THE WILL OF THE POEM

Religio-Imaginative Variations in the Poetry of

James McAuley,

Francis Webb,

and Vincent Buckley

by

Noel Michael Rowe

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of English

The University of Sydney

March, 1988.

THE WILL OF THE POEM

"When I write, I do, not my own will, but the will of my poems - that is, I try to serve most scrupulously some spiritual event which my life proposes to me, of which the shape is not yet defined - but whether this is also the will of God I cannot know on earth." 1.

James K. Baxter

". . . play not only rules the metamorphosis of reality through fiction, but that of the writer and of the reader as well. Both become ludic figures by assuming the imaginative variations suggested by the work. The imaginative variations of the author, expressed in writing, become the paradigm for corresponding imaginative variations on the part of the reader." 2.

Paul Ricoeur

---

1. "Literature and Belief", The Man on the Horse, p. 47.
2. "Philosophical hermeneutics and theology", Theology Digest, 2, 1976, 163.

SUMMARY

While considering the work of James McAuley, Francis Webb and Vincent Buckley, this thesis concentrates on the religious character of their poetry. Since it assumes that religious language is primarily metaphorical (as distinct from dogmatic), the thesis describes the poetry by way of its religio-imaginative relationships and structures. James McAuley's poetry is religious, not so much because it is Catholic, as because it voyages between despair and hope, believing always in the reasoned will. Francis Webb's poetry, continually discovering glory in dereliction, dramatises the revelatory and redeeming power of the rejected ones - and so works within the "Suffering Servant" model of Isaiah. While Vincent Buckley's poetry gradually abandons Catholic language in favour of its own "idiom of sensation", the religious quality of that sensation is discovered more in liminal than in paradisal possibilities - in the way "holy spaces" are always in some sense expatriate ones. Since each of these poets belongs in the period of Vatican II Catholicism, the thesis next relates their work to that context. Here, however, it searches for imaginative connections and disconnections by setting up its comparison on the basis, not of dogmas, but of models. Finally, the thesis interprets Webb's Eyre All Alone as a search for renewed religious language, returning to its opening assumption that religious language is primarily metaphorical.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank:

Veronica Donohue and Sr Raphael, for the typing.

Stephen Fahey, for encouraging me to think in metaphors.

Erin White, for guiding me along the way of Paul Ricoeur.

Tony McCosker, for giving me John Coulsons's Religion and Imagination.

Gerard Hall, for telling me of Clifford Geertz.

James Tulip, for his supervision.

Vivian Smith, for many an interested and interesting conversation.

Jim Murphy and Gabrielle Sivertsen, for proofing.

And, for advice and assistance in a variety of ways: Judith Barbour, Betty Briggs, Graham English, Jennifer Gribble, Margaret Harris, John Hosie, Michael Jacques, Helen Lee, Philip Martin, John Ouvrier, Tom Ryan, John Thornhill, and David Weston.

Let me especially thank those of my family and friends who have survived.

This thesis was completed with the assistance of a Commonwealth Postgraduate Research Award.

C O N T E N T S

		Page No
PART ONE:	ASSUMPTIONS	
	1. Surveying the Criticism	2
	2. Outlining a thesis	18
PART TWO:	JAMES McAULEY	
	1. A First Piece	41
	2. The Vision of Ceremony	42
	3. The Ardent Hope	63
	4. The Artesian Heart	89
	5. Through Memory and Desire	112
	6. Between the Reasons for Despair	134
	7. A Last Piece	155
PART THREE:	FRANCIS WEBB	
	1. A First Piece	157
	2. The Model of the "Suffering Servant"	158
	3. A Vision of Suffering	170
	4. Vision and Strategy	195
	5. Imagination and Religious Experience	215
	6. Imagination and Religious Tradition	235
	7. Suffering, Art, and Sanctity	256

Page No

PART FOUR: VINCENT BUCKLEY

1. Introduction 281
2. The World's Flesh and Masters in Israel 283
3. Arcady and Other Places 308
4. Golden Builders and Other Poems 336
5. Late Winter Child and The Pattern 363
6. Conclusion 385

PART FIVE: THE WILL OF THE POEM

1. Imagining Catholicism 390
2. Catholics Imagining: James McAuley 411
3. Catholics Imagining: Vincent Buckley 433
4. Catholics Imagining: Francis Webb 452
5. Gives a Word to the Sand? 473

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 498

P A R T O N E

ASSUMPTIONS

P A R T O N E

ASSUMPTIONS

SECTION ONE: Surveying the Criticism

SECTION TWO: Outlining a Thesis

SECTION ONE

SURVEYING THE CRITICISM

When a poet is described as "Catholic", the hardened reader quite often begins to work from a particular interpretative expectation: either belief will be censoring imagination, or imagination will be subverting belief. On the one hand, the poet is quite often viewed with some suspicion. Since she gives allegiance to the Catholic belief-system, her imaginative independence must be surrendered to a dogmatic authority, and her writing must be falsifying experience for the sake of theology. On the other hand, the poet is quite often regarded with rueful sympathy. No matter how hard he tries to be loyal to Catholic dogmas, he will find himself lost within the distinction between "faith" and "sensibility", will find his imagination always returning to experience - and experience, of course, will not reveal the order, certitude and consolation which (apparently) Catholicism holds in store for those who love it. (The softened reader may well operate differently: giving sympathy where the imagination is elevated by grace and illuminated by belief, suspicion where it falls away to express unredeemed experience.) What this exposes is a general failure to appreciate the way in which belief is an act of imagination, and imagination an act of belief.

This is, of course, a strategic generalisation which, when it is so expressed, may sound too simple. Nevertheless, it is possible to survey criticism of McAuley, Webb and Buckley, and argue that it has relied too much on a sharp distinction between "dogma" and "experience", so that the poetry's religious character is equated with its dogmatic character, and its commitment to "experience" is taken as the first and last guarantee of its imaginative authenticity and integrity.

Sometimes there seems to be a simplistic assumption that religion is entirely authoritarian and otherworldly, and therefore inimical to good poetry. Noel Macainsh, reviewing Buckley's The World's Flesh, is particularly dismissive:

> Whereas Webb has drawn inward and humble from the sharp impress of the world, Buckley presses outward and, in place of Webb's concrete and exorcising imagery, abounds in rhetorical generalisations. The less attractive aspects are: subjectivism, self-pity and a church-clad pontification, together with a traversing of points of hesitation and affirmation, as commonly found in writers bound by a system of institutionalised beliefs. Other people, however intimate the occasion, make only a shadowy appearance, as a further occasion for the author's self-examination. One is reminded of Nietzsche's saying, 'The religious man thinks only of himself.' [1].

Even if we allow Macainsh his own rhetorical generalisations and Nietzschean-clad pontification, and agree that Buckley's early poetry is flawed by its privacy and abstraction, this statement is still startling in the way it acrimoniously assumes that it is Buckley's religion (his "system of institutionalised beliefs") which is detrimental to his poetry. In fact, a careful reading of his early poetry will uncover a more complex interdependence. Similarly, John Docker, in keeping with his pugnacious distinction between "social" and "metaphysical" writing, equates McAuley's Catholicism only with its Thomistic aspects, then reads down from this "organicist" philosophy (and from McAuley's Catholic-DLP politics), to find only brash confidence in A Vision of Ceremony and to dismiss McAuley's concern for traditional hierarchies as cultural elitism (as if the only model of authority is an aristocratic one). Moreover, McAuley's Catholicism is seen as a medievalism which deludes him with its

---

1. Noel Macainsh, "Six Volumes of It", Overland, 22, 1961, 52.

European ideal: "It was McAuley's Cold War brashness, and his intensity and certainty as a Catholic convert, which made him think he could so easily internalise a past European way of life . . ."[1]. Webb's poetry does not usually provoke such attacks: partly because his faith never appears as sure and easy; partly because his poetry, even when it is obscure, includes so much of the complexity of human experience; partly because he did not occupy so public a position in political and social life. Yet Rodney Hall, after a very sympathetic reading of Webb's poetry, insists on raising the problem of authority as if religious authority and poetic authority have to be different:

> Even the author himself sacrifices the ultimate authority of his poetic vision in deference to religious faith: some may hail this as his point of greatness, but to me it is the measure of his limitation.[2].

Even critics who are not so suspicious of a poet's religious commitment often imagine religion "above" and "beyond" immediate experience - as more a system of beliefs than a dynamic of faith and hope. They can then too quickly assume that dogmatic language functions in poetry to the same effect and in the same way as it functions in theology. Thus, Carmel Gaffney, opposing despair and faith, too quickly translates McAuley's later poetry into the language of Christian spirituality. This allows her to interpret the last line of "Nocturne" - "Nightmares and angels roam the empty field."[3]. - as a reminder that "in spite of the will's exhaustion faith can at least recall sensible revelations of God's presence", and so ignore its disturbing and daemonic possibilities.[4]. These are the possibilities which fascinate Livio Dobrez, as he argues that McAuley's conversion

---

1. John Docker, In a Critical Condition, p. 81.
2. Rodney Hall, "Poetry for the Converted", The Australian, Saturday, 9th August, 1969, reviewing Collected Poems.
3. James McAuley, Music Late at Night, p. 5.
4. Carmel Gaffney, "Music Out of Decay: McAuley's Later Poetry and George Trakl", Southerly, 4, 1976, 407-419.

is a commitment to the objectivity of the Catholic tradition, "an obliteration of the younger poet", finally and fortunately subverted as the older poet escapes Catholic formalism and sweetly suffers the revenge of a mild Dionysus. While Dobrez shows some appreciation of the range within Catholicism, he too glibly reduces religion to self-realisation, when he effectively concludes that McAuley only finds authentic faith as he discovers that the "self's Self, who is, and is/ The end of (his) going" is not God, but McAuley's inner self.[1].

R.F. Brissenden, who appreciates the ironic quality of McAuley's faith and poetry, refuses to see McAuley's distrust of modernity as some kind of Thomistic nostalgia. He identifies it with an existential sense of despair, then employs a conventional contrast between faith and sensibility.[2]. In one sense, this respects the tension between hope and despair which is characteristic of McAuley's poetry. In another sense, it distorts the religious quality of that tension by too simply associating hope with faith and despair with sensibility. It does not seriously consider in what sense despair might be religious.

Leonie Kramer also sees despair as "a recurrent threat to serenity and faith"[3]. in McAuley's poetry - and this largely because she imagines religion as analogous to a rational paradise. Even so, she does, like Brissenden, respect the tensions within McAuley's position. She shows how he positions poetry between earth and heaven. Poetry is not a

---

1. Livio Dobrez, "The Three McAuleys", Southern Review, 3, 1976, 171-184.
2. R.F. Brissenden, "The Wounded Hero", Southerly, 4, 1972, 267-278.
3. Leonie Kramer, "Introduction", James McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary, p. xxiii.

surrogate religion, "proposing for itself a peculiar power of transcendental knowledge or wisdom" (as in the Magian heresy). Nor is it an ultimate commitment to private experience.[1] Instead, poetry illuminates the life of this world by the light of heaven. Kramer never simplifies this relationship: she assumes, rather, that belief can create as many questions as it resolves and make even greater demands on the critical reason. However, she also assumes a transcendental model of religion, firmly distinguishing "the two worlds, temporal and spiritual".[2] This does not necessarily invalidate any of her particular criticisms - her assumptions are, after all, also McAuley's. It simply means that her hermeneutic never prompts her to consider the interaction, indeed the interdependence, which operates between the "supernatural" and the "natural" terms of McAuley's work, and thus it inhibits any discussion of the reciprocity operating between his Catholicism and his poetry. Instead, we discover a theme of personal disquiet persisting side by side with religious belief. Rather than consider the interdependence of the "divine order" (her term) and "experience", she shows how McAuley's commitment to the divine order does not absolve him of his allegiance to experience and demonstrates his critical-poetic independence within "the two worlds, temporal and spiritual".

Reviewing Buckley's Golden Builders, Veronica Brady discovers more order and faith than the poem itself discloses. She sees it as a rite of passage "into a morally and therefore more humanly meaningful universe away from a world which reduces even death to something 'flat, metallic'". Since she is so sure of the poem's direction,

---

1. Leonie Kramer, "James McAuley's 'Captain Quiros': The Rational Paradise", Southerly, 3, 1965, 151.
2. "The Rational Paradise", p. 154.

she is able to see the church as a focal point in the poem (rather than the university or the streets themselves) and to oppose "the science which brings death" to "the sense of life which centres on the old church". The church symbolises a saving memory.[1] This conclusion is very different from Vivian Smith's assessment that "the sense of suffering and confusion is stronger than any sense of joy and order".[2] Brady also claims that Golden Builders succeeds because it believes in the city and that the function of the poem's religious perspective is to validate its matters of fact. In this way she keeps close to Buckley's own (early) style of Christian humanism and realism. Is it not, however, also true that Golden Builders registers some failure of Christian humanism, that its facts are more and more suggesting that they do not need any "church" symbolism to validate them as religious phenomena?

This important question does not emerge, just as it does not emerge in the criticisms of Penelope Curtis and A.K. Thomson. Here Buckley's poetry is shown developing a more personal rhetoric, but there is no realisation that it is also abandoning a traditional one, that there is at least as much displacement as integration occurring. Curtis sees Buckley's poetry moving away from its early obscurity and strained rhetoric towards a larger rhetoric, one which will have space enough to contain the intensity of his vision. The more it integrates its public and personal modes, the more "his poetry shows a new freedom in the interplay of fact and metaphor, of the natural and supernatural order".[3] Curtis uses a model of integration which

---

1. Veronica Brady, "Return to the Centre: Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders", Westerly, 2, 1973, 68-76.
2. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p. 419.
3. Penelope Curtis, "Vincent Buckley as Poet", Quadrant, 4, 1962, 55-65.

privileges the world of fact over the world of dogma and she presumes that it is the natural world which is easily available for intimacy, while the supernatural is remote and must be wrestled down to earth and existential faith. This means that she does not seriously consider whether the natural and the supernatural world are also remote because they are both constructs of Buckley's expatriate imagination.

A.K. Thomson, working from a fine appreciation of Buckley's Christian humanism, traces a similar development from a too conscious symbolism to a more natural one:

> Buckley moves from using trees - and other objects - too consciously and strenuously as symbols in a religious drama, to using them unselfconsciously and naturally as part of his own background, as part of his own drama, and in the process they become more effective symbols.[1]

In one sense, this is indisputable: Buckley's poetry does become more personal. In another sense, the interpretative assumption which lies behind this assessment is questionable. It again assumes that the religious is at one (or two) removes from the actual; and it again assumes that Buckley's remote rhetoric is more a matter of dogmatic religion than of his imaginative need for distance as well as intimacy. This also assumes a relationship between symbol and self which is somewhat one-sided and introverted and which does not appreciate that the "self" can be as mediated by language as any dogmatic formulation. My own assumption is that self and symbol are interdependent. I follow Paul Ricoeur's argument that symbols (whether traditional or personal) in some sense "create" the self, by challenging the pre-reflexive or unmediated self with their

---

1. A.K. Thomson, "The Poetry of Vincent Buckley: An Essay in Interpretation", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 305.

meanings and enigmas and calling forth the reflexive self. [1].

Among Webb's critics, W.D. Ashcroft most clearly exemplifies the danger of reducing religious poetry to its philosophical component. Ashcroft places Webb's thought firmly within the tradition of Thomistic natural theology and Ignatian spirituality. Aquinas taught that knowledge begins in sensate apprehension of reality and moves, by a process of abstraction, towards intellectual comprehension of natures or essences. Applying this epistemology to natural theology, Aquinas argued that an understanding of contingent being would yield knowledge of Absolute Being. In directing the individual's prayerful relationship with God, St Ignatius of Loyola applied a similar notion of progression from the sensate to the essential and encouraged imaginative involvement in the concrete aspects of a spiritual mystery as a means of achieving meditative communion. [2].

In Ashcroft's view this "Catholic basis" provides the key to Webb's poetic technique, since his is a poetry which operates as a progression from the immediate and definite world of creation to the knowledge of the Absolute. Webb, he claims, is on a quest for Being, and knows that he must pass through the limited and temporal order. His poetry mimics this progression - involving the reader in a word-world which is at first complexly sensuous, but which, with increasing involvement, begins to reveal the secret of its own inner arrangement:

> The form of the poetry is an apparently abstract arrangement of language which, ideally, captures and holds the attention of

---

1. Erin White, Itineraries of Meaning: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic of the Sacred, pp. 113-131.
2. W.D. Ashcroft, "'The Broads of the Spirit': The Poetry of Francis Webb", Meanjin, 33, 1974, 7.

