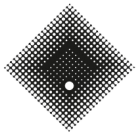
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Vincent Buckley: shaping the book

John McLaren

My decision to write a biography of Vincent Buckley arose from a series of projects I had undertaken in relation to the generation of radicals who arrived in Australian universities after the second world war. The reasons for this interest were largely autobiographical—these were the giants who had shaped the social and intellectual life of the university I entered in 1951. My immediate interest was however historical—what influences had shaped them, what accounted for the differences in their responses, what the effects of these were, particularly on literature and literary culture in Australia. For a time I intended to include Buckley in *Free Radicals*—my book on postwar Melbourne radicals. I thought his Catholicism would offer a neat counterpoint to the Communism most of the others adopted, at least for a time. However, he did not fit the frame. Their beliefs were too far removed from his, their lives governed by other motives. My personal relations with them had been quite different. Wrose, the others were primarily historians, journalists and political activists. Buckley was above all else a poet. His life had to be told in terms of his poetry.

This of course raises the whole question of how a poet's work relates to his life. Nothing of the life is irrelevant, but it may be misleading. It would be easy to write of Buckley as *bon viveur*, to fill a book with anecdotes of his social behaviour, and indeed he refers to these aspects of his life in his writing. To emphasise this element would however distort his life and distract the narrative from the nature of his poetic achievement. The same would be true of his politics, which appears more directly in his writing, but is still not its dominant concern. The book would have to include the history of his politics, but would need to show how he subsumed these concerns in the poetry. The same is true of his religion, which gave me even more problems, as he came from a background totally alien to my own. Yet there is also a close parallel between the development of his religious thought and his poetic practice, so that to discuss the poetry is to discuss the religion.

At first I thought to resolved these problems by construct my account of Buckley's life and work as a series of dialogues with the people and places that he encountered along his way. This would begin with his life at Romsey, where he

encountered the pressures of family and school, the contradictions of foreign trees in an Australian environment, the public strengths of the Irish-Australian community and the private resource of books Behind these immediate experiences lay half-suppressed communal memories of Ireland and its current politics, and further back its mythology, wholly suppressed by Buckley's immediate forebears. Even this early, his writing partly reconciles these different worlds. His juvenile poem on the Scots at Flodden employs the romanticism of Scott or Burns to condemn the same English nation that had provided many of the heroes of his childhood reading. Yet neither in his juvenilia nor in the later poems that recall this time of his life is there any real dialogue. Rather, as in 'Father and Son', the competing forces are set out, without either party really hearing what the other says.

The idea of dialogue comes into literary criticism from Bakhtin, who sees it as the defining characteristic of the novel. Other genres, he argues, are complete in themsleves, and form part of a larger, also complete, literature. They are oral in origin, and express the dominant view of ruling elites. The novel, on the other hand, is written to be read, not composed to be heard. It emerges in ages when new forms of being are emerging, and comes to dominate, or "novelize", other genres.

> They become more free an flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extra-literary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laugher, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminancy, a certain semantic open-mindedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving.

This seems to describe not only much modern poetry, but also the direction in which Buckley's poetry—and his religious thought—developed. In 'Stroke', in his eleven political poems, in the 'Golden Builders' he abandons fixed for open forms, and at the same time allows much of the meaning to be born by sketches and words of different characters, ranging from the stereotypical images of policemen and politicians to vivid snapshots of the desperate, the deluded and the possessed.

Yet if Buckley's poetry has the openness characteristic of the novel, it lacks other characteristics that Bakhtin identified. There is little engagement with other languages, but instead a sad consciousness of the linguistic imperialism of the English that has deprived Buckley and his people of the Gaelic that should have been their heritage. His conception of the past as a time of national heroes is epic rather than

novelistic. His portrayal of Bobby Sands and the hunger strikers, for example, reverses Bakhtin's description of the novelist describing past events "on the same time and value plane as oneself," and therefore as based on personal experience and thought (p. 14). Buckley instead shows the contemporary in the context of the heroic past of myth and legend.

