

Wandering the Dream City: Memory, Self and the World in *Golden Builders*

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All Saints Church on King William Street, Fitzroy, is, for the visionary dreamer of *Golden Builders*, ‘like the one bluestone in a burnt field’ (Buckley 171): something that endures unchanged in the midst of the inner city’s upheaval. It is a place of memory, a place where, uniquely in the poem sequence, he comes upon a younger self, yet this encounter seems as casual as the encounter with any other character. We hear the poet’s song replying to the organ like an echo long delayed, as the present self, with a peculiar twist, obeys the past’s command:

Remember me,
The organ sang, and I

stone, stained glass, hollows in the wood
kneelers, remember me. (171)

The past ‘me’ is a creature of contexts, material and immaterial: an individual being writing his ‘proto-poems’ and a part of a larger body, detectable only by the faintest traces of its former presence. The lightly jokey disjunction between who ought to be and who is actually remembered allows the present self to acknowledge the significance of his former self, an autonomous being distant in time, yet anticipating him through his devotion to his vocation. At first there would appear to be nothing unusual about the depiction of memory here; after all, the faculty of memory is intrinsic to the construction of subjectivity, and individual memories are very commonly figured as places. Yet if we look again, we might note the way those grammatically unanchored substances—‘stone, stained glass, hollows in the wood / kneelers,’ themselves composing a progression from substance to spirit—define both the place and the self.

The elusiveness so succinctly figured in this short passage is everywhere in *Golden Builders*. It registers nowhere more strongly than in the poems’ grammar, which refuses completeness in all kinds of ways and at every turn and seems intrinsic to the speaker’s perception. As soon as we try to characterise that perception further, we are faced with contradiction: on the one hand, the perceiving self of *Golden Builders* seems predominantly passive or, rather, passively attentive, yet, on the other hand, most of the articulations about the world seem highly willed, born of an insistence on being ‘free to mean something of [one’s] own’ (Buckley 160). Passive attentiveness, or ‘Negative Capability,’ was a quality Vincent Buckley prized; it was simply essential to a poet’s personality.¹ In *Golden Builders* it is inextricable from poetic method, accounting for the poems’ seemingly random direction. Whether we think of individual poems or the sequence as a whole, we can have no notion of where the poem is going next, and that unpredictability seems itself to embody a value, precious as a trope of freedom.² The willed

quality of the sequence is more complex. It registers perhaps in two ways: first, as an apparent refusal by the speaker to disclose enough detail for the reader to be able to summarise or otherwise reduce his perception. This insistent autonomy is linked to what Veronica Brady once called ‘the fierce precision of [Buckley’s] craftsmanship’ (68). Secondly, the willed quality of the poetry registers very definitely as discipline:

Every morning
eyes staring backward
into the skull, trying to recall it (161)

think how, in any circumstances,
the body makes will make its effort. (165)

All week I keep the sound
inviolate, the damaged paw
undamaged in my brain. (169)

Human mouths record players
O their monotonous cool teaches me
To see static, hear curving space. (178)

The unpredictability of experience, reflected in the poem’s unpredictable turns, puts the speaker on his mettle. One of his concerns is to be prepared for any occasion: familiar with whatever ceremony might, at any instant, be required. As we might expect, death, especially, requires various kinds of rehearsal.³ The *Collected Poems* clearly shows preparedness to be a lifelong preoccupation. In a poem from the *Golden Builders and other poems* volume (but not from the sequence), the speaker wonders why he thinks of the Spartans’ readiness for utter defeat ‘whenever / I tune my muscles for the straits of death’ (124); many years later, in the *Last Poems*, we find a speaker reflecting on how, as a Catholic, he has been

trained to compose the soul
for all crises: death, cancer, waste of summer,
insolence, neglect, humiliation,
the drying-out of friends,
the uncouth stroke of money,
the ordeal of home-going,
the rising mist of time,
this priest packing his cold oils. (411)