> the reader and then, by increasing involvement, proceeds to excite his imagination towards an understanding of this system.[1]

Webb's poetry, then, is mostly a "framework system" whose function is "to suggest the outline of an unenclosable experience".[2] It excites an initial response through the sensuous and spontaneous appeal of its language: impressions, syntax, images, phrases, sounds. These aesthetic sensations are then set in tension with intellectual concerns to clarify and refine experience into concepts:

> This initial response to the poetry is important, but the strategy of the language is to compel imagination to crystallize these aesthetic sensations into poetic ideas, that is, into mental images which are at the same time valuations of experience, in much the same way as the intellect apprehends facts and crystallizes them into concepts.[3]

Once the reader is so engaged within the poem, she or he becomes engaged within a visionary context and, as she or he moves more and more closely towards the centre of that context, she or he moves through strata of meaning, strata which more and more approach the "Essence":

> In the attitude of perception encouraged by the 'framework system' the attention is, in a sense, turned inward to complete the shape of the experience the language is suggesting. Moods, emotions, imagery and thoughts that arise while the art work is being contemplated and enjoyed represent the beginning of this experience. Once the attention has been arrested in the direct experience of the poetry, the gaze is propelled outward through ascending strata of meaning and allusion, through the dimensions of vision which surround the poem.[4]

In Ashcroft's view, this technique has its foundation in Catholic philosophy:

> Accepting the self-evidence of God in creation, many Catholic thinkers postulated that man could approach divine truth by an ordered progression of reason or religious experience through the definite world of creation. This progression towards revelation is the rationale of the 'strata system' in Francis Webb's poetic

---

1. W.D. Ashcroft, "The Storming of the Bastille. The Technique of Francis Webb's Poetry", Southerly, 34, 1974, 356.
2. "The Storming of the Bastille . . .", p. 358.
3. "The Storming of the Bastille . . .", p. 356.
4. "The Storming of the Bastille . . .", p. 363.

> technique. Each stratum of the meaning of the poetry represents an experiential stage in the approach to epiphany, the approach which underlies the poet's conception of the essential role of the artist.[1].

As well as relating Thomistic thought to Webb's poetic technique, Ashcroft uses it to illuminate other aspects of Webb's poetry. He interprets the place of suffering in Webb's poetry as a purifying path leading to vision: "the recognition of the infinite dimension of Being which exists beyond all conflicting tendencies, is contingent upon a condition of suffering." [2]. Webb's interest in the heroic is interpreted according to his preference for abstracting the essence. (This misses the specific quality of Webb's heroic: the dramatic relationship between aspiration and failure, strength and weakness.) "Webb's interest in the 'large' characters resides in the fact that they offer the best opportunity to isolate absolutes in existence."[3]. Despite obvious differences, A Drum for Ben Boyd and The Canticle are both attempts to discover a certain primary essence. [4]. Even a lyric poem like "Five Days Old" is seen according to Thomistic thought: the definiteness of the infant, regarded long enough, unveils immensities - that is, in Ashcroft's interpretation, the sense of a larger coherence. [5].

Thomistic distinctions between the temporal and eternal, the senses and the intellect, also sit comfortably with Ashcroft's attempt to distinguish two perspectives in Webb's thought: the "linear", most markedly present in the exploration poems, with their objectifying impulse and their concern with temporal and spatial conditions of

---

1. "The Storming of the Bastille . . .", p. 363.
2. W.D. Ashcroft, "Pain's Amalgam with Gold: Francis Webb's, 'Around Costessey'", Westerly, June, 76, p. 64 (62-73).
3. "'The Broads of the Spirit': The Poetry of Francis Webb", Meanjin, 33, 1974, p. 11.
4. "'The Broads of the Spirit' . . .", p. 11.
5. "'The Broads of the Spirit' . . .", p. 8.

existence; the "phenomenological", most markedly present in the more analytical, meditative poems, with their concern for the inner truth of the human condition, a truth outside spatial and temporal contexts. [1].

Ashcroft also relates Webb's developing idea of himself as an artist to his Thomistic thought: the poet is hero-priest whose vocation is to make revelation of the 'source' within existence, whether that quest take an heroic or meditative mode. The revealing power of art involves a movement through experience: the poet journeys to the "centre of fierceness" and there receives and reveals the vision.[2].

Ashcroft's criticism, to date the most sustained body of published work on Webb, thus presents Thomistic natural theology as the key to Webb's thought - and, presumably, to the religious character of his poetry. The strength of Ashcroft's approach is its coherence - but that is also its weakness. Webb's quest becomes somewhat impersonal, related to a concept of the Absolute, though his poetry is well populated with persons and characters, searching as much for compassion and fellowship as for Being. Suffering becomes an experience through which one passes to peace, rather than a sacrament of presence. Nor does Ashcroft's hermeneutic value the extraordinarily Christocentric character of Webb's poetry. This is not surprising since, in Thomistic terms, Christ is the subject of a theology grounded in revelation, not of a natural theology grounded in reason. Ashcroft persistently assumes that the hermeneutic movement is from philosophy to imagination. He never wonders whether Webb's

---

1. "Two Perspectives of Webb's Thought", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 55-61.
2. "Centre of Fierceness: Francis Webb's Vision of the Artist", Australian Literary Studies, 12, 1975, 160-175.

imagination might choose its philosophy. My own argument will be that Webb's poetry is more deeply influenced by the biblical image of the Suffering Servant than by Thomistic natural theology.

Most of these criticisms agree that dogmatic elements work well in the poetry if they work unobtrusively and organically. Belief is expected to maintain a discreet presence (unless, of course, it is calling itself into question). This may well be a reasonable expectation - but the reason has less to do with the remoteness of dogma and more to do with the procedures of the imagination. This interpretative expectation is working from a submerged model of integration: "dogma" is more real and more credible if it is incorporated in everyday "experience". In one sense, this is so psychologically plausible that it requires no objection.[1] In another sense, it so privileges the truth and power of "experience" that it overlooks the reciprocal relationship which quite often operates between "dogma" and "experience". More importantly, this expectation generally fails to recognise why the model of integration which informs its criticism is so valuable: not so much because religion usually involves a dogmatic process which can become remote, but because religion involves an imaginative process which is integrative and mediatory. In short, "dogma" needs to be integrated with "experience", and vice versa, so that each may become more real in becoming more imaginative.

Not all critics assume that religion is primarily constituted by commitment to some system of dogma. Others assume that religion

---

1. Interestingly, such a model of integration is somewhat confirmed by James W. Fowler's research into the stages of faith development. Fowler shows how faith, as it becomes more mature, becomes more independent and personalised, and more able to maintain a fruitful tension within the ambiguities of experience. (Stages of Faith, Harper & Row, New York, 1981.)

relates more immediately to ordinary experience - indeed, that it names a depth-dimension within experience, rather than a separate category of experience.

Though he seems to link Catholicism with an objectifying and absolutising impulse in Webb's work, James Tulip, carefully blending literary and religious qualities, stresses the poetry's "religiousness", signalling that his interest is in the "phenomenon of faith". This "religiousness" is seen as "the key to the structure of (Webb's) perceptions":

> In Webb's case, the key to the structure of his perceptions lies, I believe, in the religiousness which informs the whole of his writing. Here lies the answer to so many aspects of his work: the poet as priest, the adventurer-explorer as saint, the stance of prayer and meditativeness underlying the constancy of rhythm and tone in poem after poem, the spiritual exercises in the semi-dramatic projections of his plays; and above all, the objectifying tenor and orientation of his verse as the expression of a special kind of religiousness which risks everything in a non-objective concentration of mind and spirit and stands to lose everything in the sheer difficulty that this kind of self-transcendence imposes. The nervous, lacerating language of his verse encases itself in the fragile, crystalline structures of his stanzas, their rhythms and rhymes; and it is here that the phenomenon of faith, in its widest and most human of forms, finds its contingent finality in the unique and necessary utterance which is his art . . .[1].

By using the term "oceanic feeling"[2]. to describe the effect of Webb's poetry, Vincent Buckley invokes a phenomenological rather than doctrinal view of religion. Music, light and sea are the mythic forces in Webb's poetry, giving it "sweep and variousness". Webb, he says, sets a harmony moving in a jumble of impressions. Sometimes the jumble wins: "then the rhymes play against each other repetitiously and irregularly, the adjectives tend to take on a life of their own,

---

1. James Tulip, "The Poetry of Francis Webb", Southerly, 3, 1969, 184.
2. This is Freud's description of mysticism (although Freud uses it to reduce mysticism to emotion). Cf. David Hay, Exploring Inner Space, p. 181.

dissociated from their nouns." The more successful poems "use rhyme as the feature of an organising rhythm, and are sparing with adjectives". [1.] Buckley's criticism interrelates harmony as a literary effect and harmony as a religious experience. Similarly, Tulip argues: "(Webb's) instinct for harmony, which underlies his remarkable gift for rhyme, is the point at which his formal and perceptual interests coincide."[2.] This determination to relate the religious and the literary means that both Buckley and Tulip are careful to respect the process in Webb's poetry: its harmony is not escapist; it is a way of breaking and suffering into words.

In a later piece, Tulip starts to explore the "Australianness" of Webb's religious consciousness. He focuses on "Banksia" from Eyre All Alone, calling it "an epiphany in uniquely native and Australian terms". As such, it incorporates Australia's environment and idiom, its history (and this with a suitable degree of irony), and its European and Aboriginal heritages. He also finds religiousness in the way the complexity and struggle which lead to "Banksia" are now resolved in a moment of simplicity. Once again, religion is being considered not simply as a matter of theological content, but as a dynamic of perception. It is being more closely related to various dynamics of the poem, therefore: the relation between inner and outer worlds, the dual stance of the poetry ("both in and out of history"), and the relation between myth and history. All these factors evoke the epiphany. [3.]

---

1. Vincent Buckley, "The Poetry of Francis Webb", Quadrant, March/April, 1970, 11-15.
2. James Tulip, "The Poetry of Francis Webb", Southerly, 3, 1969, 185.
3. James Tulip, "'Banksia' - An Australian Epiphany", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 36-39.

R.F. Brissenden agrees with Buckley that Webb's response to experience is "intuitively religious" and continues to stress the pre-theological nature of Webb's religiousness:

> Every poet to some degree creates his own world, and the character this world assumes is conditioned by the poet's initial response to experience. As Vincent Buckley has said, Frank Webb's response was intuitively religious - he felt this first and then sought for the metaphors in which to express it. And the expression of this quite unselfconsciously religious apprehension of things manifests itself in the shape of the poetic world he created and the language in which he imaged it. [1.]

Brissenden goes on to show how Webb's intuitively, imaginatively religious response exhibits "a spontaneous, almost naive synaesthesia", an "animising" spirit, and an "intermingling of the inner and outer world, the intermingling of the world as the individual experiences it and as he recreates it in his imagination". This third aspect leads to "an evocation of that creative inter-relationship - the give and take between the perceiving, receptive transforming consciousness of the individual and the responsive and animated environment". [2.] In other words, Webb's religious response to experience is characterised not so much by a movement towards the Absolute, as by a development of participative awareness, in which experience and imagination are continually interacting.

If we are to develop some appreciation of the relationship between literary and religious structures, it is important to value

---

1. R.F. Brissenden, "Frank Webb's Country: The Landscape of a Mind", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 44.
2. "Frank Webb's Country . . .", 44-50.

Brissenden's sense of some interaction between given and imagined worlds, as also Tulip's sense of some coincidence of formal and perceptual interests. We need, too, to value small moments in Vivian Smith's criticism of McAuley, as when, discussing "Celebration of Divine Love", he refers to the "somewhat self-enclosed conviction both of the believer and of the particular genre (the ode and the hymn) that McAuley uses"[1], and when, evaluating McAuley's conversion, he remarks:

> If one looks at his work as a whole one notices that his conversion is reflected in his poetry not as a turning to new themes, but as a penetration to the essential significance of the themes and a resolution of the tensions that have always preoccupied him; it is reflected, in fact, in a poetically valid development to classicism in the deepest and most precise sense.[2]

Here Smith has apprehended something of the reciprocity between McAuley's poetic and religious development. David Bradley reads McAuley's conversion in the same manner, when, considering A Vision of Ceremony, he remarks that "Splendour, simplicity, and joy are the possessions equally of the religious and of the poetic imagination."[3]

This criticism signals a shift in interpretative assumptions, a shift which involves, not only a preference for experiential (more than dogmatic) models of religion, but also a renewed appreciation of how religion is a work of imagination. It looks to imaginative structures as a way of articulating the correspondences between religion and poetry.

---

1. Vivian Smith, James McAuley, p. 23.
2. Smith, p. 18.
3. David Bradley, "James McAuley: The Landscape of the Heart", The Literature of Australia, ed., G. Dutton, (1976), p. 453.

SECTION TWO

OUTLINING A THESIS

Since the Enlightenment, it has become more difficult to make convincing claims about the existence and nature of a divine reality - and "reality" is as much a disputed term as "divine". It has, therefore, become more difficult to argue the supernatural origin of religion. Severely tested by scientific modes of thought, as well as by a variety of modern philosophies - idealist, positivist, materialist, sceptical, and absurdist - religion is now trying to claim its own kind of meaning. The investigations of psychology, anthropology and sociology have highlighted the way in which religion is a human enterprise. Yet, these developments need not be told only as a "death of God" fiction. Since the Enlightenment, there has also been a renewed appreciation, not only of the religious dimension within human experience, but also of the imaginative and ludic character of religious thought and language.

In Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers (1799), Schleiermacher denied Kant's reduction of religion to morality[1]; he also denied the more orthodox notion of religion as a matter of belief. He argued that religion is constituted by "feeling", which he described as a mode of participative awareness. The meaning of religion is found, not in the traditions or scriptures of the churches, nor in reason, but in the deep inner consciousness of the religious person, the one who knows "the feeling of absolute dependence". This does not lead to subjectivism, he argued, since this feeling of absolute dependence is universal in human experience. If, despite his intentions, subjectivism remains a danger,

---

1. Cf. Copleston, A History of Philosophy, VI, p. 344.

Schleiermacher's approach is significant in the way it appealed to human-religious experience, rather than belief or reason.[1.]

More recently, Paul Tillich has been very influential in developing the notion of religious experience. For Tillich, religion is not a separate category of experience, but the ultimate dimension of all human existence. Situating himself between theologians who think religion a gift of divine revelation and scientists who think it an effect of changing psychological and sociological conditions, and suggesting that both groups make the same mistake (of defining religion as humanity's relation to divine beings), Tillich says:

> When we say that religion is an aspect of the human spirit, we are saying that if we look at the human spirit from a special point of view, it presents itself to us as religious. What is this view? It is the point of view from which we can look into the depth of man's spiritual life. Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions.[2.]

In opening up this dimension of depth, religion "gives us the experience of the Holy, of something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate meaning, the source of ultimate courage".[3.] The religious and secular realms should not be separated since "both of them are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word, in the experience of ultimate concern".[4.]

