear approach
Nor them obstruct with thy temptations of doubt and despair...

This passage expresses a number of issues that have been at the heart of this year's conference and that are indeed at the centre of the RLA impulse. Los embodies Blake's own passionate conviction that the reinstatement of all that is 'holy' is to be achieved in and through artistic creation. Los also exemplifies that passionate rejection of a form of thinking - at work in the sciences, in religious discourses, in politics - that reduces everything to abstractions, draining the vital life out of all human endeavours including religion.

For Blake, it is imagination, as embodied in art and poetry that is an integrative mode of thinking, connecting the mind with the body and the feelings and allowing access once more to the holy, the divine. While the Age of Reason saw imagination as a degenerative disease of the intellect,¹ Blake saw it as the link between the human and divine: 'The Eternal body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself, The Divine Body, Jesus: we are his Members';² 'Imagination is the Divine-Humanity';³ 'I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel that the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the Divine Art of Imagination'.⁴

And who is this Spectre that Los compels to work in the passage above? This is the reasoning, masculine principle, divided off from the feminine; it is brutal, selfish and obsessive and needs to be reintegrated into the human psyche as a whole.

This leads directly to the question posed in Plate twelve in *Jerusalem*, from which Buckley was to draw the lines which inspired his sequence:

What are those golden builders doing? where was the burying-place
Of soft Ethinthus? near Tyburns fatal Tree? is that
Mild Zions hills most ancient promontory; near mournful
Ever weeping Paddington?

Paddington was a slum district near Tyburn. The inference to be drawn here is that Los's work on the city of Golgonooza arises out of and through the world that is powerless, marginalised - on the edge, to invoke David Tacey at

this point. Implicit here, as Alicia Ostriker has pointed out,⁵ are the Beatitudes. The city of art, as Blake envisions it in the lines immediately following those quoted above, locates the essential life, beauty and purpose of Golgonooza in suffering, poverty, humility, forgiveness, thanksgiving... As each and every one of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* amply demonstrate, art, for William Blake, is not aesthetically divorced from the social and ethical realities of existence, but is deeply immersed in them, indeed draws its deepest life from them:

is that Calvary and Golgotha?
Becoming a building of pity and compassion? Lo!
The stones are pity and the bricks, well wrought affections:
Enamelled with love and kindness, and the tiles engraven gold
Labour of merciful hands: the beams and rafters are forgiveness:
The mortar and cement of the work, tears of honesty: the nails,
And the screws and iron braces, are well wrought blandishments,
And well contrived words, firm fixing, never forgotten,
Always comforting the remembrance: the floors, humility,
The ceilings, devotion: the hearths, thanksgiving:
Prepare the furniture O Lambeth in thy pitying looms!
The curtains, woven tears and sighs, wrought into lovely forms
For comfort. there the secret furniture of Jerusalem's chamber
Is wrought: Lambeth!

Lambeth was Blake's place of inspiration in London, a place of gardens and relatively open spaces. For nine years he lived in this part of London where he gave birth to *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and many other major works.

Over one hundred and fifty years after the completion of *Jerusalem*, in 1972 Vincent Buckley turned to this poem as the major source of inspiration for his massive twenty seven part poem *Golden Builders*, in which he explored the human, spiritual and geographical landscape of Melbourne. And just as David Malouf at the start of his recent novel *Remembering Babylon* invoked William Blake to ask that key question about Australia - Is this Jerusalem or Babylon we know not? - so too Buckley is invoking, through Blake, the question of whether urban Australia is a place of redemption or destruction:

Sunday grinds on
Sunday. On our right the brief church
in its paddock, in its fine-tempered stone,
lives under noise. Ropes of noise trail up. The jet-planes
sweat in the air. At every boom
the mortar shakes out in dust
and the trim stones lean together

earth shaken from the root or marrow
from the bone.

We are travelling
towards my timber birthplace
and the wilderness of flies (Somehow
damp grass surrounds a house with heat)
and the dogs paused above the creek.

And my Lord's grave? His grave?

Juxtaposed here in the last poem of the sequence are an image of modern Melbourne under siege and an earlier memory of the author's birthplace, somewhere in the country. Neither locale offers unambiguous comfort. There is a sense of dislocation that precipitates these unanswered, unanswerable questions with which the poem concludes: where is the site which can be approached with reverence and with hope of renewal and certainty of direction? The question remains whether the sequence as a whole offers any kind of hope in this direction.

It so happens that David Malouf, back in 1972, was one of the first people to review Buckley's poem. In *The Australian* on the 29th April, Malouf wrote:

... it is at once a meditation on death and a moving celebration of the particulars of life, an elegy for the old Melbourne and a vigorous acceptance of the power and necessity of change.

Most remarkable of all perhaps is its 'geography'. Melbourne itself is recorded in this poem in loving detail- its places, its styles, the life of its suburbs and streets - to create a moving record of the poet's responses and memories.

But by the end of the poem it has become like the Boston of Lowell's *Union Dead*, less a city than a state of consciousness, a state of conscience... the centre of a significant modern intelligence.

The forms the verse takes vary continually to accommodate formal elegy, narrative, thumbnail character sketches, discourse, meditation.

As a performance it is most impressive. As an exploration of what it is like to live and think and feel in one of our great cities, to be a man at this point in our century, its is immensely moving and enlarging of our own awareness.