A similar humour informs ‘Remember Mortality,’ ‘that lovechild of the seminar’:

Remember the years we spent
Mulling over it (Mortality,
the great sub-text of poetry,
with all those classical subjunctives;
the big M; the complaint tradition,
the Praeparatio and Consolatio)
till it seemed to grow before us
with noble, sombre gradualism,
creased and leathery as Picasso,
but safe as a clutch of aunts and uncles. (316)

Chris Wallace-Crabbe's comment on the back cover of the *Collected Poems* that Buckley's verse has been 'gradually pumiced' seems particularly apposite with respect to the poems' method; the unpredictable turns of *Golden Builders* will remain a feature of the entire *oeuvre*, but they will seem very smoothly travelled in the late poems:

Stay here, they were saying; why do you have to go home?
I forget what I said; I remember
evening swam crimson on the ceiling;
I found myself talking to them
as if they were strangers, or tourists,
of flame-trees or poincianas,
and colour, I told them,
the soul of everything,
rhythm the soul of everything. (432)

Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,
or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs
or that great heap of blossom in Yeats's window.
Nothing to this. To the firesmell of the forge,
squeezing into the small of burning hoof. Incense
through the voices singing *O salutaris hostia*
that never sing Latin any more.
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)

The unpredictability of events in *Golden Builders* includes the appearance and disappearance of people as the sequence bears out the claim made elsewhere in the volume that 'Life is a history of absences / and unprepared returns' (123):

in the side door of St. Francis'
the incense drifting; and the burly verger
hustling out, expelling
well, for God's sake, Walter [. . .] (168)

We can, then, understand the importance of the *approach* to those places where absences and unprepared returns might be discovered. An emphasis on doorways and entrances runs right through the sequence, again requiring self-discipline in order to negotiate them successfully:

Been here before. Through
the smart-arsed doors
two deep stairs lock ...

If you pause, just here,
halfway up ... (165)

Those who lack this discipline (perhaps because they lacked an opportunity to develop it) come to grief. Walter, who is, we have seen, evicted into the poem, encounters instead of an approach to any civilised place, 'Toils of brick, long passages of sandstone' (168), and Jimmy, 'the arsonist, doing jobs on contract,' suffers, too, from the lack of an alternative to the 'long blank streets his eyes failed in' (182). In a much later poem Buckley praises his daughter Grania for having 'mastered the trick / of hovering in doorways,' a physical skill with metaphysical implications:

Even in the rashness of the close
night, you ask questions about space,
as we watch the black spread like lava
and the stars keep their grip on it
in the pale, pale cold of Kildare. (392)

It is perhaps in the two poems entitled 'Practising Not Dying' that the contradiction between Negative Capability and the will can be most easily seen to be illusory, for in those poems passivity and willed restraint function together as a deliberate strategy, combining to form the discipline by which perception and the language that articulates it are more finely tempered. These two poems, along with the poem that begins 'Don't watch me. I need / Not to be watched' (XV; 170) are in some ways the most difficult poems in the sequence, the source of the challenge lying in the kinds of experience they document. Each of them records a perceptual exercise that seems closely akin to a spiritual exercise; each poem manifests a particular psychological or spiritual state. There is clear evidence of anguish as well as hopefulness, anguish which links these poems with the oppressive sense of the city in other poems and with the suffering of neighbours, who are sometimes also immigrants to the city. However, the disclosure of the nature of the experience is, in these most personal poems in particular, most partial and most restrained:

(A few days left.) The table's
edges and air, grain and resin
turn the eyes in like an animal
the bookspines'
primary colours, windows
primed with the late glow

impossibility of separating self and world, pursues a diametrically opposite method: a kind of dialectic of death. So that as the self turns to leave, the room, too, ‘turns aside from its walls,’ its bounded still space becomes ‘infinite, cruciform’; it ‘tilts / And goes through draggings out...,’ as does the poem’s last line, which dramatises the self’s final moment.

