

# ***Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian: Vincent Buckley and the Question of the National Literature***

WILLIAM HATHERELL  
Queensland University of Technology

*Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian* (1957, hereafter *Essays*) is the major text in Vincent Buckley's considerable contribution to the formation of an Australian literary canon. Along with his essays 'Towards an Australian Literature' and 'Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature' (both 1959), it appeared at a moment when Australian literature was for the first time emerging as a subject for systematic study in universities, and when the cultural left was defining its own version of an Australian literary canon, particularly through a renewed interest in the literary nationalism of the 1890s. Buckley joined other poet-critics such as James McAuley and Judith Wright, and literary academics such as G.A Wilkes, in offering an alternative to the left-nationalist perspectives on the national literature championed by non-academic critics such as Vance Palmer and A.A Philips. As *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* entry on Buckley puts it, 'By dismissing, or at least devaluing, such traditionally-accepted influences as nationalism, radicalism and vitalism on the development of Australian literature, Buckley set up an alternative canon which, though controversial, has proved to be significant and influential' (121).

Somewhat characteristically, Buckley was later to question this intervention in the 'national' question. In a piece published in *Southerly* in 1978, he looked back on his 1950s contributions as somehow besmirched by the terms of the debate itself:

That sterile doctrine, literary nationalism, leads always to sterile debate, about attitude and prescription. I learned that an anti-nationalist should never take part in debates about nationalism. In my own case, while intending to escape all categories, I let myself be enrolled as a partisan, if not in my own eyes, at least in the eyes of some beholders; I came to be called a Formalist, Augustan, Anglophile—all of them nonsensical labels. It was my own fault; I rejected Australian-ness as a criterion, yet very many of the essays I wrote during the 1950s were themselves concerned with Australian-ness: *true* Australian-ness versus *false*, or so I would have seen it. ('National,' 151)

By this stage, the 'national' debate had become scrambled in sometimes bizarre ways. In an amusing essay published in *Quadrant* in 1967, Patrick Morgan drew attention to the alliance that by then prevailed between the former Angry Penguin Max Harris and various left-nationalist 'mateship men,' all allegedly in opposition to the attempt by university intellectuals such as Buckley and Manning Clark to find an alternative tradition to the 'spurious ... mateship-nationalist combination' (25). The left-nationalist position had proved more resilient than Buckley might have anticipated in 1957. Even later, in his memoir *Cutting Green Hay* (1983), Buckley remembered the 1950s 'for the name-conjuring, publicity-mongering and wattle-gilding that had already become features of the poetry world, beleaguered and self-inflated as it was'

(153). By the time that Buckley got to write his introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse*, published posthumously in 1991, the nationalist project had almost become an object of ridicule in a world characterised by globalisation and pluralism:

As distances melt, it is quite clear that you cannot shape a country's poetry as if you were making butter; even if you know where the cream comes from, you can never be sure of the salt. All individuals will provide for themselves, and those who can't get what they need will make do with what they can. (xxix)

Despite the apparent revisionism of these later pronouncements, Buckley's ambivalence to the nationalist project is clearly embedded within the structure and argument of *Essays*, which even while it contributes to the task of national canon formation suggests the limitations of the Australian poetic 'tradition' (a term that Buckley finds problematic at times) and broader contexts for the national literature. This tone is evident from the outset, with Buckley's preface anticipating the criticism of being 'too hard' on his own country's poetry 'on the heels of a too-scrawny praise—indeed, on its very instep' (ix). And indeed the opening paragraphs of the first essay, 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry,' do not pull any punches: the presiding myths of Australian poetry are 'incomplete, question-begging, and crude' and 'The tradition of Australian poetry, as of Australian society, has been an anti-intellectual one' (2).