This emphasis on the religious dimension of experience becomes more specific if it is allied with empirical studies made by William James, Alister Hardy, and David Hay, as well as with the studies of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. James, for instance, examines experiences of

---

1. Cf. Macquarrie, In Search of Humanity, pp. 200-202.
2. Tillich, Theology of Culture, p. 5.
3. Tillich, p. 9.
4. Tillich, p. 9.

happiness, conversion, ineffability, and saintliness.[1] Hay describes a range of recorded experiences: the presence of God, answered prayers, premonitions, meaningful pattern of events, conversion, evil powers. He then analyses the qualities within such experiences and arrives at an idea of the quality of religious experience: it is experienced as "given", "involving", "more real", and it has the effect of altering behaviour.[2] Hardy sums up his research:

> At certain times in their lives, many people have had specific, deeply felt, transcendental experiences which have made them all aware of this spiritual power. The experience, when it comes, has always been quite different from any other kind of experience they have ever had. They do not necessarily call it a religious feeling, nor does it occur only to those who belong to an institutional religion or who indulge in corporate acts of worship. It often occurs to children, to atheists and agnostics, and it usually induces in the person concerned a conviction that the everyday world is not the whole of reality; that there is another dimension to life.[3]

It is easy, seeing this variety of experiences, to look back at Rudolf Otto's The Idea of the Holy, and to say that it makes the mistake of looking for the "essence" of religion. Yet Otto's work, first published in 1917, encouraged important shifts. By relating religion to numinous experience, it displaced Kant's emphasis on the rational-ethical meaning of religion. Moreover, Otto's description of the holy as the mysterium tremendum et fascinans was a significant attempt to articulate religious experience as a pattern of relationships: in this case, relationships between attraction and awe, otherness and immediacy.[4]

A very similar sense of some relationship and threshold between sacred and profane realms operates in Mircea Eliade's famous identification

---

1. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, (The Gifford Lectures, 1901-1902), Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1977.
2. David Hay, Exploring Inner Space, Penguin, 1982.
3. Alister Hardy, The Spiritual Nature of Man, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 1.
4. Cf. John Macquarrie, In Search of Humanity, pp. 202-205.

of religious with hierophanous experience:

> Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane . . . It could be said that the history of religions . . . is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities . . . In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act - the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world.[1.]

Eliade maintains this relationship between the sacred and the profane by locating hierophanies in familiar experiences of time, place, and nature, and then speaking of sacred time, sacred place, and sacred nature.[2.]

Clearly, Otto's and Eliade's descriptions have an imaginative structure: they are relational and tensive constructs. If we accept Tillich's notion that there is a religious dimension to experience, we need also to assume that, unless it can somehow be perceived in a pre-linguistic mode, experience is being interpreted and modelled even as it is being had. Such an emphasis on the symbolic character of religion counters any tendency towards subjectivism which might attend the emphasis on experience. It also reflects the important influence of cultural anthropology on contemporary appreciation of religion. Clifford Geertz encapsulates the kind of shift in sensibility which this thesis presumes:

> There has been, in short, a general shift in modern anthropological discussion of culture, and within it, of religion as a part of culture, a shift from a concern with thought as an inner mental state or stream of such states to a concern with thought as the utilization by individuals in society of public, historically created vehicles of reasoning, perception, feeling, and understanding - symbols, in the broadest sense of the term. In the study of religion, this shift is in the process of altering our entire view of religious experience and its social and psychological impact. The focus is now neither on

---

1. Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1959), p. 11.
2. Eliade, pp. 20-159.

> subjective life as such nor on outward behaviour as such, but on the socially available "systems of significance" - beliefs, rites, meaningful objects - in terms of which subjective life is ordered and outward behaviour guided.
>
> Such an approach is neither introspectionist nor behaviourist; it is semantic. It is concerned with the collectively created patterns of meaning the individual uses to give form to experience and point to action, with conceptions embodied in symbols and clusters of symbols, and with the directive force of such conceptions in public and private life.[1].

Anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss and Turner have highlighted the power and importance of symbols. Levi-Strauss asked whether social life (including religion) would be best studied with methods and concepts similar to those employed in linguistics. Indeed, in regard to the different aspects of social life, he wondered "whether they do not constitute phenomena whose inmost nature is the same as that of language".[2]. Various aspects of a society - myth, kinship, food, political ideology, marriage ritual, cooking - are seen as partial expressions of a total culture and studied "in terms of the contrastive relationships they have with each other that make their structures analogous to the phonemic structure of language".[3]. Anthropology, then, must move beyond empiricism and naturalism to discover the structural foundations on which social life and language rest, "the internal logical structure of the meaning of sets of symbols".[4]. Or, as Terence Hawkes puts it, "His quarry, in short, is the langue of the whole culture; its system and its general laws: he stalks it through the particular varieties of its parole." [5].

---

1. Clifford Geertz, "The Struggle for the Real", Islam Observed, pp. 95-96.
2. Structural Anthropology (Penguin, 1972), p. 353. Cited, Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, p. 33.
3. Hawkes, p. 34.
4. Edmund Leach, Levi-Strauss (Fontana, 1970), p. 98. Cited, G. Arbuckle, "Theology and Anthropology: Time for Dialogue", Theological Studies, 47, 1986, 436.
5. Hawkes, p. 39.

Victor Turner takes his cue from Arnold Van Gennep, whom he honours as one who left anthropology "a clue to a deeper understanding of the human condition than has been provided by functionalism, structuralism, or dialectical materialism".[1] That clue is found in Van Gennep's Les Rites de Passage (1909), where he divides transitional rituals into rites of separation, threshold rites, and rites of re-aggregation, or preliminal, liminal, and postliminal rituals. Turner takes up the notion of liminality:

> For in protracted rituals of any complexity in innumerable cultures the liminal phase implies the termination or suspension of cultural classifications and social status-roles and the rules and sanctions which define and uphold them. What formerly 'mattered' matters no more, what will matter is being generated in the domain of liminal seclusion set apart from the mundane, quotidian world. It would not be a rash generalisation to state that in prolonged liminal phases, and particularly in initiation rituals from childhood to adulthood, symbolic objects and activities represent in their most general aspect, not only metaphorical (and metanymic) birth and death, but also a transient state in which these (and other) opposites of quotidian experience become one. Caves, tunnels, seclusion huts or camps, may represent simultaneously tombs (of former social-structural selves) and wombs (of new identities). Liminality itself is a process; in certain of its phases symbolic objects, roles, activities and relationships represent the coincidence of quotidian opposites or non-duality.[2]

Speculating that cultural processes, like verbs, have different "moods", Turner argues that much of liminality may be described as culture's "subjunctive" mood, since it breaks away from standard notions of factuality, reality, or actuality (culture's indicative mood) and expresses desire, supposition, hypothesis and possibility. In that mood it exhibits the sacra, the symbols of a higher reality.

Clifford Geertz claims that classical religious symbols have lost their power to sustain faith. He sees the major reason for this as

---

1. Victor Turner, "Religion in Current Cultural Anthropology", Concilium, June, 1980, 69.
2. Turner, p. 69.

the secularisation of thought, and the major response as the ideologisation of religion.[1] His own approach implies that ideology needs to be appreciated as an expression of humankind's symbolising activity. Taking up Malinowski's distinction between religion and commonsense, Geertz argues that commonsense is itself a frame of mind, that the "facts of life" are as much art as fact, and that commonsense and religion are distinguished and interrelated inasmuch as religion "springs from a perception of the insufficiency of commonsense notions to the very task to which they are dedicated: making sense out of experience".[2] Rather than look for some universal property, such as sacredness, with which to divide religious phenomena off from non-religious, Geertz suggests that we study religion, not as if it were an object, but as if it were a way of looking at the world, and to look for "a system of concepts that can sum up a set of inexact similarities, which are yet genuine similarities, we sense to inhere in a given body of material".[3] The important characteristic of a religious perspective is not belief in some invisible order or divine presence:

> Rather, it is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection. What sacred symbols do for those to whom they are sacred is to formulate an image of the world's construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another.[4]

Religious beliefs, therefore, are not inductive, but paradigmatic. Religious symbols not only communicate such a paradigmatic perspective, but also encourage its internalisation.[5] Their meaning lies in the "intersubjective world of common understandings".[6]

---

1. Islam Observed pp. 102-103.
2. Islam Observed p. 94.
3. Islam Observed p. 97.
4. Islam Observed p. 97.
5. Islam Observed pp. 98-100.
6. The Interpretation of Cultures, p. 92.

They do not deny problems of meaninglessness, suffering, and evil, but provide interpretations in which such experiences are paradoxical and not, therefore, the whole story.[1.]

This changing image of religion has, of course, influenced the development of modern Christian theology. While many theologians are reluctant to abandon entirely the notion of theological realism[2.], they are aware of the need to re-examine and re-validate it. They also realise that the connections between doctrinal, historical, mythic, and experiential dimensions of religion have been damaged and need to be revitalised. This, in turn, involves a shift away from a defensive stance before science (a stance confirmed during the nineteenth century). John Coulson would argue that theology is recovering an option already anticipated by Coleridge. Coulson describes the method of doubt, as used by Bacon, Descartes, and Bentham, as one which assumes that our primary response to language is analytic and which, therefore, judges metaphors and symbols meaningless if they are inconsistent with clear and distinct ideas. He continues:

> Coleridge perpetuates the older, alternative tradition - that a language is a living organism whose function is to reconcile the past and present experiences of a community. For him the primary response to language is not analytic, but fiduciary. In religion, as in poetry, we are required to make a complex act of inference and assent, and we begin by taking on trust expressions which are usually in analogical, metaphorical, or symbolic form, and by acting out the claims they make: understanding religious language is a function of understanding poetic language.[3.]

Among the developments in modern theology, two have closely influenced this thesis: the growing appreciation that theology is a work of "models", and the development of "story theology".

---

1. The Interpretation of Cultures, pp. 100-109.
2. "Theological realism": an attitude which assumes that the language of theology can correctly refer to the supernatural order. The term is used by Cupitt in The Sea of Faith.
3. Coulson, Newman and the Common Tradition, p. 4.

The notion of "model" has played a significant role in modern theology, not the least being that it has reasserted the cognitive claims of religious language.[1] Avery Dulles has argued for different models of church - and even argued that the "institution" model characteristic of Counter-Reformation Catholicism is the one least faithful to the gospel.[2] He has also challenged the privileged position of a propositional model of revelation (at least within Catholicism) and reinstated a symbolic model.[3] Ian Barbour has used the notion as a way of talking with the old enemy of religion, science: both order and interpret patterns of experience by way of models. If dogmatism is disavowed, so is positivism: models, religious and scientific, are neither literal pictures of reality nor useful fictions. (Barbour also acknowledges that religious language performs non-cognitive functions which have no parallel in science.) While this means that belief should not be identified with any one closed metaphysical system, it also means that religious models, like scientific ones, require critical realism, which he sees as a mixture of commitment and enquiry.[4] Sallie McFague, assuming that experience, symbol and thought are critically interrelated, argues that models in theology can all too easily become pictures. At that point, she says, religious language becomes idolatrous or irrelevant. She goes on to claim that the model of "Fatherhood" has become idolatrous (with many thinking the model is God) as well as irrelevant to the experience of many women.[5] McFague opens her work with a passage from Simone Weil's Waiting for God:

> There is a God. There is no God. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my

---

1. Cf. Ian Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, p. 5.
2. Avery Dulles, Models of the Church.
3. Avery Dulles, Models of Revelation.
4. Ian Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms.
5. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology.

> love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word.[1].

Story theology holds that Christian stories are not merely illustrative of doctrines, but that they provide the substance of faith. Doctrines and dogmas are derived from stories: "The key concepts of Christian faith - creation, fall, incarnation, atonement, church, eternal life, trinity - are all metaphors at rest, metaphors which have become Christian doctrines."[2]. Story theology represents, in part, a rediscovery of the mythic dimension of religious life - and, in that, a critique of the Enlightenment inheritance as "blind to the myths which constructed the Enlightened World".[3]. While this approach allows that faith is a fiction, it does not agree that it is a fantasy. Tilley enumerates the ways in which story theology can be "true": it represents the world revealingly; it is coherent (corresponding to the facts, referring accurately, attributing correctly); it shows ways of overcoming self-deception; it shows a person how to be true in relationships; it provides a model for constancy in seeking to tell the truth.[4]. John Shea sees this development as one which incorporates experience and symbol into the task of theology. He outlines this approach: a stress on the religious dimension of ordinary experience; an understanding of the peculiar ways of God-language; a recognition that the first expression of faith is in images and stories (which capture and communicate both cognitive and affective perception); a realisation that we participate in our inherited stories and images symbolically, then attempt conceptual clarity and systematic ordering through the elaboration of doctrines. Finally, dogmatic statements arise out

---

1. Cited, McFague, p. 1.
2. Terence Tilley, Story Theology, p. 3.
3. Tilley, p. 45.
4. Tilley, p. 183.

of this doctrinal effort and "express the non-negotiables of faith thinking".[1.]

Accordingly, in order to interpret the religious character of a poem, this thesis assumes that an imagination may be religious according as it may include and integrate one or more of three levels of religiousness: experience, story, and dogma.

If an experience is named "religious", it is because it is an experience interpreted (intuitively) in terms analogous to those indicated by words such as "liminal", "ultimate", "hierophanous", and "mysterious". Such words are useful, not because they define religious experience, but because they disguise and disclose tensive structures which often characterise the primitive religio-imaginative process, structures such as those relating familiar and strange, frightening and fascinating, finite and infinite. Judith Wright's "Night Herons" simply describes how, charmed by the strange appearance of "two tall herons" walking through their ordinary perceptions, human faces "opened", "suddenly believing in something".[2.] The poem allows and responds to a religious interpretation inasmuch as it expresses an hierophanous experience. Similarly, when Patrick White wants to declare his own "belief", he appeals to one of his most characteristic patterns, locating his religious experience on some threshold between destruction and revelation, fragmentation and wholeness:

> What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In

---

1. John Shea, "Experience and Symbol, An Approach to Theologizing", Chicago Studies, 1, 1980, 7.
2. Judith Wright, Collected Poems, Angus & Robertson, 1975, p. 177.

> patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening. I hesitate to add a child, because a child can grow into a monster, a destroyer. Am I a destroyer? This face in the glass which has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. A face consumed with wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all.[1.]

While neither of these pieces declares any denominational allegiance, each is an expression of a religiously imagined experience.[2.]

If a poem employs a traditional religious story, metaphor or symbol, and even if it does so in an affirmative manner, this does not necessarily mean the poem expresses a formal commitment to that religious tradition. It may express faith, as distinct from belief. Faith-language corresponds to the uninvertible, irreducible character of metaphor - what John Coulson calls the "first use" of metaphor, which does not so much point outside itself for the explanation or completion of its truth (for such metaphors involve "an uninvertible use of language, whose meaning cannot be separated from its form"[3.]), but which creates a world and "brings powerfully alive a sense of order, unity, or organism apparently in terms of what it is itself".[4.] Whereas the world and language of belief are referential, the world and language of faith are primarily relational. Belief encourages an epistemological stance which is objective and informative. Faith is

---

1. Patrick White, Flaws in the Glass, Penguin, 1981, p. 70.
2. One might argue that this approach may encourage a colonising attitude whereby any work which faintly hints at "ultimate concern" (Tillich) is claimed in the name of religion. Obviously such a danger does exist. However, the way to meet it is to perform a tactful criticism, not to ignore the more obvious possibility that a work may be religious, but not denominational. A tactful criticism will be wary of edging experiential terms in the direction of theological terms, in such a way that associations are covertly established between experience and belief which the poem may not want to carry.
3. John Coulson, Religion and Imagination, p. 18.
4. Coulson, p. 26.

a mode of participative awareness, in which the world is apprehended as invitation and response. Faith-language holds open a range of meanings which are fundamentally intersubjective, and its intention is performative. Belief is a way of comprehension. Faith is a way of apprehension. It apprehends connections and correspondences between particular experiences, personal symbols, and older, larger symbols such as land, nation, good, evil, and God. It apprehends the world as order and wholeness, but this more because it intuits interconnectedness than because it demonstrates logical coherence. While it may lead to (and return to) belief, faith is first a way of trusting that the world can be a place of belonging. It is, then, primarily a mode of awareness and language which is relational. Its stories, metaphors and symbols are its way of wording the world as ultimately trustworthy and hopeful, of providing a transcendent frame for critical experiences such as freedom, love, suffering and death, and also of motivating moral and meditative awareness.

Vincent Buckley's "Stroke", for example, expresses faith, even though it does not precisely argue for belief in the Christian dogma of resurrection.[1] It accepts the dogma as if it were true, as a way of entering more deeply into the father's dying. It does not, however, seek to locate the resurrection in the realm of objective reality. Its language does not point outside itself, but reaches more and more deeply into itself, discovering and accumulating analogies which confirm the resurrection metaphor as a mode of being human, a way of providing death with profound significance. Its language does not intend to establish the resurrection as an independent and absolute fact. By contrast, James McAuley's "Confession" and "Credo" are

---

1. Vincent Buckley, Arcady and Other Places, Melbourne University Press, 1966, pp. 3-9.

personal expressions of belief in the absolute fact of resurrection.[1] They refer away from themselves, to the "real" resurrection of Christ, which gives the ultimate (that is, absolutely objective) reason for moral and spiritual discipline, and which also guarantees and completes the "syntax of the real". When McAuley refers to poems as a "rumour of resurrection", he is carefully acknowledging that human language, as rumour, has its truth in reference to the real, the resurrection. In short, Buckley's poem uses the resurrection to find a way of responding in a relational world, while McAuley's poems use it as guarantee of the real world. Buckley uses resurrection more as metaphor; McAuley uses it more as dogma.