Reading *Golden Builders* more than thirty years after it was published in book form, it seems to be the poems’ incompleteness—their combination of openness to experience with restrained disclosure, and the un-pin-downable consciousness they dramatised—that makes them so enduringly compelling. The sequence as a whole brings the reader face to face with indeterminacy as a trope of possibility, with multiplicity of meaning as a trope of plenitude, with reading as a fundamentally mysterious activity.

If we can discuss the sequence in terms of a Romantic dialogue between self and world, as indeed, some critics have done (Brady 75; O’Sullivan 56), it seems worth expanding the argument to consider the sequence in terms of one of Romanticism’s characteristic poetic methods. The shape of the seventh poem in the sequence, which begins ‘With the spring rains...’ (160-1), is so familiar that its method might be invisible to us. This poem’s shape, I would suggest, broadly conforms to that defined by M. H. Abrams as ‘the descriptive-meditative poem,’ the pattern that many odes and ‘ode-like lyrics’ exemplify. That poem VII should follow this pattern is not in itself remarkable, since, as Abrams explains, once the genre was established in the beginning of the nineteenth century, it grew so popular that it came to inform our unconscious model of what poetry is. Still, it is, I think, worth attending to his description of how such poems work and worth examining the ways in which the poem in question conforms to and deviates from the pattern. Here is Abrams:

The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (527-8)

Abrams’ concern is with ‘extended’ rather than short lyrics, so we would expect the pattern and movement he describes to be telescoped or commuted in a short poem. And so they are—the elements of the extended lyric are all there, but in comparison with the extended lyric, the elements seem distorted, like a psychic disturbance dramatised. So we have an indoor rather than the outdoor setting specified by Abrams, but that seems entirely right in an urban lyric, and in any case, the small spiders stand in sufficiently for the natural world, the walls into which they weave themselves suffice for a ‘landscape,’ and it is the spiders’ changed spring activity that, like so many spring changes, sets the psychological processes of the poem in motion:

With the spring rains, small spiders
weave themselves into the walls

till now this one unravelling his body
 climbs in a long curve floorward
 towards undizzied stillness.

As I towards sleep. (160)

Abrams supplies a long list of poems as embodying the ‘descriptive-meditative’ pattern, which was practised not only by all of the English Romantic poets except Byron but also by their Victorian successors and their American successors and their modernist descendants on both sides of the Atlantic. Amongst that list is Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’—not the first poem, perhaps, that one might think of in relation to ‘With the spring rains...’ but the one that, to my ear, resonates most strongly with it. For instance, we can read the speaker’s insomnia in ‘With the spring rains...’ as a kind of reversal of Keats’s somnolence, his ‘drowsy numbness’ (*Complete* 279), and in fact the later poem plays with all kinds of reversals, beginning with the spider’s ‘climb[ing] . . . floorward / toward undizzied stillness.’ What is being dramatised here is some witty verbal activity while waiting for sleep. (After all, why should a poet count sheep?) Keats’s speaker’s swoon of happiness feels like the swoon of an easy death occasioned, he imagines, by hemlock or some ‘dull opiate’ (279). Yearning to leave the world and its suffering, he longs for a magic draught ‘with beaded bubbles winking at the brim’ (*Complete* 280). Buckley’s restless speaker has more practically taken a sedative,⁵ which still produces a Keatsian ‘sweet bubble’; like Keats, also, he draws on the venerable connection between sleep and death, but, being a modern poet, he avails himself of the heavy irony of a bad joke:

Seconal the sweet bubble
 comes and goes in the mouth
 dying for a cigarette. (160)

At this point the Keatsian analogy fades, and, as if to negate that moment of obvious wit, the poem takes on a lyric virtuosity, achieving extraordinary mimetic effects:

[...] am I
 free? free to mean
 something of my own? The limewhite faces
 lower at each other
 as if shorn from bodies. The feet in the dance
 slowing down. At what speed
 how deep
 down does the mind
 just disappear and in its turn
 be dreamed its lingering? (160)