*Essays* also needs to be read in conjunction with Buckley's consideration of major renaissance, romantic and modernist poets in the Anglo-American tradition in *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), and his account of the 'ethico-formalist' critical tradition that informs his own work (Carter 272) through the essays on the criticism of Arnold, Eliot and Leavis in *Poetry and Morality* (1959). Just as *Essays* insists on placing 'local poetry in the context of recent poetic developments in England and elsewhere' (ix), the significant critical *oeuvre* that these three works constitute puts Buckley's contribution to national canon-formation within a much broader intellectual and cultural context.

David Carter places Buckley's contribution to what he calls 'the institutionalisation of Australian literature' during the decade from the mid-1950s within a movement that brought the 'vocation of English,' inspired by British models, particularly Leavis, into Australian English departments (272). Such an approach privileged the autonomy of the literary text over the sociological approach at least implicit among the nationalists, yet, at least in Buckley's case, the national historical framework remained important in considering Australian literature. Leigh Dale sees Buckley as conservative (or Leavisite) in asserting the centrality of a canon to the study of Australian literature and in rejecting sociological perspectives, yet radical in suggesting that there were sufficient Australian works to make up such a canon (162). Both these interpretations highlight the tension in Buckley's critical project between his commitment to a new critical rigour in approaching Australian texts and the national project that inevitably underpinned the work of canon-formation. However, Buckley's participation in these local debates was also informed by a complex religio-cultural position, which involved its own critique of Leavis, and which only clearly emerges by seeing his Australian work in the context of his larger critical project.

*Essays* developed out of a series of lectures given in 1955 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Literary Fund (McLaren 83), as well as from journal articles published as early as 1952. Consolidating earlier essays and lectures into a book with pretensions to canon formation complemented Buckley's more explicit contributions to debates about the academic study of Australian literature, most notably his essay 'Towards an Australian literature' first published in *Meanjin* in 1959, a response in part to what Buckley calls a 'symposium' conducted over three issues of *Meanjin* in 1954 about 'how, and under what aspect, we are to promote the study of Australian Literature in a university' (80). In a more negative sense, Buckley's celebrated essay 'Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature,' published in *Quadrant* in 1959, complements this work of (anti-)canonisation by debunking the notion of a central Australian tradition and identifying the central 'lines of influence' not as literary nationalism but as 'a kind of utopian humanism or insistence on the soul's radical innocence, and a kind of vitalism, or insistence on releasing the vital powers of life' (40): 'lines of influence', it might be noted, that were as important for writers central to Buckley's canon such as Richardson, Slessor and McAuley as they were for those he clearly regards as minor writers such as McCrae, O'Dowd and Lindsay. Buckley's work is consonant with other influential works such as the collection *Australian Literary Criticism* (1962), GA Wilkes's *Australian Literature: A Conspectus* (1969), Judith Wright's *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), Peter Coleman's edited volume *Australian Civilisation* (1962)—which includes Buckley's rather scathing take on Australian 'Intellectuals'—and James McAuley's *The End of Modernity* (1959), in promoting a view of Australian writing and culture at least in part as a reaction against the renewed enthusiasm for cultural nationalism, and its implicit literary canon, in influential books by Palmer and Phillips during the 1950s; what McAuley memorably calls 'varieties of sub-standard verse rhetoric ... used by the bards of Federation, of Utopia, of Nationalism, and more recently of Latterday Leftism' (63). The new canon privileged supposedly complex and 'European' writers such as Brennan and Richardson over most nineteenth-century verse but also over latter-day attempts to revive the nationalist tradition among what Buckley calls 'Contemporary Left-Wing Poets' and 'A New Bulletin School' (*Essays* 52–69, 70–78).