Of course, the distinction between faith and belief should not be used too sternly - both are works of imagination. Coulson argues that the relation between faith and belief is peculiarly one of overlap, that they refer "not to different things but to the same thing in different stages of our awareness".[2] While faith is more implicit, one cannot be described without implying the other.[3] Further, dogmas may appeal to the imagination as well as the intellect: Coulson cites John Henry Newman's distinction between a dogma which is "discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination" and that same dogma "held as a truth, by the theological intellect".[4] Such a distinction provides another way of describing the difference between

---

1. James McAuley, Collected Poems, 1936-1970, Angus & Robertson, 1971, pp. 191-192.
2. Coulson, p. 167.
3. Coulson, p. 149. See also, Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: "If we wish to be precise, we must make a distinction between primary and secondary religious language, between metaphorical and conceptual language. But it is impossible to keep the distinction clear because most primary religious language is implicitly conceptual and most secondary theological language is latently imagistic." (p. 22)
4. Coulson, p. 41.

Buckley's "Stroke" and the two McAuley poems: in the former, the resurrection is being appropriated by the religious imagination; in the latter, it is being held by theological intellect (which then informs the imagination). Nevertheless, the theological intellect itself works within imaginative patterns. Not only does Christian religion, for instance, remain somewhat determined by the imaginative possibilities of the gospel stories in which it originates, but, as Earl R. MacCormac observes, it depends on metaphor to create its new meanings, giving words like "father" and "grace" extraordinary meaning, selecting new facts or reconsidering the significance of "old" facts, renewing itself by discovering new models with which to rearrange its material.[1].

MacCormac would also argue against the distinction I have been making between experience, story, and dogma. He writes:

> The division between religious and theological language fails because those who profess to have a religious experience use theological terms to describe their experience. The religious tradition in which they live provides them with the terminology necessary to talk about their experience. [2].

In its own terms, this is true, although it is somewhat one-sided in the way it privileges theological language within religious tradition. It lacks Coulson's sense of how faith and belief overlap. It also fails to distinguish between language which has theological associations and language which makes theological affirmations.

My distinction, then, is limited, but still valuable. It at least warns us that McAuley's and Buckley's poetry may not be "Catholic" in quite the same way and gives us a way of articulating the difference.

---

1. Earl R. MacCormac, Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion, pp. 135-157.
2. MacCormac, p. 61.

It also gives us a way of appreciating why Webb's poetry, which combines Christian experience, story, metaphor, and dogma with an unusual intensity, is so completely sure of Christ's saving presence and yet so utterly exposed to suffering and doubt. What the poetry believes is, at best, rising from and falling back to a use of metaphor, even of Christian metaphor, which keeps breaking open the meaning and experience of God. What is important, in using the distinction, is to keep returning authority to the integrative and mediatory power of imagination.

A very similar, and very helpful, way of approaching this question can be found in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic of the symbol. For Ricoeur, the symbol contains three distinct, but interrelated and interacting levels: primary (semantic), mythic, and rational (dogmatic). Primary symbols are the least articulated and the closest to experience. For example, Ricoeur sees defilement, sin, and guilt as primary symbols of "evil". Mythic symbols then "re-enact" primary symbols - "evil" is articulated in the story of the Fall. (What is important here is that the "intention of the symbol" is preserved and followed in the transfer from primary to mythic levels.) Myth deals with experience by means of a dramatic structure, conferring universality, organising temporality and spatiality, and exploring ontological significance. Rational or dogmatic symbols have the highest degree of articulation and rationalisation, and are explanatory rather than descriptive. They are "quasi-concepts": they pretend to be rational, but disguise a tension, even a contradiction. Taking the rational symbol which corresponds to the Adamic myth, that of Original Sin, Ricoeur demonstrates that the dogma, which conceptualises a notion of evil as voluntary and interior, actually disguises a tension between this and

another emphasis on the involuntary, externalised character of evil. For Ricoeur vibrant symbolism is open to the interaction between and within these three levels. [1].

Even so, this thesis does not intend to justify a particular theory of religious imagination. It offers no prescriptive definition. It simply, yet critically, assumes, with reference to the poets studied, that a particular imagination may be religious according to the manner in which it may initiate and engage in a conversation between those imaginative structures which see experience as somehow liminal, those which remember stories of God, and those which espouse formal belief. It uses such an interactive model of religious imagination in order to encourage the notion that religious poetry is best interpreted from imaginative grounds (as distinct from doctrinal, or even "experiential" ones), and also to encourage consideration of the reciprocal and interreaching relationships which operate, within the imagination, between religious and literary structures.

As one way of pointing to these interactions occurring in religious imagination, this thesis searches for the poetry's characteristic ways of arranging and relating, of structuring, its perceptions and interpretations. In this, it sometimes uses the notion of a model, at least as it is described by Ian Barbour:

> Broadly speaking, a model is a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behaviour of a complex system for

---

1. For this exposition, I am most immediately indebted to Erin White, Itineraries of Meaning, pp. 89-97. The more relevant Ricoeurian texts are: The Symbolism of Evil, pp. 25-174, 347-357, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I", The Conflict of Interpretations, ed., D. Ihde, pp. 287-314. "'Original Sin': A Study in Meaning", The Conflict of Interpretations, pp. 269-286.

> particular purposes. It is an imaginative tool for ordering experience, rather than a description of the world.[1]

Barbour goes on to say that one of the main functions of religious models is the interpretation of distinctive types of experience: "awe and reverence, moral obligation, reorientation and reconciliation, interpersonal relationships, key historical events, and order and creativity in the world".[2] Another very significant aspect of models is highlighted by Sallie McFague: they mediate between imagistic and conceptual language. She writes:

> In the continuum of religious language from primary, imagistic to secondary, conceptual, a form emerges which is a mixed type: the model. The simplest way to define a model is as a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.[3]

Without deciding between different descriptions of "model"[4], this thesis takes the general notion - a pattern of seeing and relating experiences - and uses it to show how poetry and religion meet along the way of metaphor.

Understood as a large, foundational, yet flexible frame for experiencing, apprehending and even comprehending the world, this motion of "model" is, therefore, particularly useful in interpreting poetry as religious. It acknowledges the primary and integrative function of the imagination in religiously-interpreted experience, as also in religious dogmas. It acknowledges the tensive character of religious imagination (so displacing the conventional distinction between faith and sensibility, which too easily converts faith into certitude). Because it so recognises the metaphorical character of

1. Ian Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, p. 6.
2. Barbour, p. 7.
3. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, p. 23.
4. Some other approaches to "model" can be found: Max Black, Models and Metaphors, Ian Ramsey, Religious Language, and David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, pp. 22-42.

religious imagination, it also helps locate the relationship between religion and literature within their common patterns of meaning. It also reminds us that religion, like poetry, carries meaning in its structures and processes as well as in its ideas and themes. Moreover, it does not destroy the individuality of a poetry or poem: it provides an approach which is synthetic as distinct from systematic, and which relates parts to a whole by tracing the shape of correspondences which connect individual experience, personal and traditional mythologies, metaphors and symbols, doctrinal and credal formulae, and patterns of language. This is not precisely a theology of imagination: indeed, it is a way of allowing that a particular religious imagination will be attracted to its own network of correspondences and participate in its own conversation of symbols.

In the case of James McAuley, it is possible to speak of a set of relations between hope and despair, order and chaos, involuntary and voluntary evil, relations which are themselves held in balance by a model of reasoned will. While this may, from some points of view, seem merely to repeat the readings given by Bradley, Brissenden, Kramer and Smith, [1] (who realise that McAuley's religious imagination, while it may be traditional, is also individual and even existential) its importance is that it questions an assumed association between religion and hope, and shifts the site of the poetry's religious character, such that it is more evenly related to both terms of the hope/despair tension. It also emphasises the continuity between post-conversion and pre-conversion poems in such a way as to argue for a more reciprocal relationship between "experience" and

1. See the first section of this thesis.

"dogma" - a relationship mediated through the imaginative structure which characteristically disciplines despair with hope.

In the case of Francis Webb, I use the biblical model of the "Suffering Servant". In doing so, I am not arguing that the poetry displays explicit consciousness of this model, as classically articulated in the prophecy of Isaiah. I am using the term to indicate the deeply religious character of an imagination which persistently links suffering and glory, reverences the rejected one, and names Christ within that suffering and rejection. Not only does this model provide a way of articulating the poetry's vision of suffering, but it does so in a way which allows us to specify two of Webb's favourite insights: suffering's capacity to confront established power-bases of thought and language, and its capacity to evoke a community of consolation and compassion. This allows for a reading which is more comprehensive and more Christocentric than Ashcroft's attempt to ground religiousness in Thomistic natural theology [1]. - even as it also allows for an appreciation of the correspondences between the poetry's religious and literary strategies, between its vision of suffering and its process of suffered vision.

In the case of Vincent Buckley, I refer to his "expatriating imagination", implying that his work continually creates and sustains a tension between some force of intimacy and some force of distance - whether it is dealing with love, Melbourne, Ireland, his father, or God. This sets up interesting correspondences between his poetry and his prose, particularly as his prose develops a more phenomenological

---

1. See the first section of this thesis.

sense of religion and his poetry more and more locates itself in the very liminality of sensation and on the nervous edge of the conscious, divided self. It also highlights a very difficult question: in what sense is his later poetry, so denuded of theological references, more and/or less religious?

In then considering the relationship between this poetry and its Catholic culture, I propose that Catholicism is itself best interpreted as a dynamic environment of models, rather than as a set system of dogmas. This is particularly true of the Vatican II Catholicism to which the three poets are most immediately connected. Even in McAuley's most confident Catholicism, I see the model of reasoned will and the tension between hope and despair working with his images of church, authority and Christ. His Catholicism is as much determined by as determining his poetic impulses. Accordingly, his image as a reactionary Catholic is shifted aside, and a more complex sense of his Catholic imagination is allowed to emerge. In dealing with Buckley, it would be tempting simply to speak of some decline in Catholic imagination, a shift through pluralism to relativism. Instead, I argue that, even in the earliest work, there is a non-ideological stance which qualifies commitment, and that his Catholicism is increasingly determined by his expatriating imagination. In dealing with Webb, I stress the degree to which the "Suffering Servant" model implies models of authority, church and Christ which critique any tendency towards pharisaical power. While I recognise that Webb's imagination relates to his Catholicism in a manner which includes a great deal of conventional devotion, I also maintain that it disguises a subversive edge by which his Catholicism is being continually challenged to break open, rather than close, the

structures of truth.

In the final chapter, as a kind of conclusion, I return to the notion that religious language is primarily metaphorical and use Webb's Eyre All Alone to reopen the question of religious language. Webb's poem, I suggest, displaces the propositional mode which has long dominated Catholic language and sets out to renew the language of faith.

P A R T T W O

A GRACE AGAINST DESPAIR

James McAuley

P A R T T W O

A GRACE AGAINST DESPAIR: JAMES McAULEY

SECTION ONE:	A First Piece
SECTION TWO:	The Vision of Ceremony
SECTION THREE:	The Ardent Hope
SECTION FOUR:	The Artesian Heart
SECTION FIVE:	Through Memory and Desire
SECTION SIX:	Between the Reasons for Despair
SECTION SEVEN:	A Last Piece

Abbreviations:

CP:	Collected Poems: 1936-1970, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971.
MLN:	Music Late at Night, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1976.
TG:	Time Given, Brindabella Press, Canberra, 1976

SECTION ONE

A FIRST PIECE

"I cannot pretend that the tension between the modern and the traditional has ceased within myself. I know I have to live in ambiguities and dilemmas, not letting go one end in order to cling with both hands to the other in false simplification."

James McAuley, "Culture and Counter-culture"
(Quadrant, September, 1976, 19.)

I had read in books that art is not easy
But no one warned that the mind repeats
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.

Ern Malley, "Durer: Innsbruck, 1495"

SECTION TWO

THE VISION OF CEREMONY

When, in 1952, James McAuley converted to Catholicism, it seemed to some that he had been seduced by the consolations of orthodoxy.[1] A Vision of Ceremony (1956) and The End of Modernity (1959) were seen as companions in Catholic certitude. This image of the "Catholic poet" can easily promote a serious misreading of McAuley's work, one which fails to incorporate the creative function of his uncertainty, the expressive role of his restraint, and so fails to articulate that intimate, interactive relationship between hope and despair which enlivens his religious imagination. While it must be acknowledged that belief plays a strong, sure part in these volumes, it must also be acknowledged that McAuley's commitment to coherence and traditional symbolism is, at its best, a dynamic part of the larger relationship between hope and despair, and not a cool, externalised resolution of it.[2] Without denying the importance of Catholic philosophy and belief in A Vision of Ceremony and The End of Modernity, I want first of all to examine the "Catholic poet" image. In doing so, I will direct attention towards the presence in his work of an artesian, contemplative heart and the pressure of a restrained despair, and suggest that these must be carefully explored, if we are to discover the "world unsimplified"[3] which the public, discursive map of verse both discloses and disguises.

---

1. Cf. Leonie Kramer, "Introduction", James McAuley . . ., p. xiv.
2. I need to stress, perhaps, that a phrase like "McAuley's commitment" is not intended to suggest a biographical reading of the poetry, that I am using the phrase (and others like it) as a shorthand way of referring to the commitments, disclosures and disguises evident in the poems themselves.
3. "The Family of Love", Collected Poems, p. 10.

In The End of Modernity, McAuley argues that "the roots of great poetry are metaphysical and religious".(138) McAuley's philosophy is basically Thomistic[1]: there is an objective, knowable metaphysical order; reason, submitting to the "grammar of the real", has primacy in the epistemological process. Coherence and order are possible through "intellectuality" or metaphysical wisdom, which must recognise the primacy of the sacred. If artistic values are to undergo conservation and renewal, the artist must respect the primacy of the intellect and of the sacred.

The culture of Western modernity is anti-poetic because it is anti-intellectual and anti-realist. Accordingly, "An Art of Poetry" (Collected Poems, 70) opens with the line, "Since all our keys are lost or broken", while The End of Modernity declares, "The positivism of the modern mind constitutes an anti-poetic."(139) While the poem believes "where Christ has set his hand/ Only the real remains", the prose work articulates how Christ is an antidote to the modernist anti-poetic:

> In (Christ) the primitive theory of language is verified. His words are 'words of power'; what he speaks, is; name and essence are one. He is himself the Divine Word which expresses the Ineffable Name of God, and all created things are vocables which when gathered together in their right order become a polysemous speech responding to the primal Word that brought them into existence. (166)

---

1. McAuley was, during the fifties, associated with Dr Austin Woodbury, of the Aquinas Academy, and with Dr Wilf Radford, of the Marist Fathers' Seminary. Both men taught Thomistic philosophy. Dr Radford told me that McAuley's mind had a connaturality with Thomism, a philosophy often described by its adherents as "Moderate Realism". McAuley also greatly admired Etienne Gilson's The Unity of Philosophical Experience, a central work in Thomism, which argues that the question of knowledge is the central problem in the history of philosophy, and that different philosophies evolve depending on the answer they give to the question of how active/passive the knower is in the act of knowing. (Cf. "A Small Testament", Quadrant, December 1976, 7.)

In "An Art of Poetry", therefore, the poet is "Drawn inward by his love" to trace art to its "secret springs". The passivity indicates the poet's reception of supernatural grace ("his love"). There is a Thomistic catch-phrase that "grace perfects nature". For McAuley, poetic inspiration may involve heightening of natural powers, and poetry itself may be a work of grace.[1.]

Much of McAuley's thinking in The End of Modernity is based on the distinction between the supernatural and the natural order. This distinction forms the basis of his attack on the "desire to ascribe to the poetic word a preternatural power" or the Magian Heresy:

> . . . the attempt to identify poetry with anything in the supernatural order argues the absence of a due sense of the infinite distance that separates divine things from human things. To turn the analogy that exists between poetry and mysticism into an identity is possible only after the loss of any sense of proportion and reality.[2.]