The last question is surely a version of Hamlet’s, but the questioning consciousness concerns itself with measurement rather than metaphysics or right action. The question is, nonetheless, terrifying: the terror lying in being able to answer it—being able to specify a particular point at which mind has disappeared and only its dream-echo is left. Beyond dream, though, there is something still worse: a realm of sheer horror, visited, fortunately, only once, but memorable

pressure—sheer rhetorical pressure—to serve as the poem’s resolution. It would seem that the operations of the old brain during sleep remain ultimately and impenetrably mysterious, no matter how much the speaker yearns to recall the experience and no matter how much disciplined effort he puts into trying to do so. If these lines do represent an emotional resolution, it can only be, at best, a deeply compromised one.

In thinking about the shape of ‘With the spring rains...’ against the template Abrams provides, and in trying to work out what kind of significance is to be ascribed to the formulation of sleep as a return to ‘the old brain / wound tightly as the old city,’ we become increasingly aware of the use of the second person pronoun in this crucial passage. What is particularly interesting is the mixture of the general and the personal: ‘In sleep you go / back up into the old brain...’ sounds like a general statement, where ‘you’ essentially means ‘one’ —that is, everyone; but when you

Come out
as from a séance to the choke of white bread
the rubbed taste in your mouth
bones standing up
in the water of your face

‘you’ would seem to signify the speaker only: the style of suffering depicted seems so individual. In fact, John Wright chose these lines to illustrate Buckley’s ‘intensely subjective personal [ambience]’ (53) and even added a note to say that ‘one feels this even without reading the succeeding four lines (the end of the poem)’ ([53]). We might add that the depiction of awakening, in all its discomfort, is accorded a certain grandeur, to which the use of the second person pronoun somehow contributes; after all, wakefulness is represented here as the contractual condition, the occasion to which the self must rise. In contrast, the last lines, which revert to the ‘I,’ seem to mark a diminished sense of possibility, as the effort to recall sleep only evokes ‘the chop and change of the machines.’

As a teacher and a critic and a poet, Buckley was fascinated by the possible uses of the second person pronoun—for example, T.S. Eliot’s use of it in certain passages of *Four Quartets*, where ‘you’ is used in a way that can only signify the individual subject, but where that lyric subject is accorded a special status by being cast in the second person:

Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes... (196)

Robert Lowell’s revised drafts of passages of ‘The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,’ published in *The Partisan Review* around the time of the first publication of *Four Quartets* as a whole, seemed to Buckley to suggest an understanding of precisely this aspect of Eliot’s poetic practice.⁶ I do not wish to expand on this analysis here, and I am far from certain, in any case, that my analysis would accord with Buckley’s; rather, I want to indicate the level of sophistication that the poet brought to the issue. In terms of his own poetic practice in *Golden Builders*, the use of the second person pronoun is quite varied and seems intuitive rather than systematic, as we might expect. Both its usage and the switch of pronouns contribute to some extraordinary effects.

‘Micro-Biology I,’ for example, uses the second person almost exclusively throughout:

Been here before. Through
 the smart-arsed doors
 two deep stairs lock. White coated demonstrators
 carry their phials in front of them like tulips
 and flick you with their eyes.

I’ve been up here before.
 If you pause, just here,
 halfway up the clanking stairway,
 and lift your head, let your shoulders
 feel them, listen at their feet

you can hear them, over and across the shallow ceiling [...] (165)

The single sentence that uses ‘I’ (‘I’ve been up here before’) is enough to ensure that we read the ‘you’ as an aspect of ‘I’ rather than merely as ‘one,’ a reading that the self-directed instruction to ‘let your shoulders feel them’ confirms. The poem ends with the speaker’s exhorting himself to think positively about the dogs trapped on the sixth floor. Here the explicit ‘you’s’ fall away, but a ‘you’-grammar is nevertheless implied through the imperative which the speaker directs at himself:

Think of them at the live bone
 at the tender unpeeled wood
 their voices crossing like the yelps of children;
 think how, in any circumstances,
 the body makes will make its effort. (165)

These final lines were cited earlier as an example of self-discipline—the highly willed quality that runs throughout the sequence. Here in their context at the end of the poem, the imaginative exercise that is represented as necessary but which cannot change the dogs’ suffering still represents the best thought that a resolute and compassionate consciousness can achieve. The lines dramatise an extraordinary mixture of mental courage and imaginative vulnerability; this is not a state to be endured for any length of time, and yet that is exactly what the dogs are being required to do, and that is why, ultimately, they may serve as an example of physical courage.