The titles of Buckley's critical trilogy—*Essays in Poetry*, *Poetry and the Sacred*, *Poetry and Morality*—themselves attest to the grandness of his ambition. We should also note the emphasis on *poetry* in each of the titles. This was part of the elevation of poetry in general by the new academic critics 'against the nationalist preference for realist prose' (Carter 274). Although Buckley would argue elsewhere for the inclusion of various works of prose fiction in an Australian canon and would also join the general revaluation of Brennan, his primary focus in *Essays* was on a limited body of poetry published after the First World War, as a site of resistance to the nationalists. When he came to map 'modern' Australian poetry in the Faber anthology, the work of the five poets discussed individually in *Essays* (Slessor, Fitzgerald, Wright, McAuley, Hope) remained central, and that of poets who published beyond 1920 but belonged 'to another time and to genres on the edge of extinction' (Brennan, Gilmore, Paterson, McCrae) was deliberately excluded (xxxx). This gesture might be seen as part of a larger emphasis on 'the *maturity* of Australian literature' (Carter 273), but it is also consonant with Buckley's preoccupation with the status of romantic and post-romantic poetry in the modern world that runs through the two books on Anglo-American literature and criticism. While Wordsworth might already exemplify these issues in the early nineteenth century, it would seem to be Buckley's assertion that poetry of such complexity only really emerged in Australia in the modern (though not necessarily modernist) poetry written after about 1920.

Underlying the project of *Poetry and the Sacred* and *Poetry and Morality*, but also implicit in *Essays*, is a view of poetry—and culture—as inextricably connected to questions of morality and religion, yet never reducible to any particular philosophical or theological formulation. Buckley typically expresses this religious stance through terms such as ‘incarnation’ and the ‘sacramental.’ He writes in an appendix on ‘Criticism and Theological Standards’ in *Poetry and Morality*: ‘Christianity is in general relevant to English literature not only because of the historical development of that literature but also because of the historical nature of Christianity...literature is incarnational, and so is Christianity’ (223). But he goes on to qualify this perhaps rather glib and vague analogy:

But it [Christianity] is not relevant simply as a body of doctrine. Indeed the body of doctrine is simply *not there* for the critic to use unless it exists in himself, and it exists in him not simply as doctrine but as discrimination. It can only exist in him as a force in his affective personality as well as a force in his intelligence. (223)

Buckley in fact chastises Eliot and some of his followers for their attempts to apply explicitly Christian criteria to literary criticism. The two chapters about Leavis in *Poetry and Morality*, however, make clear that Buckley is equally cautious about aspects of Leavis’s critical practice that seem to reject any extra-literary ‘sanction’ for literary value. In his book on D.H Lawrence in particular, Buckley argues:

Leavis seems to be suggesting, in blunt terms, that the greatness of art is a guarantee of the truth of its own world; and we are never justified in suggesting that. ... If we take Leavis literally, we will understand him as saying that art perceives reality and embodies it so completely that it *becomes* reality. (211)

The insistence on some, presumably ultimately theologically-grounded, ‘sanction’ for literary values, however, does not lead Buckley to an Eliotesque nostalgia for the explicitly religious poetry that he admits had largely disappeared by the time of Dryden. In a remarkable passage in *Poetry and the Sacred*, Buckley compares three verses from George Herbert’s ‘Man’ with the Simplon Pass passage in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (sublime images of crags and waterfalls as ‘workings of one mind ... The types and symbols of Eternity’), concluding that the Wordsworth is in fact more successful as religious poetry:

If ... one asked oneself which of the two passages was the more sacramental in a traditional Christian sense, one might well answer ‘Wordsworth’s’ ... in both cases religious poetry is being used not as a *reminder* of what is already known, but as a way of establishing a sense of the sacred which, without such a use of language, could not be established at all. (47)

The romantic view of the sacralising role of language is accepted here, despite the earlier strictures on Leavis’s treatment of Lawrence. And in fact *Poetry and the Sacred* celebrates the work of Blake, Melville and Yeats as religious in this broad sense even if it is only in parts of *Four Quartets* that Buckley can find an example of a successful post-romantic religious poetry that is also explicitly Christian. Certainly the refiguring of writers such as Wordsworth, Blake, Melville and Yeats as in some sense religious suggests a critical vision quite radically different from Eliot’s, and a literary taste far from that of Leavis.