Malouf's comment suggests that there is more to this poem than a simple reaction to the ills of urbanisation. Something of what Malouf means is evident in the first poem of the sequence which begins with a geographical and visionary exploration of the streets of Carlton:

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...

The sun dies half-glowing in the floating brickdust,
suspended between red and saffron.
The colours resonate like a noise...

We have built this Sabbath School. Feed My Lambs.

Evening wanders through my hands and feet
my mouth is cool as the air that now thins
twitching the lights on down winding paths. Everything
leans on this bright cold. In gaps of lanes, in tingling
shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines.

O Cardigan, Queensberry, Elgin: names of their lordships.
Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: shall I find here my Lord's grave?

The litany of street names (all names of Irish colonists) that resonate with history, mingle with images of machinery and with vivid sense impressions of the feel of this city. It is a landscape perceived in intimate detail and somehow consecrated through the poet's imagination. Like Blake's London, there is evidence here of the fallen world, of Ulro.⁶ It is there in the 'brickdust' and 'the crying of the machines'; but there is also evidence of a world transfigured in and through the poet's imagination. Here are the hints of Golgonooza in the making; not in some remote abstract realm, but emerging through the lineaments of the city under siege: in the molten hammers, in the red and saffron glow of the sunlight in the brickdust.

John O'Hara, writing in the *Melbourne Review* about the poem as a whole in May 1972, was the first reviewer to note this sacralising of the urban experience:

What the poem is essentially about... is the attempt to create a poetic structure which will embody exactly those religious perceptions whose possibility our society seems to deny, in its technological, urban life, in its vocabulary and rapid change.

George Tibbits' *Golden Builders* is a work of art in its own right, with its own agenda, its own vision, drawing fire from Vincent Buckley's words and inevitably also carrying some elements of William Blake into the late twentieth century.

In some printed notes about his own composition, Tibbits has written:

The first and last sections of the musical composition present the unbending energy of builders building or destroying the environment without thought for the world about them. Change dislocates the individual from his external environment. The middle sections present aspects of an individual's intimate environment: an uncle, a father's death, and the self alone. The distancing of close relatives dislocates the individual from the sources of his being... [he] is alone with the realisation: 'The environment is inside me'... the last movement of the work... returns to the outward world of building and destruction. The day's work has ended, and the broken walls stand like wounds in the environment.

The delivery of this paper was accompanied by a guided tour through some of the key episodes of the recorded version of Tibbits' composition. Here a few written notes will have to suffice.

Tibbits' work is in six sections. It selects the Epigraph from Blake's Jerusalem and Buckley's poems I, VI, VIII, XII and XII for musical treatment. As an architect and environmentalist, Tibbits verbally challenged the Melbourne 'Urban Renewal Program'; in his music, he used a range of creative methods to get the same message across.

The musical transcription of Buckley's first poem, 'The hammers of iron glow down Faraday', blends the sounds of machinery with the dramatic overlapping of many voices. Words intentionally lose their distinctiveness, but there are sections where all the voices come together punctuating the soundscape with moments of lyrical vision. Tibbits draws attention to the concluding line, 'Shall I find here my Lord's Grave?' This becomes his quest as much as it is Buckley's. The overall effect is a wonderful complement to Buckley's text which draws out the haunting sense of nostalgia for the past, together with the unease and wonder of someone trying to cope with living in a contemporary city.

Poem XII, 'At my father's bedside', provides Tibbits with an occasion for an elaborate musical overlay which draws out the tragic emotional content, not by articulating words individually, but by allowing them to resonate together. Tibbits deliberately fragments the linear form here and produces a composition that has an almost liturgical feel to it.

Tibbits' concluding section deals with part of poem XII, 'The hammers are at rest in the man-built field'. Powerful, dramatic music wrenches the melodic line into angular shapes imitating some of the verbal imagery, especially that of the destruction of parts of the city by heavy machinery. The piece reaches its conclusion with Buckley's words:

They crush the sides of bluestone. The great ball
cancels the window-side. The press of towers
crumples over the stairs. Will I find my soul here...'

As a dramatic and public composition, written as it was for the 1972 ABC Gold Series Concert, Tibbit's *Golden Builders* has a more polemical agenda than Buckley's collection of lyrical poems. Tibbits is Los in his mode of fury and strength and indignation at the vandals who threaten beauty and creativity in the world. But at the same time he is not without his appreciation for the inward, meditative side of Buckley's poem. Like Buckley, Tibbit's work begins and ends with the quest for the soul. Both exemplify the continuance into the late twentieth century of Blake's call to awakening from 'the sleep of Ulro' into the vision of Los. As artists, both were instrumental in contributing to the continuing creation of Golgonooza.

REFERENCES

¹ See Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, Chapter xlv, 'The Dangerous Prevalence of the Imagination'.

² Laocoon Plate.

³ *Jerusalem*, Plate 70.

⁴ *Jerusalem*, Plate 77.

⁵ See note 28, *William Blake: The Complete Poems*, Penguin, 1977, edited by Alicia Ostriker, p.1001.

⁶ Ulro is Blake's name for the material, delusional world. It is a place of 'unreal forms' and 'dark delusive dreams', *The Four Zoas*, ii & vii. In *Jerusalem*, it is described as 'the space of the terrible starry wheels of Albion's sons' (12).