Nor does dialogue function in his poetry as Bakhtin considered it does in the novel, where it is the equivalent as heteroglossia, as the characters construct themselves though their verbal interaction with others. Buckley gives us vivid glimpses of others, and like all poets—although not as frequently as some—puts on different masks and adopts various narrative voices. But these differences are resolved within the poems. It is Buckley the poet who leaves Melbourne at the end of 'Golden Builders', it is Buckley the son who leaves his dying father at the end of 'Stroke'. These endings are still open to further possibility, but they are quite different from the novelistic ending that completes a narrative distancing of the events. The novel invites us to participate; Buckley invites us to join him in contemplation, in the search fo a pattern, for a truth.

There is however a different understanding of dialogue which I considered. Martin Buber talks of dialogue as a way of forming our identity by each opening ourselves totally to the other. This is different from the idea of forming our identity in distinction from the other. Rather, it is allowing the other to enter our being and form us as individuals in a world where everything is part of a greater unity. Buckley explicitly distrusted the idea of dialogue, which he saw as a debate between different opinions in which one must triumph. Buber is more dialectic, in that he sees the dialogue of difference as one that leads towards the greater unity, but this is not simply a new synthesis which the earlier merges the original subjects. Rather, the new unity strengthens the original identities. This is close to the spirit of Buckley's writings about religion and his religious poetry. In his essay on 'Specifying the Sacred', he draws on Mircea Eliade to describe he experience of the sacred as "both a movement into the world of common experience and a movement within the common experience to transcend itself ... " (p. 15) I his subsequent discussion of particular poets he shows how this movement takes place in relation both to the natural world—in Wordsworth or Hopkins—and to people within the world—in Wyatt or Donne. He writes for example of Donne's Elegie XIX that it reveals "the presence of another person, who is there, in the poem, not to be persuaded or assailed, but to become part

of the vision of mutuality". This vision, or epiphany, marks the best of his own love poetry, but is explicit in religious poems like 'Good Friday and the present Crucifixion'. In this poem he surrenders himself to the experience of the Mass, to the point that he discovers

> This world of flesh scored with the full meaning ...
> But still in the sibilant air,
> Its mottled-with-crimson darkness, hangs
> The thong and point of rain. (*Arcady*, p. 14)

His dialogue with God has made sacred the earth that it brings him back to.

But although this concept of dialogue helps to explain much of Buckley's poetic endeavour and achievement, it did not seem a rewarding way of approaching his life and its relationship to his writing. In everyday matters he was given to conviviality and debate much more than to dialogue in either of its senses. If there was dialogue, it was between these two aspects of his personality, which I turn provoked the strong differences of opinion that continue to this day. But to capture these elements of his life required a different kind of a map.

To assist me in this task I had the great volume of papers he left, and the memories of many of his former colleagues and students, as well of course of his published work. A greater understanding of the last is the ultimate purpose of the book, but this requires some consideration of the relationship of life and work. It is only too easy to fall into the circular argument that an episode in his life explains this poem, and that the poem explains the occurrence. This is close to the hermeneutic circle, that we understand a text only through its context, and that the context is explained by the text. This was the fault Howard Felperin found in Buckley and the whole Melbourne approach to English literature. This was based on the assertion that great literature affirms the qualities of life in its historic context, and that the context explains the qualities of great literature. The problem, according to Felperin, was that history itself is a literary construct. But hermeneutics also offers a way of escaping these circles and bringing together the different elements of literary biography in a narrative that establishes some of the truths of the life and the values of the writing, even if the result can never be complete.

As Paul Ricoeur describes it, every act of communication is also an intentional act of interpretation. We start with the fact of our being in the world, and as we find words to make sense of this we distance ourselves, put ourselves to some extent in