What Buckley's repeated insistence on the 'sacred' and 'incarnational' nature of successful poetry might mean for a contemporary Australian poetry emerges in a piece on 'Poetry in Australia,' written for a British audience and published in *Encounter* in 1955. The Australian poet's task is conceived of as 'achieving a formal poetic wedding of the Australian fact and the European tradition,' something that has been largely precluded in the past through 'an insufficient love for the richness of the mind as it is enlivened by the senses, and an insufficient sense of tradition' (66). This entails a version of the religious impulse in poetry that adapts, or 'incarnates,' the European tradition in the realities of life in Australia:

The social and religious impulses of poetry must concern themselves with life by responding to what realities confront us here and now. And for my own part, while I am content to be called a "religious poet," I should be horrified to read in this term the implication that I am a practitioner of a special branch of poetry, a special genre. Religious poetry in our age must be incarnational, or it will become neither religious nor poetic. (66)

An incarnational Australian poetry must adapt the religious impulse and the weight of European tradition to the 'here and now.' Ideally such a poetry, like the Wordsworth of the Simplon Pass passage, creates its own reality through language but avoids the dangers of aestheticism—or indeed of nationalism, utopianism and vitalism—by its deep roots in 'European tradition' (which is of course largely coincident with Christianity).

This context adds some complexity to our consideration of Buckley's role in establishing an Australian literary canon. Buckley was clearly part of the new 'ethico-formalist' orthodoxy that accompanied the 'institutionalisation of Australian literature' in the university. After all, he studied in the Cambridge of Leavis. But as these quotations show, Buckley brought his own preoccupations to this tradition and was acutely aware of certain tensions within it. The other particular perspective that Buckley brought to the critical task was his role as a practising poet, part of the trio of 'university poets' along with Hope and McAuley, and along with Wright a prolific poet-critic.

Ironically enough it is in Buckley's disagreement with Hope about the appropriate place of Australian literature in the university that the force of this perspective most clearly emerges. Hope argues in his 1954 *Meanjin* piece 'Australian Literature and the Universities' for the inclusion of Australian literature as a postgraduate subject, secondary to 'the education of individuals' in the undergraduate curriculum through the study of English literature, and with a heavy emphasis on training in 'certain technical and expert studies, bibliographical, historical and so on without which it cannot do its work' (168). To Buckley this represents a privileging of research, or what he calls 'those ancillary studies—presumably biography, bibliography and laundry-bill counting—on which literary studies depend' (83), over criticism and teaching. We are reminded that Buckley decided to write a book on literary criticism rather than a research-based PhD at Cambridge, a book in which he lauds Leavis as a 'teacher in a closely defined milieu, that of a great university' (158), and in that sense a critic very different from Arnold and Eliot. Moreover, Hope's nuanced argument is, perhaps rather mischievously, presented by Buckley as logically leading to a position equivalent to what he sees as the reduction of the literary to an object of merely sociological interest by nationalists such as Palmer: 'the study of Aust. Lit. as part of our study of Aust. Civ. or Aust. Soc.' (83). Although Buckley's own views about the proper place for Australian literature in the university in this essay are convoluted, the

consistently pejorative use of terms such as ‘study,’ ‘research’ and ‘the sociological’ is clearly part of a rhetoric that seeks to protect the literary from the ravages of both the nationalists and the researchers.

The particular personality and cultural baggage that Buckley brings to his critical role as a whole are also subtly evident in the agenda of *Essays*. Structurally, the rhetorical priority in the title of ‘Poetry’ over the qualification ‘mainly Australian’ is realised through the insinuation of larger issues about the aesthetic and philosophical status of poetry in the essays primarily concerned with non-Australian poetry—‘Poetry and the New Christians’ and ‘Helicon as Jordan’—as the central section of the book that links the broaching of general questions about the Australian poetic tradition in the first four essays and the engagement with the work of five individual Australian poets—Slessor, Fitzgerald, Hope, Wright and McAuley—in the final section.