On the basis of this, McAuley defends a poetry which recognises "the true proportions of things" (while yet preferring general to particular truths) and rejects a poetry which pretends to "magic, gnosis, paracletic inspiration, prophecy, revelation, even divine creation".[3.] Among the Magian heretics he names: Blake (for strictly identifying poetic inspiration with divine revelation), Novalis (for thinking poetry is the absolutely Real), Rilke (for turning all existence into poetry), and Surrealism (for transmuting dream and reality into a sort of absolute reality or surreality). These are the descendants of Simon Magus, who is "the type of all those who seek to transcend the human state without submitting to the divine redemptive scheme".[4.] It is worth noting that McAuley's distinction between the

---

1. Cf. The End of Modernity, p. 167.
2. "The Magian Heresy", Quadrant, March, 1977, 44.
3. "The Magian Heresy", p. 42.
4. The End of Modernity, p. 149, footnote 2. Simon Magus appears in The Acts of the Apostles (8:9-24).

natural and the supernatural corroborates itself with an implied distinction between the fallen and the redeemed world.

For all their confidence in intellect, McAuley's philosophy and poetry arrive ultimately at the heart. Rational certainty becomes dispensable. This is, in fact, a paradigm of conversion, where one begins with "rational motives of credibility" [1.] and then:

> this rational certainty is, so to speak, transformed and lifted to the level of supernatural certainty by the fact that the act of faith is a work of God in the soul - grace here as elsewhere perfecting and divinizing nature.[2.]

In The End of Modernity the philosophical framework of credibility is left behind, and McAuley invokes the old symbolism: "In the old symbolism the heart was the principal organ, the seat of life, soul, intellect, memory, will." (131) Pascal's dictum that "the heart has reasons that reason does not know" is interpreted not as a disjunction between feeling and reason, but as the intuition of what is above both feeling and reason. [3.]

McAuley argues that what is necessary for poetry is contemplative leisure or "active receptivity". [4.] Ideally, the poet would achieve a "level of detachment where the mind is stripped of sensations, emotions and images in order to 'experience divine things'". [5.]

---

1. This phrase is taken from McAuley's account of his own conversion in "A Small Testament", Quadrant, December, 1976, 7. It is a phrase which was very common in Catholic apologetics at that time - particular apologetics grounded in a Thomistic notion of the relationship between rational and revealed truth. (Cf. Avery Dulles, Apologetics and the Biblical Christ.)
2. The End of Modernity, p. 35. This also, I would suggest, hints at the deeply subjective substratum operating beneath the objective surface of The End of Modernity. The public argument projects out from issues more intimately connected with the private process of conversion.
3. Cf. The End of Modernity, p. 131.
4. Cf. The End of Modernity, p. 132.
5. "From a Poet's Notebook", Quadrant, March, 1977, 35.

The pattern of consciousness found in his later poetry is increasingly that of sensations, emotions, images actively received, then stripped away to evoke a contemplative detachment - a paradoxical gain-in-loss. In this regard, even as it is being affirmed, the Catholic aesthetic of "An Art of Poetry" is itself discarded, or transcended, by the heart's deeper knowledge:

> We know, where Christ has set his hand
> Only the real remains:
> I am impatient for that loss
> By which the spirit gains. (CP, 71)

McAuley's emphasis on the contemplative paradox is more than a statement of via crucis spirituality. It also represents a transformation of "The Tomb of Heracles", where the stoic's world is eaten hollow with despair. Grace and discipline stand against despair: the poetry struggles to transform one darkness into another, to make nothingness into all, to make the passivity of the sterile heart into the active receptivity of the contemplative heart:

> Wisdom, intellectual inquiry, and art all require for their perfection a recollected contemplative . . . Poetry grows out of silence; even if tumultuous it leaps forth from stillness . . . Much that happens is not conscious - there is needed a certain attentiveness and waiting in darkness. [1]

Even in the aggressive and discursive poem, "A Letter to John Dryden", it is the silence which sings. There is a moment of lyricism which breaks through the polemic:

> Incarnate Word, in who all nature lives,
> Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
> Among us, men who walk within the fire
> Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
> Set pools of silence in this thirsty land: (CP, 94)

The poem has two voices. One is a public and polemic voice which distinguishes between metaphysical and empirical knowledge and

---

1. The End of Modernity, p. 124.

attacks positivism and relativism. This voice holds centre-stage for most of the poem. There comes a moment, though, when the voice of anxious reason surrenders to the voice of the heart, where we "may reach/ Tremendous meanings without tongue or speech". The heart is momentarily flooded with light:

> Open, eyes of the heart, begin to see
> The tranquil, vast, created mystery,
> In all its courts of being laid awake,
> Flooded with uncreated light for mercy's sake. (CP, 95)

In "To the Holy Spirit" (CP, 69) McAuley uses the Bird of Paradise to symbolise the Holy Spirit. The measure of the poem's success is the measure to which the doctrinal consciousness is organic rather than imposed. The Holy Spirit's prophetic truth is uttered as a firedance, which becomes a fertility ritual. The mate - again the hidden and "unseen" one - is "filled with the nuptial splendours of (his) desire". There is a spiritual eroticism here which is not common in McAuley:

> Engender upon our souls your sacred rhythm: inspire
> The trembling breath of the flute, the exultant cosmic psalm,
> The dance that breaks into flower beneath the storm-voiced
> mountain;
> Array in your dazzling intricate plumage the swaying choir.
> (CP, 69)

The swaying choir links up with the earlier description of the bird as "plumed with glowing iris along each curving wire". Both connote a central stillness surrounded by movement. This meditative undertow incorporates the doctrinal elements and gives the poem its integrity. Time and eternity are unified in the contemplative vision as they are in the union of the Bird of Paradise and his "drab earthly mate". This union is already implied in the opening where the Holy Spirit, placed in timeless rest, calm, and height, descends his mountain to make his visit in time.

In McAuley's theological imagining, then, the Holy Spirit illuminates the actively receptive heart and fills it with "sacred rhythm" and "incandescent ritual". In this way he completes the meaning of the wagtail in "Canticle" who:

> Sings all night long insistently
> As if his song could prove
> What wisdom whispered from the start,
> That only love can fill the heart. (CP, 68)

Given this sense that the Holy Spirit restores the heart's ritual, it is not surprising to find that McAuley constructs his New Guinea in imaginative terms very similar to those used in this poem.

While it is still contained within McAuley's larger framework of lean hope or endangered order, New Guinea is imagined as a confrontative reminder of the heart-centred symbolic consciousness abandoned by Western secularism. He sees New Guinea as a test of the quality of the Australian people and fears that the country's instinctive sense of the sacred order will be polluted by what Australians might offer: "sterile secularism" and "disintegrated liberalism with its inability to rationally affirm or practically defend its own values".[1].

We might corrupt the native culture with "the major respectable vices of cold-heartedness and hypocrisy".[2]. With disorder in our own country, we could not be expected to bring order to New Guinea: "the shapeless cannot give shape, nor the formless form."[3]. This conviction becomes the turning point of "New Guinea":

> We in that land begin our rule in courage,
> The seal of peace gives warrant to intrusion;
> But then our grin of emptiness breaks the skin,
> Formless dishonour spreads its proud confusion. (CP, 80)

---

1. "My New Guinea", Quadrant, March, 1977, 40.
2. "My New Guinea", 41.
3. "My New Guinea", 41.

Even so, McAuley's imagination will not conceive New Guinea free from all effects of Original Sin. His is not a sentimental view of New Guinea as the land of the noble, innocent savage. He criticises the Cargo Cult mentality for its millenarian and apocalyptic pretensions, and for using "magical shortcuts in the absence of real knowledge of causes".[1] The poet of the artesian heart, however, finds a pulse. Here is a society which keeps vital contact with the elemental experiences of birth, death, and sex, "a world where the inexorable organic rhythms were insistent".[2] Here is a psyche which finds in ordinary things - things combining both use and meaning[3] - a symbolic power. This spiritual and symbolic potency of the land - "Regions of prayer, of solitude, and of death" - is rehearsed in the first three stanzas. There is something here for the deeper heart - "Life holds its shape in the modes of dance and music,/ The hands of craftsmen trace its patternings." (CP, 80).

There is something, too, which encourages the poetry's attraction to remote disorder. New Guinea is not too sophisticated for demons: "but stains of blood, and evil spirits, lurk/ Like cockroaches in the interstices of things." (CP, 80). McAuley sees demons as integral to Christian faith: "to be a believing Christian means to accept as fact what the gospels say not only of the action of divine power . . . but also of the action of created spiritual beings - angels and demons."[4] There must be an exorcising of the demonic. This may be correct Catholic doctrine, but it is also an emphasis intrinsic to McAuley's underlying imaginative structure. A sense of artesian hope is

---

1. "My New Guinea", 38.
2. "My New Guinea", 37.
3. Cf. The End of Modernity, pp. 79-80. For McAuley, art should have "use" as well as meaning.
4. "My New Guinea", 39.

being constructed in the emphasis he gives to Bishop de Boismenu's description of New Guinea as "a school of detachment and sanctity".[1] Similarly, the "lean plough" of "Envoi" (CP, 6) operates in his observation that, according to the spiritual law, pain and desolation are the price paid to establish the kingdom of God.[2] This is true throughout A Vision of Ceremony: the commitment to coherence and traditional symbolism is expressed in such a way that we feel the pressure exerted by forces of disorder and chaos - pressure largely contained by the disciplined attitude and style of the verse itself. "Exploit", for instance, uses tightly framed, rhyming quatrains to support its commitment to the Christian hope of life-in-death, but it also indicates the edge of despair:

> That stealthy breathing, is it mine?
> Are mine those sounding feet?
> Am I myself, in this design,
> The quarry I must meet -
>
> The monster in its lurking-place,
> The thing that I must kill,
> The central nightmare I must face
> With failing powers of will? (CP, 102)

"Vespers" (CP, 83) can no longer believe in the happy endings promised by nursery rhymes, and, if it does believe in Christ, it links belief with suffering:

> No, Wisdom's self has shed the warm salt tears
> Which melt the glassy ice; and he has willed
> Nothing whatever should be unfulfilled
> That childhood promised to my later years;
> Only this added, which I could not know,
> That first the bitter tears, like his, must flow. (CP, 84)

There are tears too in "Merry-go-round" (CP, 98), when the speaker is distanced from the kaleidoscopic joy and colourful spontaneity of the merry-go-round. This sense of sadness is disciplined, but not

---

1. "My New Guinea", 39.
2. "My New Guinea", 40.

displaced by the close, where joy is associated with the ephemeral and transitory, while the real is a crowd which is "outside", toward which we move with reluctance. "To Any Poet" (CP, 85) betrays a similarly ambiguous approach to joy. While the poem argues

> Living is thirst for joy;
> That is what art rehearses.
> Let sober drunkenness give
> Its splendour to your verses (CP, 85)

it actually exhibits a sobriety Dionysus would find disappointing. The opening injunction to "Take salt upon your tongue" underlines the role of discipline in art. The closing stanza, in its identification of the poet with the "sable swan", supports the vision of ceremony in such a way that it anxiously withdraws the poet "out of range/ Of barking ignorance". Interestingly, this is the poem McAuley wrote to complement the more ordered view of "An Art of Poetry". In his view it "expresses something about the commitment of the poet to his own experiences".[1] Perhaps it shows, rather, his preferred perception of experience. Just as this poem warns against feeding the heart "With sorrow, darkness, and lies", so "An Art of Poetry" (CP, 70) censures forces, such as individualism, which contract the heart. Both poems value lucidity of voice and serenity of movement and both are concerned to protect the genuine sources of such art. Whereas "To Any Poet" closes with the poet somewhat endangered by "barking ignorance", "An Art of Poetry" locates that ignorance within the problem of contemporary belief and also withdraws to the centre of true wisdom:

> Since all our keys are lost or broken,
> Shall it be thought absurd
> If for an art of words I turn
> Discreetly to the Word? (CP, 70)

---

1. Cf. John Thompson, "James McAuley: An Interview", Southerly, 27, 1967, 100.

"Nocturnal" (CP, 104) is also governed by this characteristic perspective. The solitary poet, committed to a society and poetry based in the natural order, realises that the Swan, symbol of ceremony and design, is about to abandon us to "Dishonour in our deeds, death in our art". It is only the celestial possibility represented by the Swan which strengthens the will and "makes the heart go on". "In a Late Hour" (CP, 105) creates a figure who, in a world which has lost metaphysical reason and reached "the last estrangement -/ The sense of nature gone", is both stubbornly faithful to Christ and deeply aware that any order is rescued from hurt:

> Though the stars run distracted
> And from wounds deep rancours flow,
> While the mystery is enacted
> I will not let you go. (CP, 105)

If we are to appreciate that A Vision of Ceremony represents "a strenuous attempt to reconcile (McAuley's) tough empirical sense of the realities of our immediate everyday world with his conviction that man is a spiritual being"[1], then this kind of argument is necessary. However, it has its dangers. It can too easily accept, as one of its hermeneutical assumptions, a difficult gap between empirical experience and belief, and then read the tension between these as a personal struggle rather than an imaginative construct (and this would apply whether the struggle is seen as ending in honesty or in repression). I have tried to counteract this tendency by assuming that the "strenuous attempt to reconcile" empirical and spiritual perspectives (rather than realities) originates in an imaginative construct which interrelates hope and despair, discipline and freedom, the vision of ceremony and the "formless fear".[2] Later, in

---

1. R.F. Brissenden, "The Wounded Hero", p. 277.
2. "Exploit", CP, p. 101.

considering Under Aldebaran, I will suggest that this structure of perception is operative in pre-conversion poetry. Even so, the poetry itself actively encourages this danger since, at least in A Vision of Ceremony, it does seem to authorise an identification of subjectivity and negativity.

"An Art of Poetry" declares:

> Scorn then to darken and contract
> The landscape of the heart
> By individual, arbitrary
> And self-expressive art. (CP, 70)

Why should "individual" and "self-expressive" art be linked with "arbitrary" and found to contract, rather than contact, the heart? Why should an expression of self be seen, so strongly, as an exercise in anti-metaphysical individualism? In McAuley's schema, arbitrariness and individualism are the necessary consequences of an anti-realist aesthetic:

> At the very instant at which the mind loses its absolute allegiance to the rule of rational faith as the proper measure of reality, there spring into being three characteristics of the modern world which tend to stultify intelligence, namely: humanism - man is made the measure of all things, including the things of God; arbitrariness - 'heresy' means picking and choosing, the will deflecting the intellect; and individualism - the ego receives the prerogatives of the Supreme Being. 1.

While it is quite clear that this apparently logical discourse itself participates in McAuley's order/disorder model, it is also clear that this model has become entangled with some favourite Thomistic distinctions - supernatural/natural, objective/ subjective - and that it is being pushed off-centre, away from its tensive co-ordinates. In this one-sided position, the model begins to authorise continuity between "rational faith" and "God", between the non-rational

---

1. The End of Modernity, p. 36.

self and humanism, arbitrariness and individualism, as well as discontinuity between "God" and "man". These structural relationships, too simplistic and absolute in themselves, rob the model of any tensive character which remains. What we have, in other words, is McAuley's imagination disguising itself as metaphysical reason, but also attempting, by way of an attack on what is arbitrary, individual, and self-expressive, at once to express and repress its need to construct a world both fallen and upheld.

This may help explain an intriguing "blindspot" in McAuley's metaphysics, a "blindspot" he uses to over-objectify his suspicion of the personal element in poetry. His metaphysics of "person" is, in general, too essentialist. In common with a great deal of Thomistic philosophy at that time, his is a metaphysics which does not acknowledge personalist and existentialist philosophies. In an easily overlooked section of The End of Modernity[1.], he claims not to understand a distinction between "person" and "individual" made by the French Thomist, Jacques Maritain. Maritain writes:

> In each of us, individuality, being that which excludes from ourselves that which other men are, might be described as the narrowness of the ego . . . Personality, on the other hand, is rooted in the spirit inasmuch as the spirit holds itself in existence and superabounds in existence . . . it testifies to the generosity or expansiveness in being which pertains to its spiritual principle. Personality means interiority to oneself and requires at the same time the communications of knowledge and love.[2.]