By contrast, the second poem in the sequence, in which the speaker gives details of his killing of a family of rats behind the old stone furnace, is written almost exclusively in the first person. As a consequence of the horror of this episode, he remarks, drily, ‘Now I kill on a small scale (154)’—a remark which turns out to apply to the size of his victims. It is in the course of his account of his killings of centipedes at the very end of the poem that the pronouns shift:

And the small
 unkillable bodies of the centipedes
 rush from wall to wall, their movement
 an unvoiced shriek in the loam-like damp,
 unsnappable, twisting, shellac bodies.
 But I kill them with a spade between the bricks.

And find something like pleasure in it
 (of a sort you'd never dare to tell the
 unforgiving and compassionate young).

Here, in a wonderfully succinct example, the use of 'you' —which could only refer to an 'I'—undergoes a kind of generalisation, as if to say, 'I am an example of what people who have lived for some time in the world are like. This is the nature of the brutalisation that I and people like me have undergone.' Had the poem's speaker maintained the first person, the lines would have amounted to a confession—a confession for its own sake—and nothing more.

Like 'Micro-Biology I,' 'Practising Not Dying (i)' also uses the second person throughout, moving from a series of tenses and moods which dramatise a sense of blocked possibility—the past conditional, the subjunctive—through the present indicative, the present conditional, and thence to the future, with its affirmations:

Even if there'd been prayers
 Left for an hour, not quite prayed,
 Hanging like chill strings in the air,
 You'd have no choice [...] (lines 1-4, 155)

If you lie long enough
 Who knows what will settle
 On your face or hand: a shredded
 Fragment of carbon

Drifted through the window, a globule
 Of hot weld,
 A dried morsel of cypress,
 A seed from the uprooted spiky bush. (lines 22-29, 155-6)

This poem seems to present a much more specialised use of the second person than we have seen thus far. It is as if the self is being shepherded through the spiritual exercise that the poem records: the 'you' here represents an aspect of self that has been detached from the poem's speaker, the implicit 'I,' in order to undergo an imaginative operation that the 'I' monitors. This is, in my view, a process akin to what Eliot does in certain passages of 'East Coker' and 'Little Gidding.'⁷

In 'Practising Not Dying (ii),' however, the use of the second person pronoun fails to empower the self. The sense of possibility at the beginning of the poem is enormous, and ultimately one cannot know just why that sense of possibility proves fruitless in this instance. Yet there is a kind of logic to this 'dialectical flip-over' to the converse of possibility: death. It is as if the poem's speaker, having articulated a series of optimum conditions for living—'fine cool air,' 'the [street] bright as a window' (159)—had to undergo, as a kind of dialectical necessity, a consideration of the opposite conditions. (Alternatively, one could argue on purely logical grounds that a very large sense of possibility must by definition encompass also the possibility of the arrival of

death). Here the speaker uses the second person to respond in an exemplary way to the threat of annihilation, but he fails to convince himself:

So you count on the light-switch
 Staying unmoved, the lemon-flower stalk
 Not moving on the glass's rim;

And you say
 Over and over
 As if paying tribute money
 "The environment is inside me."