command of it. InRicoeur's terms, the otherness of the world constructs our individual identity. This is close to Buber's idea of dialogue. It can be taken as a metaphor for the behaviour of the biographer, who starts with the fact of the subject's life and work and tries to assemble the words that will put them into a coherent narrative that constructs its subject.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe has shown elsewhere how even the way we start on this task determines the shape of the finished work and places it in one of the established forms of significance. The Biblical narrator goes back to the ultimate source and comes down through generations of begats to the subjects own beginnings—or, in the case of Lawrence Stern's first book, just to this moment. This implies that the present derives its significance from the past. On the other hand, there is the classical biographer, who begins *in medias res*, in the middle of matters: "'Anger be now your song, immortal one, / Akhilleus's anger ... that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss." This marks the narrative as something removed from the present, contained in its past. Brian Matthews' biography of Manning Clarke comes to mind. It starts with an account of a photographer's obsession, and then a glimpse of Clarke on one of the regular walks he took later in his life around Lake Burley Griffin. It thus highlights Clarke the individual subject of his writing, rather than the historiography of the writing, as the biographer's subject. Finally, there is the Miltonic opening, "Of Man's first disobedience ..." This opens at the end, and establishes the significance of the narrative in eternity. David Day does something similar in his biography of John Curtin, which begins with the subject's death, implying a fixed historical significance. I toyed with each of these patterns, but eventually chose the Biblical, beginning with place and ancestry, as the interplay of these provided the themes of his life's work, as well as leaving their meaning open.

After the opening chapter, the book follows Buckley's life, looking first at the documents, including interviews, and then at the poems, read as his response to the eve nts that have been documented. The reading of the documents is itself, of course, an act of interpretation. The intent is not to reconstruct a past, which remains alien in part because I did not live in the same circumstances, and particularly not in the social and intellectual enrolment of Irish-Australian Catholicism. So I have first had to enter into my own dialogue with the documents, trying to find the words that will make them a part of my own lived experience. This provides the approach to the poems, giving them a context and suggesting the questions. Both the assembling of the

evidence and the interrogation of the poetry can be regarded as part of the hermeneutic process: being seized into the historical moment by the words, is followed by the distancing of interpretation through symbolism and metaphor. This raises the question of whether this not in itself a form of dialogue.

Buckley claimed that it was not possible to enter into dialogue with written work, as the author could not respond. However, this is a narrow definition of dialogue, and in principle there is no reason why readers should not open themselves to the experience offered in a book much as they might to spoken words. A more serious objection is that Buckley's poems themselves are the product of meditation rather than dialogue. His poems on Northern Ireland, for example, present the experience of the nationalists, but make no attempts to enter into any kind of dialogue with their opponents.

Buckley entered into the politics of his time with the passion of the warrior, and into the religious troubles with the passion of the explorer. These qualities virtually exclude him from dialogue, not because he had a closed mind, but because the questions he posed to his experience were already determined by his personal history. His thrust is towards a vision of the unity of a restored creation, not towards the diversity required of dialogue. In the Melbourne of 'Golden Builders', or the Ireland of his memoir, this unity was already shattered. Only in a few lyrics did he come upon it. His late Ardmore poems are a case where his conflicting emotions about land and people, past and present were resolved. The form is traditional, but as we enter into the words—into the linguistic moment—we are taken into a harmony that is sanctified by the mythical figure of St Declan, and spreads from land and nature to encompass his own distant home, the people of Ireland, the children and the future. Each image is naturalistic, yet together they build a metaphoric world that incorporates Buckley's abiding concerns in a paradisal vision.

St. Declan came here in the dawn of the years
And built with his fingers the place without tears
There the pines in the wind blossom up like a kite
And at evening you'll see the small prows of light.

The cliffs of Ardmore
The mists of Ardmore
And the children at play on the strand,

The roads to the tower,

The soft blooming hour,

Of the sea that runs under the land.

And again:

The morning in the tiding the waves were green with spray
And the land seemed moving outward from the sea.
Though I must leave it soon, to go twelve thousand miles away,
Ardmore will never see the last of me.

The people in their kindness, in the delicate deep town,
They're living in the dignity of Here;
The sea they'll walk in summer, the land they'll kep their own,
This is the Ireland no-one has to fear.

The seagulls come down grunting on the tailspin of the gale,
They are speaking Munster Irish to our heart;
The past that gives us courage will keep our country whole
And the future lift away the bitter part.

The angles of the light

And the blackbirds in their courting

They fall away togther

To the wide strand of Ardmore.