While Maritain's distinction allows him to argue that if a work of art is "subjective" its meaning is both universal and individual, McAuley assumes that if a work of art is subjective it is self-centred, not God-centred.

---

1. "A Note on Maritain's Views", pp. 111-116.
2. Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, pp. 105-106.

If I consider this a poetic as well as philosophical problem, it is not because I am assuming McAuley's poetry must be directly personal, or that it hides a personal subtext which has been suppressed in the interests of objectivity. There is, quite obviously, a reasoned attempt on his part to exclude the random particularities of immediate experience, to "Elucidate the carnal maze/ With clear light from above" (CP, 70). This does not automatically result in bad poetry: concealment can be a mode of revelation as "Vespers" and "Nativity" demonstrate, and "impersonal" poetry can be as moving as "To the Holy Spirit" or as exciting as "A Leaf of Sage". Yet it does represent a danger that metaphysical reason may, in its turn, dominate his imagination, willing it to become overly committed to "objectivity" (making it almost a substitute for "hope"), overly suspicious of "subjectivity" (making it almost a substitute for "despair" or, at least, "disorder" and a surrogate for other, less voluntary images of evil), and thus dismantle the imaginative structures which give the best poetry its "sober drunkenness". Without these, the faith can become one too rational and the verse too "willed", as in this moment from "A Letter to John Dryden":

> Christ is what men have in common, he,
> He is the Word, the source of unity,
> The Reason of man's reason, and its Light;
> Those who participate in him, unite,
> And those who turn their backs face out to endless night.
> Who does not gather with the Logos, scatters;
> With him, man makes and mends, without him, shatters,
> And nothing that he schemes or hopes for matters. (CP, 91)

The assumption of The End of Modernity, like that of "An Art of Poetry" and "A Letter to John Dryden" is that, given the distance between the supernatural and the natural, and given the shattered culture of Western modernity, the poet must either deny disorder or deny Christ.

For Maritain, creativity involves both a revealing and sacrificing of the creative self - and, through this, a revelation of more general truths. The sense of self and the sense of truth intersect in the creative intuition.[1] McAuley claimed not to understand this. Yet, there is a very real sense in which his poetic practice vindicated Maritain's theory. "Nativity", for example, shows how his imaginative construction of self corresponds with his imaginative construction of objective reality:

> The thin distraction of a spider's web
> Collects the clear cold drops of night.
> Seeds falling on the water spread
> A rippling target for the light.
>
> The rumour in the ear now murmurs less,
> The snail draws in its tender horn,
> The heart becomes a bare attentiveness,
> And in that bareness light is born. (CP, 69)

The power of this simple poem is precisely that one cannot distinguish between the sense of a subject and the sense of an object. Both are perfectly constructed and captured in the fragility of the opening stanza, the growing silence, the reserved tenderness of the snail, and the bare attentiveness which receives the light.

"Celebration of Divine Love" (CP, 73-76) has much the same imaginative integrity. It presents itself as a public pattern of conversion, yet its commitment to traditional symbolism leads ultimately to a more personalised contemplation of a more localised landscape. It derives much of its power from the way it restrains, then releases, the "individual" and "self-expressive" dimension of its art, and from the way its restrained despair is transfigured by the heart's active receptivity. It also reveals a religious imagination informed by the myth and theology of Adam's and Eve's Fall.

---

1. Cf. Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, p. 107.

The poem opens with the image of an infant in innocent delight, but then needs to introduce - "even here" - its sense of a flawed world:

> Things turn and show an underside of fear;
> Night-terrors come; the Eden colours fade;
> The joy that seemed a supernatural power
> Weakens and grows discouraged and afraid. (CP, 73)

As the child enters this mystery of evil and begins to "learn/ The outer life of exile on the plain", he becomes both victim and sinner. His mind is divided between Cain, who is active after material and commercial interests, and Abel, who is contemplative and peaceful. It is significant that the Abel figure is defensively peaceful: he rescues peace from the surrounding violence. The child then participates in the second fall - the murder of Abel. He becomes both cause and effect of "love's shattered law", as his heart learns an "obscured guilt", which has its correspondence in creation "Grown tuneless and distraught". He is still like Abel in that he receives a primordial wounding. He is still like Cain in that he is driven by desire and "marked with an inward flaw". Finally, though, it is the sinner, not the victim, who most carries the poem's sense of evil: as the second stanza closes it must leave Abel behind and go with Cain "To wander in the earth without vocation" (CP, 74).

The childhood world of innocence and obscure guilt is at once abandoned and confirmed when we arrive at the world of adult action. McAuley associates the Flood with the "sexual night": "Now in the sexual night the waters rave". What is important here is not any confession of youthful debauchery, but the persistent combination of love and loneliness. The sexual night is the spiritual condition of those who "receive/ A stranger to their bed, and wake alone". While the poem maintains the victim/sinner tension by incorporating the destructive/redemptive possibilities of the Flood, it also places more

emphasis on human action as having a voluntary quality:

> Waters of judgment! Yet they might have been
> Living waters, sanctified.
> Pity the castaways of that vast storm,
> Who, passing through the deathly element,
> Survive unliving and are not reborn: (CP, 74)

Loneliness then drives the speaker in search of meaning. The magi he first consults are prophets of an entirely and exclusively terrestrial hope, who advocate a "desecrated life", and seem to incorporate two biblical symbols: Babylon and Babel. When the speaker resists them and discovers faith, he does so within the biblical symbol of exile. This symbol, as McAuley uses it, also signifies the way of tradition and of the "undivided will". This is particularly emphasised by the reference to Psalm 137, the song of the faithful remnant.

It is also a symbol which attracts the contemplative heart: the song is heard "out of the bowed darkness" and its truth makes the heart stand still.

Now the poem begins to celebrate Christian belief through its traditional symbols, which are seen to illumine and elevate natural and biblical symbols. The Annunciation, symbolising Christ's becoming human, confirms "a deep sense/ Of natural order in the way of things". It also completes Old Testament types of redemption - "The Ark, the Rainbow, the Returning Dove" - but in such a way that emphasis still falls firmly on humankind's voluntary participation in a pattern which, while it requites piety and rewards care, guarantees that any violation of the natural order "brings sure recompense". In the sixth stanza, which, in its visionary quality, recalls "The Incarnation of Sirius" and anticipates the dying vision of Quiros, we have a vision of the Church as "The sacred mother of terrestrial things". The

church is perceived as a confirmation and convergence of other symbols: the "living Temple" of the New Jerusalem, the Woman of Revelations, and Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church. If this risks a certain denial of the present world, so that it tends to "turn to dust and shade", the orchestrated tones do embody the rational component of belief and the tapestry itself reflects the sense of interconnectedness and hierarchy which accompanies it. The beauty and the danger of this belief is revealed as the Church displays her wealth:

> Music reflects angelic hierarchies;
> And crafts that Wisdom has perfected shine;
> There Holy Poverty with Joy resorts,
> And Love that is most human grows divine.
> Caught in her splendour other glories fade,
> And earthly kingdoms turn to dust and shade. (CP, 75)

Then, as if it recognises its own temptation to pseudo-transcendence, the poem next focuses on Christ - but as symbol of the redemptive process, more than as promise of the redeemed state. It moves back into the tensions with which it opens. The figure of Christ "reigning on the cosmic tree" relates Eden and Calvary as type and anti-type, just as it also relates creation and redemption (again interpreting the notion of grace perfecting nature). Other interactions - between perfection and pain, Original Sin and Redemption - reinforce this:

> He is the bond and stay of his creation,
> Unmeasured measure of immensity;
> The nails that pierce his hands and feet make fast
> The axis of the world, his outstretched arms
> Give falling nature its stability. (CP, 75)

When the poem next combines the story of Christ's resurrection with one of exorcism, we realise how the traditional symbolism - with all its celebration of natural order and angelic hierarchy - has been used to locate evil and redemption within the human figure. While this is obviously a way of saying that Christ's victory over death is his

victory over Satan, it also says that the "demons" belong to "the epileptic will" and are exorcised when the "right mind" listens to "The Word":

> Now is the three hours' darkness of the soul,
> The time of earthquake; now at last
> The Word speaks, and the epileptic will
> Convulsing vomits forth its demons. Then
> Full-clothed, in his right mind, the man sits still,
> Conversing with aeons in the speech of men. (CP, 75)

In its final stanza, the poem shifts its celebration of order - natural and redeemed - closer to "the speech of men" and to a lyric mode. Here we find that the sense of despair which enlivened the opening stanzas has been neither repressed nor resolved by rational faith. What has occurred is a transformation: the poem ends with the transformed negativity of the contemplative, via negativa vision. At this point traditional symbols give way to familiar and concrete images - the heron, the sharp frosts, and the time of pruning. In the clear lines of the heron and the cool lucidity of winter, the poem establishes a more immediate resonance between the "old mysterious symbols" and the "old fidelities of earth" while developing a beautiful correspondence between the structure of perceived experience and the structure of belief which it has been celebrating. The sense of a fragile existence is transmuted into a longing for eternity. The sense of loss is transmuted into a sense of abandonment in love - a belief that what we cannot keep will yet be tenderly kept and restored. The sense of winter is transformed into a yearning for summer and for communing in solitude beyond reason:

> Before the herons return
> Abide the sharp frosts and the time of pruning;
> For he shall come at last for whom you yearn
> And deep and silent shall be your communing;
> And if his summer heat of love should burn
> Its victim with a sacrificial fire,
> Rejoice: who knows what wanderer may turn,
> Responsive to that fragrant hidden pyre! (CP, 76)

This ending, where the poet is servant within the mystery of sacrifice, accords with "Invocation" (CP, 63), McAuley's self-dedication as a poet. The Muse is tenderly addressed. She is nurse and friend. The poet has been suckled by her - this suggests the poet's submission to the real. So too, the "wondering mouth" recalls the kind of wonder McAuley associates with a metaphysical intuition and a reverence for creation. Love of the Muse also involves solitude, but such a solitude as ripens, softens, and gives fulfilment to "crude/ Harsh vigour". Complexity is transformed into that McAuley ideal - "a lucid line". This is only achieved by an abandonment. The sense of what words cannot say is transformed into the belief that these are "words that are no longer mine". Implicit in this is the turning to the Word for an art of words, as well as the recognition that the poetic inspiration involves a heightening of the natural faculties.

With this abandonment, the poem has as its final mood patience and acceptance. There is a meaning larger than individual isolation, and so mortality is trusted for its sense of exile and of welcome:

> I do not now revolt, or quarrel
> With the paths you make me tread,
> But choose the honeycomb and laurel
> And walk with patience towards the dead;
> Expecting, where my rest is stayed,
> A welcome in that windless shade. (CP, 63)

That welcome is found in "Winter Nightfall" (CP, 103) the first of McAuley's Trakl poems. It exemplifies what will become a familiar mode: the simple, familiar objects, the selective stress, building up a pressure of symbolic meaning. The images are clear, almost stark (outlines, as it were, of the Swan). The double stress of "Snow falls" introduces a focusing stillness. The double stress becomes an important key to the meditative technique of later poems. Then there

is a falling away from the stillness with "on the darkening boughs". This pattern is repeated: "Evening bell rings through the shade." This metrical method provides a central insight into McAuley's religious mode: the central experience surrounded by the transitory; the heart, still, and the remote disorder.

There is a meal of bread and wine - familiar, but also suggestive. The wanderer is welcomed in. Where does he go? There is a "stony sill" which is "hard with pain". Why should pain be the way in to this welcome? Once again, there is a striking correspondence between the "self" and "world" constructs. McAuley has written of this poem:

> But then we become aware that this house is also finally a grave, whose threshold of stony pain the wayfarer must cross; and the waiting meal is not on this side of death but on the other. There is a controlled ambiguity, a range of multiple meaning kept afloat by the simple words and images, and this is typical of Trakl.

It becomes typical of McAuley as well. He will return to Trakl and deepen his own technique of "controlled ambiguity". For the moment, though, I want to examine further how this ambiguity finds expression in the language of belief, and to consider Captain Quiros as a poem in conversation with the myth and theology of the Fall.

---

1. The Grammar of the Real, p. 203.

SECTION THREE

THE ARDENT HOPE

Even as it celebrates Quiros's dream of a Christian society founded in peace and justice, Captain Quiros is more deeply concerned with the apparent ineffectiveness of that dream. Even as it redeems Quiros's failure by appealing to the obscure designs of God, it never quite decides that the failure had to be: rather, it examines the problem of freedom and evil. Quiros's vision is, throughout, endangered by the evil men do: greed, revenge, unchastity, dishonesty and - as one might expect of McAuley - indecision. It is also endangered by involuntary forces, such as sickness and storm. Somewhat like the Great South Land itself, it is a vision never realised: it is never an immediate presence, but a presence beyond and calling. This is partly because the poem's characters are never dramatically realised[1]; partly because the poem, intellectually conceived, carries the conviction that paradisal hopes will only ever be attained in an eschatological order.

It is also because McAuley's imaginative predisposition links hope and failure. This is clearly happening as Belmonte begins to tell of Mendana's voyage:

> With this new enterprise and its disaster
> My theme begins; for in it Quiros sailed
> As Pilot first, but in the end as master
> Who saved the remnant when the venture failed.
> Then of that noble voyage I shall tell
> That sought the South Land; of what there befell;
> Of ardent hope and how much it availed. (CP, 112)

The indications are already ominous: "enterprise" and "disaster" so nearly placed; the rhyming of "availed" with "failed" and "sailed",

---

1. Cf. Vivian Smith, James McAuley, p. 36.

relating hope to failure and effort; the rhyming of "disaster" and "master" - slightly redeemed by the portrait of Quiros as "master/ Who saved the remnant", though this itself recalls the remnant of Israel, and invokes a theology of tough and tested fidelity[1].

While paradise remains an eschatological hope, the free agent is not absolved from making every effort of prayer and sacrifice. Yet, he is often betrayed: by his will, by forces of fate and chance, and especially by other people. Here, John Leal is probably a more significant Christian model than the heroic, tragic Quiros who commands much of our attention. Leal appears briefly as Quiros is trying to lead the remnant of Mendana's ambition to safety in the Philippines. Most of the expedition are hopelessly ill and dispirited. There are "Only a few that hardship could not daunt." Belmonte praises Leal "above the rest": having turned from soldiering to "a penitential life of prayer/ And service . . .", Leal, though ill himself, spends his time caring for the sick. His apparent reward is bitterly recorded:

> Yet at last his own
> Death came to him, neglected and alone,
> The slave of love worn out with constancy. (CP, 137)

Leal stands in stark contrast to Donna Isabel, who is "punctilious in her devotions" to Christ, yet keeps for herself a large store of oil, wine, food and water, while her sailors have only flour paste and slimy water. McAuley's Christian vision is not without irony, irony which exposes the vacillations and selfishnesses of the will. Therefore, the poem's religiousness should not be too quickly identified with the theology of providence expressed by the Father

---

1. Cf. Xavier Leon-Dufour, Dictionary of Biblical Theology, pp. 428-430.

Commissary; it should be associated with the poem's own combination of irony and faith, and with its exploration of evil and freedom.