These two connecting central chapters can be seen as enacting the same journey we have seen in parts of *Poetry and the Sacred* and *Poetry and Morality* in charting a passage between the Scylla of a didactic poetry and the Charybdis of aestheticism. ‘Poetry and the New Christians,’ while applauding a *Zeitgeist* that has led to a religious revival in poetry since the 1930s, deplors the ‘anti-humanist sadness’ and ‘sad carnality’ of poets such as Sitwell and Nicholson; ‘Helicon as Jordan’ deplors the other extreme most evident in the work of Dylan Thomas and some of his followers in considering poetry ‘more as a metaphysic rather than an art’ (94). In both cases Australian poetry seems to offer the potential to avoid European mistakes. The lack of a convincing tradition of religious poetry in Australia is almost seen as a positive as Buckley finds, for example, that love in the work of the non-Christian poet Judith Wright ‘has the breadth and ambience of a myth which is not arbitrary but wholly satisfying’ (91). Indeed, in quoting favourably from Wright’s poem ‘Myth,’ Buckley comes closest to showing what his problematic criterion of ‘incarnation’ might precisely mean by pointing to a poem that speaks literally of incarnation, albeit one consciously identified as ‘myth’: ‘A god has chosen to be shaped in flesh / He has put on the garment of the world’ (91). In ‘Helicon as Jordan’ Buckley finds that Australian poets have succeeded in avoiding what he sees as the anti-social tendencies of the privileging of art in much European modernism: ‘In this country, society and the premises on which society is founded still allow poets to explore the external world in terms of man’s real hopes and fears’ (99).

The force of this ‘Australian exceptionalism’ is the more extraordinary as Buckley sees not just minor writers, but major modernists including Joyce, Rilke and Yeats as implicated in the narcissism that is one consequence of an exaggerated sense of the status of art: ‘The great writers of this century have been all too concerned with themselves as the *source* of their own work. ... Much as I admire him, I cannot see Joyce’s last work as anything but a staggering hoax which ended by hoaxing its author’ (95). Indeed the greatest writers in the European modernist tradition may be precisely those who turned to themselves, sometimes like Yeats supported by a ‘bogus cosmogony,’ to confront the almost insurmountable issue of ‘the place of religious consciousness in a world which rejects all transcendent values’ (98), an issue that even Eliot, and much less the minor ‘new Christians,’ did not confront with complete conviction.

Whatever the attractions of Australia’s isolation from European intellectual conundrums, Buckley is equally frank about the negative implications of Australian anti-intellectualism for the writing of poetry. While ideally ‘Poetry concerns itself with the image of man,’ the limited achievement of Australian poetry has been part of the broader anti-intellectualism of the society:

In a settled and prosperous land such as this, only a tiny minority asks itself the central questions about the destiny of all. And the poets are not always members of this minority. For us, poetry is not a vocation, but an additional pleasure; it is not a seeing of ultimate pleasures but a surrender to immediate experiences, whether sensuous, emotional or even intellectual. The life of the mind is merely one among others in a range of possible experiences. (2)

The cultural pessimism here is part of a long tradition that can be traced back at least to Wordsworth's remarks about the popular equation of a taste for poetry with a taste for 'Rope-dancing, or Frontiniac' (257) in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. What is perhaps distinctive about Buckley's perception of Australian poetry, however, is the attribution of philistinism to the poets themselves as well as their bourgeois readers. Buckley's survey of the Australian literary tradition in the opening chapter of *Essays*, 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry,' finds little to admire in nineteenth-century Australian poetry with the partial exception of Brennan, but also in the two central traditions of twentieth-century poetry, vitalism and nationalism, 'the retarding forces on our poetry' (19).