But you know the street
 Is full of false notes,
 That you lie in the centre
 Of rectangles, spaces of sound. (159)

'Everywhere, at all times,' as John Wright memorably put it, 'people "count on the light switch / Staying unmoved"' (51)." Yes, and the lemon-flower stalk in the glass is as composed as an object in a still life painting. Yet what 'you know' is, ultimately, incontrovertible; the second person represents that aspect of the self that, while it can be made to act in a certain disciplined way, cannot be lied to. In this instance, the self is not sufficient unto itself; it cannot compose itself like the lemon-flower stalk. It is undone by something as subtle as its own sensitivity to the shapes of air or sound.

This same sensitivity is, in another poem, a source of triumph. Poem XXI, which begins, 'The rain gusts at the asphalt' (177), seems quite different from our other examples. To start with, its typography is unique in the sequence, with slashes as well as indentations. Moreover, the use of 'I' seems unusually prominent, with that 'I' tending toward declarative or descriptive statements rather than toward dramatisation or self-embodiment:

[...] I
 fighting my consciousness

I dread these streets [...] (lines 6-8, 177)

so little air/ left, the centre is displaced
 two bodies where one could live/ each face [...] (lines 18-19, 177)

Yet even at the end of this fear-ridden poem, the speaker reaches toward self-address, achieving that most self-consciously poetic sound, 'O', as it makes a definitive statement of poetic authority, indeed, of vocation:

Human mouths record players
 O their monotonous cool teaches me
 To see static, hear curving space. (178)

Not all of the examples of the usage of personal pronouns are as telling as the ones I have discussed here, but most of them *are* purposeful and dramatise a consciousness that moves surely and intuitively from one person to another. In the very uncertain world of the city in *Golden Builders*, that seems no small thing. To manage aspects of one's self—even when one cannot master them—is part of a discipline so ingrained that it can face the full spectrum of uncertainty without flinching. It would seem that whatever the point of access to the *Golden Builders* sequence, we are invariably led to its central questions about being in the world, about self-representation and the forces that threaten it, about the meaning of place and the function of memory.

NOTES

¹ 'Negative Capability' was Keats's famous definition of the readiness of the flower for the random attentions of the bee as an analogue of the poet's opportunistic consciousness (*Selected*, 260-61). Buckley used Keats's term in the classroom and in less formal conversations. He considered it essential to good writing, and also to good teaching, since the fundamental thing about teaching is to be open to texts and to people's responses to them.

² Regarding the poems' unpredictability, Lyn McCredden writes of 'having to read again and again for the tone and direction of the poetry' (156). Regarding the value of unpredictability, note Vincent O'Sullivan's remark that Buckley valued 'flexibility' over the cast of mind that seeks the 'definitive word' (52) and Veronica Brady's claim that the sequence is 'part of the epic of non-compliance which keeps alive our hopes for betterment' (70).

³ Brady calls the sequence's 'preoccupation with death . . . an essential strategy' (71), because it prompts the self to enact counter-strategies, such as the 'Practising Not Dying' poems.

⁴ O'Sullivan also sees a link with Whitman in the sequence, but, unlike me, he sees it as 'deliberate.' However, he does not specify the nature of the connection, except, perhaps, as a source of postcolonial irony (56). Wright does not mention Whitman, but his talk of the way the poem 'relat[es] the city to the fact of personality' and of 'rejoic[ing] in man's desire to be alive "in the body"' (53) suggests two further connections with Whitman.

⁵ See the COD definition. Seconal, which dates from the 1930s, is a barbiturate used as a sedative and hypnotic. Its name comes from 'second' and 'allyl', which refers to the source of the hydrocarbon C₃H₄ in alliums. At the time that the poem was written, Seconal would have been routinely prescribed as a sleeping tablet, despite its being a barbiturate. I am grateful to my colleague Tanya Uebergang for this information.

⁶ In asserting this I am reliant on my memory of conversations with the poet during his supervision of my Master's thesis in 1979-80. I note, however, that John Wright also singles out this passage to compare with the beginning of *Golden Builders* (52-3).

⁷ See Masel 163-7 for a more extended analysis of Eliot's use of the second person pronoun in *Four Quartets*.

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