Nor is this the only moment when McAuley's irony exposes the effect of Christians on their vision. While Mendana's expedition is anchored at "The Marquesas Islands", eleven natives paddle out to his ships, hoping to trade food. They are fired upon; three are killed. The Camp Master displays them on posts in order to terrify the natives into submission. Mendana approves - and his failure of will is framed by two images of crucifixion. As the three natives hang from the posts, "Lorenzo took a lance and thrust it through/ One of the bodies." This irony is fiercely underlined as Belmonte then records of Mendana:

> Before departing he erected three
> Crosses of wood on shore beyond the tide,
> And cut the day and year upon a tree:
> Images that more fitly signified
> The first descent of Christian men among
> This friendly folk, than those three bodies hung,
> One with gaping spear-wound in its side. (CP, 118)

This incident, where the image of Christ is discovered more deeply in a pagan civilisation, anticipates McAuley's use of Malope, "A man instinct with power, authentic, whole" (CP, 120). Malope's is a world where ritual unifies ancient truths and immediate situations, a place of enlivening tradition and mythic imagination:

> This is that island world, Malope's place,
> Much like our childhood world of presences
> That look out from a mythic time and space
> Into the real: a land of similes
> Where man conforming to the cosmos proves
> His oneness with all beings, and life moves
> To the rhythm of profound analogies. (CP, 121)

In one sense Malope demonstrates an intimate connection between natural and supernatural grace. A man of great natural virtue, he

also senses that Christ is the fulfilment of the native Word, "The primal lore the ancestral spirits gave" (CP, 127). Admittedly, this is treated somewhat ironically - Malope thinks the visitors will themselves be greater because of their superior revelation and mistakenly expects "peace and amity". However, the irony is directed more at the Christians' lack of virtue; it leaves Malope's integrity untouched. Malope undergoes what traditional theology would describe as "baptism of desire":

> Clearly the white ones have received a Word
> More potent than our own forefathers heard:
> The proof lies in the power they have displayed. (CP, 127)

Therefore, when Malope is murdered, he is received into the Christian heaven: he traces "the Path of Fire", no longer finding the "She-Ghost" who might trap him in her maze (CP, 120), but Mary, "Lady of the Way", who shows the maze "Completed as a Cross" (CP, 132). Not long before this, Mendana had expressed his failure of will and admitted himself trapped by the maze (CP, 128). Malope's death is itself preceded by Lorenzo's killing of the Camp Master - denying him the sacrament of Penance (CP, 130) - and the vengeful, disordered killing of "one of the Camp Master's friends" (CP, 131). In another crucifixion parody, the heads of these two men are set on poles and raised to view along with the Royal Standard (CP, 131). It is then that the Vicar says Mass. His sermon anticipates, in parody, the Father Commissary's theology:

> The Vicar then said Mass, and at the end
> Declared these grievous happenings were ordained
> For wilful disobedience and sin;
> Henceforth by meek submission they might win
> A better life than so far they had gained. (CP, 131)

The Vicar's eschatology has taught him indifference to human affairs. When he enunciates what is, in many ways, the poem's central theology,

McAuley undercuts him by having these Christians bury their murdered fellows "and divide/ Their goods among the victors" (CP, 132) - thus identifying them with the murderers of Christ.[1] It is then that Malope is killed and received by Christ, "Who had hung upon the wood;/ In Whom he learnt the meaning of his days." (CP, 132). Within this maze of ironies, McAuley may offer a belief in the Cross, but he certainly does not propound a simplified belief in a Christian society. In the midst of it all, when it is already clear to him that Mendana has failed, and just after he has had some presentiment of the "Day of Blood", Quiros receives his destiny, and a coded vision of the only answer McAuley ever really offers: a leaping fish (Christ) which momentarily discloses "hidden grace"; the morning star (Mary)[2]; and the sound of a cock crowing:

> Then calmed by prayer, southward his vision went
> Where like a kite of stars with blazing streamer
> The Cross hung over the last continent,
> Still waiting for the impress of the dreamer.
> To lead with bloodless sword a new crusade:
> This was the hope, the solemn vow he made,
> To which henceforth his energies were bent.
>
> Meanwhile the bay was quiet in night's presence,
> Save where a leaping fish an instant showed
> The water's hidden grace of luminescence;
> Then on the eastern verge the planet glowed,
> Shedding the mild rays from its tranquil lamp.
> Out of the silent darkness of the camp
> With lost and lonely clamour a cock crowed. (CP, 129)

Although Quiros's purpose is holier, less bloody and less mercenary than Mendana's, he discovers that God does not necessarily bless even the best of intentions. The precarious character of Quiros's Christian heroism is indicated in the opening of "New Jerusalem":

---

1. Cf. John, 19:23-24.
2. In Catholic devotion, Mary is often referred to as the morning star. This practice is still evident, for instance, in the issue of The Catholic Weekly dedicated to the Marian Year. (June 3, 1987) The litany which Quiros and his crew recite (CP, 146) includes the term.

> Those who have quenched the heart, who would not dare
> For any cause to set life on a throw,
> Who never walked with failure, death, despair
> In long familiar converse: how can they know
> What the world looks like in a blaze of glory? (CP, 155)

This faith has its foundation in stoicism, especially in its rhyming of "dare" with "despair", and it gambles between long despair and brief glory. By the time he sets foot on what he mistakenly believes to be The Great South Land of the Holy Spirit and celebrates the feast of Pentecost, violence has already been done to the natives. Once again, through an act of disobedience, a native has been shot and, in yet another parodic reminder of the crucifixion, his mutilated corpse is hung upon a tree. Quiros himself is ill and his division of command is beginning to cause confusion. Pentecost, however, is presented, perhaps rescued, as a moment of glory and happiness. The vigil is celebrated with fireworks, reminding us that "The heart is born to celebrate."[1]. The dawn cooperates with its "gleaming purple and bright gold", (although this rather ominously recalls Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib"). Quiros, in dedicating the land, declares, "here is a new heaven and earth" as he institutes the "knightly Order of the Holy Ghost" and commits it "to the uttermost/ Reaches of time". The prayer he gives his knights is significant:

> For this grace only shall these servants pray:
> That they may give and never count the cost,
> That they may fight when everything seems lost,
> Heedless of wounds, unshaken by dismay. (CP, 158)

As Bradley has pointed out, Quiros exposes his presumption by failing to include the third part of St Ignatius's prayer: to labour and not to ask for any reward. [2].

---

1. Cf. "The Royal Fireworks", A Vision of Ceremony, Collected Poems, p. 82.
2. David Bradley, "James McAuley: The Landscape of the Heart", G. Dutton, ed., The Literature of Australia (1976), p. 456.

The dying speech of the Father Commissary reminds Quiros that his "task and privilege" is to restore the world to Christ, but that such restoration can be perfected only at the end of time. While this is the theological core of Captain Quiros, it needs to be carefully appreciated. The Franciscan does not absolve Quiros from engaging vigorously with history's incomplete designs. Rather, he strikes a tension between end-time and present time:

> For in the midst of time God has not willed
> The End of Time. Not ours to bring to birth
> That final Realm; nor shall our labours build
> Out of the rubble of this fallen earth
> The New Jerusalem, which will never be
> Christ's perfect Bride save in eternity. (CP, 163)

This is easily misrepresented. It does say that an ideal Christian society will exist only in eternity. Yet it also disciplines the escapist possibility of such an eschatology: the providential purpose is working back towards "the midst of time", as well as forward to "The End of Time" (and the difficult intimacy operating between these terms is given visual representation in the way they stand almost against each other on the page). The placing of "Not ours to bring to birth" and "nor shall our labours build" certainly denies these efforts perfection here and now, but it also lets the end-of-line linger on, quietly confirm, the activities themselves. Quiros must, "in the midst of time", continue his work - indeed, the very incompleteness of his endeavour will encourage greater passion, and will also occasion divine grace (usually for others). However, his actions must not be corrupted at the heart by utopian ambition. The theology, then, is a frame for reconciling Quiros's quotation of the gospel command to be perfect and the Father Commissary's counsel that "all shall be made perfect at the last" (CP, 164). This reconciling is done in the heart: at the centre of Captain Quiros's theological

tension is the belief that "God will approve/ The work you have pursued with burning love" (CP, 164). Love, which for McAuley is equally a matter of feeling, "intellectual passion", and faith, is used to hold together temporary uncertainties and failures, continued effort, and the promise of final joy. If it seems that McAuley barely believes in the success of such endeavour, this derives from a further tension: between his theology and his imaginative predisposition to believe

> That every living fruit the soul can bear
> Is born of patience and despair.[1]

This, it must be stressed, is not the same as a tension between a religious worldview and a more secular one. It is, rather, a tension between hope and despair - which itself provides the fundamental shape of McAuley's religious imagining.

Therefore, the Father Commissary's speech needs to be read in relation to the more lyrical passages which follow it. The speech may provide the theological core of Captain Quiros, but here is its emotional base:

> Can this be all that the great Ocean gave,
> A doubtful glory and a broken rite?
> Spears of the sun lie shattered in the wave;
> Hope into history sinks out of sight
> Like a drowned sailor on a coral reef
> Where fish with flash of scarlet and goldleaf
> And lapis-lazuli take watery flight.
>
> Still I invoke you, my prophetic star,
> Rising each spring above the Southern Sea
> Whose waters in their overturning are
> Renewed with teeming life unweariedly:
> Your rays of blue and rose, Aldebaran,
> As on the very night that I began,
> Charge the abyss with magic energy.

---

1. "Celebration of Love", Collected Poems, p. 37.

> Until He comes, who will come, may there be
> The cosmic dance pursued in that lost land;
> Let the drum-voices wake to prophecy;
> And through the maze-print on the trodden sand
> Let masks of vision lead the warriors on;
> May time revolve as shadow round a stone,
> Untroubled by destruction's blundering hand.
>
> (CP, 164-165)

This structure is very typical of McAuley: disillusionment breaks through, but is restrained by "Still"; order and meaning are willed back into the situation by the invocation of Aldebaran; the perspective is thrown forward to the final coming of Christ, then returned to the present moment, now transfigured by a ritual of hope. Nevertheless, the opening sense of history's grief is very strong: "Spears of the sun lie shattered in the wave". As hope surrenders to a time-bound perspective, the simile of the drowned sailor rises, carrying certain complexities. It does more than communicate loss of hope. Its initial sense of defeat is somewhat restrained by the lovely colours of the fish (as a personal condition is comfortingly converted into a natural one). It also recalls that Belmonte himself was saved from drowning (CP, 148) - Belmonte the poet, now turning failure into song. This submerged association leads easily into the invocation of Aldebaran. Aldebaran is a strangely ambivalent symbol, if we recall its earlier appearance:

> Then in the evening vault Aldebaran,
> Eye of the Bull, renewed its changing fire.
> Out of the starry labyrinth it shone,
> Guiding the heart through memory and desire,
> The dark alternate tenses of our days. (CP, 146)

Aldebaran, then, illumines Belmonte's art "with its sad alternate fire:/ Blue as of memory, red as of desire" [1] - so that the poet's position corresponds to the poem's religious structure. This

---

1. "The Incarnation of Sirius", Collected Poems, p. 24.

correspondence generates and authenticates the final prayer. Here the recurring image of the maze is related to "trodden sand" emphasising that hopes identified with time are not well-grounded. Instead McAuley/Belmonte proposes a more ritualised mode of life, one of figural imagination, by which this "lost land" might enact and renew "The figured Now which is eternity" (CP, 173). Time becomes more shadow than substance. Yet as this hopeful prayer concludes, we arrive at a very familiar construction of McAuley's: "Untroubled by destruction's blundering hand." - a negative way of saying something positive, an absence edging towards a presence. All this is contained within the space the prayer constructs and "believes": the space between the present world and the final coming of Christ. Into that space Belmonte/McAuley casts his prayer: urgent, but also strangely passive, as if the "may" and "Let" indicate a voice seeking permission to believe. These words, then, relate to the prayer's structure in such a way that its eschatology serves more deeply to expose the vulnerability of history.

In his dying vision, Quiros sees "history . . . shaped to a new theme" (CP, 172). This theme is barely consoling. It is largely the theme of Quiros's voyaging: failure checked by a remnant of faith and by love. Quiros first sees those images of Australia which succeed his broken quest and which continue its ironies. The Dutch see a "barren coast", useless for their commercial purposes. Though Bougainville finds in New Guinea "minds kept childish by the drug of sense", his reports encourage a dream of "the paradise of Natural Man" (a dream which, like Quiros's Christian one, cannot dissociate itself from violence). Quiros finds difficult comfort in Cook's final discovery of Australia; he sees Cook as a "Child of an age grown dull to

blasphemy" who will "lightly accept" being adored by islanders and who will be killed to provide them s cred sustenance. So Quiros has to face the failure of his dream: Australia is not settled as a New Jerusalem, but as a place of damnation. But still, he recognises something of Malope's authentic wholeness in the Aboriginal ritual life:

> "I saw the South Land, vast, worn down, and strange:
> Man in his tribes, and insect, beast, and tree,
> Set in a cyclic pattern beyond change.
> There solemn long-shanked birds danced ritually,
> And painted men enacted and renewed
> With mime and song in rapt exalted mood
> The figured Now which is eternity." (CP, 173)

This rite too is soon broken by the penal settlement. Quiros does glimpse happier moments as "A nation rises fortunate and free" (CP, 174). These give way, however, to figures of dread Apocalypse, figures which embody an ironic confirmation of all that the old explorers feared.

In this anti-Christian era, when "grace and nature both appear to wilt", the faithful remnant must live estranged from custom and ritual. Quiros's vision of failure is checked by a belief that this remnant's disregarded suffering may yet have influence (the same belief which informs the prayers in "A Letter to John Dryden" and "Celebration of Divine Love"):

> "They take the world from which they seem estranged
> Into love's workshop where it will be changed,
> Though they themselves die wretched and alone." (CP, 175)

Quiros envisages the poem's voyage of dream, failure and hope turning towards the notion of some dark, redeeming love, his ultimate hope being that "The energies of Mercy will prevail/ Till time is closed up with a thunderclap." (CP, 175). The final victory of love and mercy

is then figured in the Virgin Mary:

> "In the world's night I see the Virgin stand,
> Crowned with the stars, the Spirit's perfect Bride,
> And the bright rays that issue from her hand
> Are reins by which she gently sways the tide." (CP, 175)

The Virgin is certainly a consoling presence. Since she is "Crowned with stars", she represents the woman of Revelations who, threatened by the dragon, gives birth to "the son who has to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre" (Rev., 12:5). She also represents the ultimate realisation of Quiros's dream, since the phrase, "the Spirit's perfect Bride", recalls another passage from Revelations:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone. (21:1-4)

Even so, her consolation is not easily possessed: the Virgin stands "In the world's night" - the vision remains embattled, and the space between the eschaton and the present still troubles. Moreover, the Dragon has not, at least in the poem, been defeated and Mary stands very near her own anti-type: the Mother "holding in her lap/ The head of Antichrist, her own misbirth" (who herself resembles the famous prostitute of Revelations, 17). In this way the tensive character of the poem's religious imagination is sustained. While this is the Virgin who guided Malope to Christ, she is also the Virgin menaced by evil. She is victorious - but in the "End of Time"; "in the midst of time" she is still struggling, as Mendana's experience shows:

> Daily they searched those empty latitudes,
> Where the exultant whale finds pasturage:
> Four tiny arks filled with cabals and feuds.
> At night they saw malignant Scorpion wage

> His warfare overhead, with curving sting,
> And glittering claws stretched forward, menacing
> The just virgin of the Golden Age. (CP, 118)

The primary reference here is not to Mary, but to Astraea, who, during the Golden Age, lived on earth as the goddess of justice, but who, because of humankind's increasing wickedness, withdrew to heaven and was placed among the stars as Virgo. Still, each figure occupies a very similar space: between the woundedness or wickedness of human history and the ideal of justice and mercy. Each is, in a sense, removed from earth, though each figures the true meaning of history. When Astraea next appears she is even closer to Mary, since she prefigures the gospel image of the grain which dies in order to give life:

> In the late watch, that month, the north-east sky
> Showed forth the Virgin with her angel-wings,
> As in the old star-maps: holding on high
> A bough in one hand, while the other brings
> An ear of corn, fruit of the Golden Age:
> What can that ancient mystery presage
> But that the grain must die before it springs? (CP, 146)

This passage from death to life is then immediately related to its anti-type: the passage from life to death symbolised in "that fatal tree" of Eden. (CP, 147) [1]. On a night which seems to restore the original gleam of "wild Chaos", Belmonte remembers Adam and Eve, then, as if to indicate their heritage, records:

> A sudden illness, violent and obscure,
> Almost extinguished Quiros at the start,
> And to the end remained without a cure. (CP, 147)

Thus Mary may embody a final victory of Mercy, but there are many hints in the poem that her status as "the Spirit's perfect Bride"

---

1. The term, "fatal tree", is Milton's: Paradise Lost, IV, 514.

cannot be too quickly divorced from her role as the Second Eve, her place within the Fall-Redemption drama.

The real source of the poem's religious structure is not the Father Commissary's theology of providence, but rather the unspoken way in which Captain Quiros re-enacts the myth of the Fall. In making this claim, I am arguing only a general correspondence, one directed towards similar religious issues, and encouraged by McAuley's Catholic climate of imagination and imaginative predisposition, but not necessarily motivated or sustained by close and critical appropriation of the Genesis texts themselves. Those aspects of the Fall myth which I see as operative in Captain Quiros are: the metaphysical struggle between order and chaos, reflected in the human story of good and evil; this tension between good and evil as experienced in the flawed human will and expressed in the problem of guilt (as also in the promise of redemption). These inform the ironies and disappointments of Captain Quiros and, more than anything else, guarantee that its eschatology avoids escapism and indifferentism. While this mythic impulse is already implied by what has been said about the tension between failure and hope, and between "the midst of time" and "The End of Time", I want now to explicate some other aspects, particularly as they elucidate the relationship McAuley establishes between evil, failure, and will.