Nevertheless, the twentieth-century poets that Buckley does admire 'have attempted, whether consciously or not, to fuse the two traditions' (20), a fusing that he finds exemplified in poems by Wright, McAuley, Slessor and Fitzgerald. The new maturity that Buckley finds in at least some mid-twentieth-century poetry builds on local literary traditions but in a way that allows 'European values' to 'live in Australian forms.' This he opposes to the specious claims of 'contemporary left-wing poets,' who 'pin a disproportionate importance on the unwarranted assumption that they are extending, purifying and completing the central tradition of Australian poetry' (52). Indeed, at various points in the book, Buckley points out the benefits that Australian poets have derived from their isolation from the cultural centre. For example, in comparison with the various waves of poetic modernism in England since the 1930s, he notes that there 'has been nothing of this changeability, nothing of its extravagance, in the work of Australian poets':

If we are awkward and to a degree dull, it is with the dull awkwardness of the youth who is content to grow under his own powers, at his own rate, and who will not be pushed; it is not that other disguised (because distracted) dullness of the middle-aged neurotic. There have been no revolts, few explosive changes, almost no manifestos. Life is still real in Australia (though perhaps not overly real); and it is very, very earnest. (43)

Buckley in *Essays* is perhaps rather grudging about the amount of poetry that he really considers first-rate, and implicitly worthy of university study: Slessor's retirement from poetry probably reflects that he 'no longer has anything to say' (121); only 'a fraction' of Fitzgerald's poetry 'will retain a permanent value' (141); much of Hope's work shows 'puzzling crudities' (157); he has serious reservations about Wright's work after *Woman to Man*; and McAuley's 'over-simplified' later style 'reads as though it had been freed of all tensions, all complexities of mire and blood' (194). This selectiveness is of course part of resisting the nationalist celebration of work for its 'Australian-ness' rather than for its quality. Admission to Buckley's post-nationalist canon is of necessity limited.

Buckley's evaluative mode of criticism and his frankly metaphysical view of poetry are of course highly unfashionable today. Moreover, although he helped to found the academic discipline of Australian literature, Buckley apparently showed little interest in the professional avenues of communication, such as the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), that the new discipline eventually developed (McLaren 128). Yet at a time when the academic study of Australian literature is widely perceived to be in crisis, and what is left of the Austlit academy is largely preoccupied with formulating research projects increasingly divorced from the matter of teaching and canon-formation, Buckley's ambitious attempt to situate a canon of Australian poetry within an international tradition repays closer examination. At the very least, Buckley's admittedly controversial notion of a national literary canon fit for university study provides a forcefully argued case against which alternative notions of what is important in the national literature, and how it might be studied at university, can be argued.

## WORKS CITED

- Buckley, Vincent. *Cutting Green Hay*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1983.
- . *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1957.
- . 'National and International.' *Southerly* 38.2 (1978): 145-56.
- . *Poetry and Morality: Studies on the Criticism of Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1959.
- . *Poetry and the Sacred*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1968.
- . 'Poetry in Australia.' *Encounter* 4.4 (1955): 62-66.
- . 'Towards an Australian Literature.' *Meanjin* 18.1 (1959): 59-68.
- . 'Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature.' *Quadrant* 3.2 (1959): 39-51.
- , ed. *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse*. London: Faber, 1991.
- Carter, David. 'Critics, Writers, Intellectuals: Australian Literature and its Criticism.' *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth Webby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 258-93.
- Coleman, Peter, ed. *Australian Civilization: A Symposium*. Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962.
- Dale, Leigh. *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities*. Canberra: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997.
- Hope, A.D. 'Australian Literature and the Universities.' *Meanjin* 13.2 (1954): 165-69.
- Johnston, Grahame, ed. *Australian Literary Criticism*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1962.
- McAuley, James. *The End of Modernity*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959.
- McLaren, John. *Journey without Arrival: The Life and Writing of Vincent Buckley*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009.
- Morgan, Patrick. 'The Misuse of Australian Literature.' *Quadrant* 11.3 (1967): 23-33.
- Wilde, William, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Wilkes, G.A. *Australian Literature: A Conspectus*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969.
- Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. Ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones. London: Methuen, 1963.
- Wright, Judith. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1965.