The failure and evil consequences of the first voyage are clearly attributed to Mendana's failure of will. He sows the disorder which will undo him when he picks "a relative as Admiral" and includes "Three haughty brothers of his wife", who soon quarrel with the Camp Master - another troublesome character whose first thought "Was not to keep the peace" (CP, 113-114). The pattern is indicated very early in

the poem:

> With faction at the top, disorder spread
> Under Mendana's moody vacillations. (CP, 114)

This disorder takes strength from Isabel's vanity and ambition, as well as from Lorenzo's unrestrained pride "By which he ministered to anarchy" (CP, 114). There is an element of moral allegory in the poem, dealing with the relationship between will and disorder. When Admiral Lope wants to steal a better ship, it is "the false counsels of the family clique" (CP, 114), which weaken Mendana's distaste for lawlessness. This act of piracy provokes a prayer, admittedly from a commercially-minded priest, that Mendana's expedition should fail. If it does fail, it may not mean that the priest has indeed been successful in invoking divine retribution, but that he has merely been the first of many victims who express the expedition's inherent flaw:

> So things went on, disorders of every kind,
> The Devil walking loose to spread the flames. (CP, 115)

It is at this point that Quiros wants to preserve his virtue by withdrawing. However, he lets himself be persuaded by a dangerous collusion of King's man and Christ's: Mendana makes a futile vow to re-establish order in the service of the King, and the Vicar, with piety and opportunism sweetly blended, urges "Christ's holy purpose" (CP, 115). If we need any sign that their enthusiasm ignores the fallen state of humankind, this is immediately provided:

> Once out to sea, matters a while improved,
> As if Old Adam had been left on shore. (CP, 115)

In this way, McAuley clearly frames the voyage in relation to the Fall myth, and its presence can be traced throughout. If he had indeed been left on shore, Old Adam arrives at "The Marquesas Islands" with them: as natives paddle out towards the ships, they are shot. Mendana's disapproval loses authority before the Camp Master's

philosophy "That killings at the outset well convey/ The lesson to be learnt . . ." (CP, 116). Old Adam next discovers the island women, who with their "voluptuous grace", represent "too yielding access to damnation" (CP, 117). If McAuley betrays some puritanism and a patriarchal bias (reading the Fall myth with Woman as Tempter), he is also acknowledging one of his own favourite poets: Milton. While this section seems to celebrate natural innocence, it hints, too, at the dangers which pleasure can have for the reasoned will. Its Miltonic echoes should remind us of Raphael's advice to Adam:

> In loving thou dost well, in passion not,
> Wherein true love consists not; love refines
> The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat
> In reason, and is judicious, is the scale
> By which to heav'nly love thou may'st ascend,
> Not sunk in carnal pleasure, for which cause
> Among the beasts no mate for thee was found.[1]

Indeed, something of this God-like hierarchy lies at the poem's heart, as we see when McAuley uses Belmonte to voice his own profession and lament:

> For poems of this kind are out of fashion,
> Together with the faith, the will, the love,
> The energy of intellectual passion
> That built the greatness which we have resigned. (CP, 142)

When Mendana next capitulates to the "ill-inclined", abandoning his plan to leave a settlement and continue searching for the Solomons, his failure of will causes considerable chaos: natives are shot for stealing water-pots; food is stolen; then three more natives are shot and hung up for all to see (CP, 117). When Mendana, "caught/ Where violence pulled like a strong undertow", fails to condemn these actions, disorder seems to occupy his mind:

> From this time on, the fabric of his mind
> Began insensibly to gap and fissure,
> As if some dark distrustful spirit would find

---

1. Paradise Lost, VIII, 588-594.

An unpredictable release from pressure:
A secret man, strangely irresolute
For one so pertinacious in pursuit
Of that to which his whole life was consigned. (CP, 118)

Discontent and treachery now flourish - and the stars seem to approve as the Scorpion menances Virgo. Mendana, blaming himself for "loss of discipline", prays to Our Lady of Solitude and tries to make peace. Immediately after, one of his ships disappears, as if his failure in freedom is being sealed by forces of malign fate (CP, 119).

In describing the destruction of Malope's world, McAuley is clearly blaming Mendana. He lets power slip into the hands of the Camp Master, "the duke of strife", whose actions are described as "boisterous", "vehement", and "ambiguous". His disordered actions reinforce the discontent of Isabel's brothers, who conspire to alienate Malope (by having two natives killed secretly) and so pressure Mendana into abandoning the settlement (CP, 124). They also plot, with Isabel, to kill the Camp Master. Mendana, sick and "Wrought by an inner torment of decision", too easily resigns himself to their advice. Even so, as he considers how delay, sickness and grief "Have left (his) will frustrated and perplexed" (CP, 128), he is able to recognise his fault and recognise it precisely in terms of his participation in the Fall:

"How straight, how clear, in the beginning seem
Those tasks we undertake at heaven's calling!
Danger we run to embrace, and never dream
How vast the labyrinth and how appalling
The ambiguities that sap the heart;
Till that which God assigned for us our part
Becomes the shameful instance of our falling." (CP, 128)

His knowledge is, however, ineffectual: both the Camp Master and Malope are murdered. After this Mendana, "weakening more and more", abdicates authority in favour of Lorenzo. Once more, external forces

seem to cooperate in Mendana's fall:

> As if in punishment
> For treachery, disorder, cruelty,
> Which had too long outraged it, Heaven sent
> Swift fevers and devouring dysentery
> Till more were sick than well. So through the veil
> Of nausea they heard the funeral wail,
> And hostile drum-beats thudding endlessly. (CP, 135)

Then, as Mendana and Lorenzo die and the natives grow more and more aggressive, the survivors petition Isabel to save them from "the Devil's tightening claws" (CP, 135). This, referring back to the struggle between Scorpio and Virgo, creates a lovely irony. Isabel is hardly a figure of justice, nor indeed a Virgin figure; and the sailors are now reaping the reward of their own treachery against the just order.

In contrast to Mendana, Quiros remains a man of honourable will, and the evil and failure which attend his voyage derive more from forces beyond his control. Despite the blessing of Pope and King, Quiros is soon in trouble. After being shipwrecked in the Atlantic, he arrives at Cartagena only to find that here King's orders are reverently obeyed, but not carried out. He receives no finance. In Panama he is again refused. Making his way to Lima, he finds a small reminder of Mendana's failure of will:

> Even now harsh fortune scarcely would relent.
> The Viceroy, the great Count of Monterey,
> Though favourable, was sick and negligent
> While his subordinates caused more delay. (CP, 145)

Most significantly, Quiros must, in order to get his three ships, accept three men against his will, men with neither loyalty nor skill, men who will corrupt his enterprise: Bilbao, Iturbo, Prado. So the visionary is supplied with "a usual ship's complement/ Of good and ill" (CP, 145). Even though Bilbao and Prado may be seen as

responsible for their own actions, they also serve to distance evil from Quiros's individual will. In this sense they substitute as embodiments of external, involuntary evil. Similarly, the "sudden illness, violent and obscure" which then strikes Quiros, represents an evil beyond his choice. Yet Quiros is shown to have the spiritual integrity necessary to combat evil:

> Only the fiery vigour of his heart
> Now kept his judgment and his will intact. (CP, 147)

This capacity for vision, judgment and will distinguishes him from Mendana, whose sickness was so closely allied to his "inner torment of decision".

As he is leaving the Isle of Beautiful Folk, Quiros prays for this "shadowed race". Though they are a people of great natural virtue, they are not redeemed and live in "the long exile of the Lord's delay". In biblical terms, they are still living "in a land of deep shadow", without the light of Christ.[1] Quiros prays that their natural virtue will find its perfection in Christ. His prayer, addressed to the "fruitful palms", prompts Belmonte to recall Psalm 92: "Justus ut palma", with its promise that "the just will flourish like the palm tree". It celebrates the wonderful works and deep designs of God, announces that the wicked will perish and the virtuous obtain an ever-green reward, and so guarantees the final restoration of paradise, the final victory of good over evil. However, the victory will not occur "in the midst of time" for Belmonte next records a troubling moment:

---

1. Cf. Isaiah, 9:2-7, which, in the Catholic liturgy, is used for Christmas, so that the "great light" is interpreted as Christ.

I felt the lonely strangeness of the South,
And shuddered, though I could not have said why.
As we stood off, there came brief rain and thunder;
Once more I glimpsed the island, lying under
An arc of iris broken at the sky.

The broken rainbow seems deliberately to deny utopian enthusiasms. It recalls, too, the description of the original assault perpetrated by Mendana's men in "The Marquesas Islands":

With that first violence the happy time
Burst like a bubble, the irised colours fled. (CP, 116)

Disorder now begins to corrupt Quiros's virtuous endeavour. Prado, Satan-like, prowls about "Insatiate for mischief . . . Sowing his hints." (CP, 151). Quiros himself is finally implicated by "his idealist's remoteness from the pressure of immediate reality"[1]:

Weakened by sickness, Quiros seemed remote,
Giving his orders without consultation;
If he addressed the company the wrong note
Was sounded in his passionate oration:
Too much of Honour and of Fortitude,
When what was needed in the present mood
Was to take treason firmly by the throat. (CP, 151-152)

Bilbao then makes an error in piloting, rebels against Quiros's reproof, and is imprisoned on board the Almiranta. This sets off "a wave of murmurs . . . Among the malcontents" (CP, 152). Yet Quiros, despite contrary advice from Torres, persists in his mild government, which he sees as expressing his personal dedication to Christ's law of love. Quiros appears to be rewarded: land-birds are sighted, and since they are compared to "the dove/ That bore the olive-twig to Noah's hand" (CP, 153) they signal an end to destructive powers and the healing of the broken rainbow which marked the departure from the Isle of Beautiful Folk. Soon after, Quiros arrives at what will be New Jerusalem.

---

1. Vivian Smith, James McAuley, p. 32.

Even here, disobedience quickly brings death - a soldier in the landing party, disobeying Torres, shoots a native. The superior weapons of Spain establish "a pause in the hostilities", but the group is itself plagued by "confusion of command". When, after the brief paradise marked by Pentecost, the Order of the Holy Ghost, and Corpus Christi, Quiros again sets sail, he is finally undone - by storm and by the indecision of his Pilot (CP, 160). McAuley places his emphasis less on fate, and more on the failure of the other's will, a failure he carefully distances from Quiros himself:

> The Captain, lying sick, could not forestall
> An outcome that events themselves decided
> While the Chief Pilot and the Admiral
> Share a command uncertainly divided:
> The necessary orders were not given. (CP, 160)

It is indeed a "Fulcrum of chance" (CP, 160), but the force which turns the lever is dividedness of will. The moral seriousness of this is underlined as the Scorpion and Devil are recalled: "we swayed in the wind's claws" (CP, 160). As the Father Commissary then teaches Quiros the stern mysteries of divine providence, he speaks of "this fallen earth" (CP, 163): not only is perfection impossible except in eternity, but the imperfection which so bedevils the voyage is directly related to the Fall.

Finally, Quiros's intentions to undertake another voyage are undone, not simply by his death, but by forces of ill-will outside him. His country is "A specious fabric of exterior power/ Enfeebled by decay and lassitude." (CP, 167). His King is indecisive and the Church deceitful and opportunistic. Even in his final illness, Quiros retains his honour and we are carefully told that he is a "prince of charity and valour" (CP, 171). In his visionary experience he is

almost invisibly configured to the Lamb of Revelations[1]: finally, that is, he has put off the Old Adam for the New. After his death, Belmonte sees the morning star: not only does this vindicate Quiros, but it also redeems Mendana, since it was he, on the eve of his "Day of Blood", who had quoted the text: "To him that overcometh shall be given/ The morning star." (CP, 128).

Mary is described as the morning star in the litany by which Quiros dedicates his "holy enterprise" to her honour (CP, 146).[2] Belmonte's sighting of the star tells us, therefore, that the voyager has reached the shore. It also places Quiros firmly within the mythology of the fall, since it recalls, even re-enacts, how Malope found, in the Lady of the Way, one who would rescue him from the serpentine coils of betrayal and bad will.

This mythic substructure, which has Quiros voyaging towards an ever-deepening appreciation both of the world's fallen condition and of the uplifting influence of divine grace (which can guide the individual will to authentic goodness, as well as to eternal salvation), is reinforced, at key moments, by Belmonte's understanding of his poetic responsibility. In attempting to relate the poetic and the human voyage, Belmonte re-focuses the poem's sense of a fallen world and its belief in disciplined will:

> He who would rise, in deed or poetry,
> To the height of a great action, must have first
> Eaten the harsh bread of reality,
> And, schooled by blows, must with sad skill be versed
> Both in the deep corruptions of men's will

---

1. The description of Quiros's last words as "prophecy that seemed to break/ The seals of an illuminated scroll" (CP, 171) recalls the description of the Lamb in Revelations, 5:7-9.
2. This litany is published in The Catholic Weekly, June 3, 1987.

> And in their shallow weakness, which can still
> Level the best intentions to the worst. (CP, 138)

If such a purgative path leaves the poet, like Quiros, with "a clear purpose, tempered and serene" (CP, 138), prayer confirms the purpose. Belmonte is quite explicit about this: it is the Ignatian method of meditation which illumines the facts of his story, so that they glow "in their true light and meaning" (CP, 113). This meaning is beyond feeling and reason; it is apprehended by the heart. Belmonte declares that his story is something he has "long kept in (his) heart" (CP, 112) - echoing a phrase used in the gospel to describe Mary's prayerful searching of the mystery of Christ.[1] This phrase also recapitulates McAuley's view that poetry grows in contemplation[2], as well as his awareness that "In the old symbolism the heart was the principal organ, the seat of life, soul, intellect, memory, will."[3] If Belmonte's ideas evoke memories of "Terra Australis" (CP, 16), the correspondence between inner and outer voyages is once more sealed in a way one might expect of the artesian heart:

> Go, little stanza, set like a ship to sail
> Inner and outer Ocean. Will you bear
> Across the boundless playground of the whale
> This burden of stores and lives? How will you fare
> In wintry gulfs when storms beat from the Pole,
> Or through the reef-maze as the waters shoal
> In a blind world of rain where men despair?
>
> Terra Australis you must celebrate,
> Land of the inmost heart, searching for which
> Men roam the earth, and on the way create
> Their kingdoms in the Indies and grow rich,
> With noble arts and cities; only to learn
> They bear the old selves with them that could turn
> The streams of Eden to a standing ditch. (CP, 113)

If this shows yet again how the poem's religious structuring is informed by the Fall myth, it also, in stressing the vulnerability

---

1. Cf. Luke, 2:19, 51.
2. Cf. The End of Modernity, p. 124.
3. Cf. The End of Modernity, p. 131.

of human and poetic aspirations in a maze-like world, reveals how darkly that myth operates in McAuley's work, how determinedly he tries to hold Old Adam in relationship with New Adam. In this moment, Old Adam is almost breaking away from hope: only the troubling rhyme of "fare" and "despair" holds to a stoic style of hope (anticipating the later rhyming of "despair" with "dare" - CP, 155). Moreover, this poet's attempt "to sail/ Inner and outer Ocean" will bring him, with Malope's death, to the destruction of his desired "land of similes" (CP, 121). The poem is deeply aware of the dead Malope as the dark wound at the centre of its own aspirations to recover the figural imagination and move "To the rhythm of profound analogies" (CP, 121). In this way, even as Belmonte bravely performs his analogies, the poem tells itself that it has endured its own version of the Fall.

This sense of a post-lapsarian poetry is reinforced as the "Proem" for Part Two self-consciously declares that its own high, frail purpose is "out of fashion" (CP, 142). In calling "for the gift of tongues and prophecy", Belmonte is calling on the Holy Spirit to inspire his work, and also sharing McAuley's view that great poetry originates in metaphysical and religious truths. If great poetry is difficult for Belmonte, it is because of a failure of metaphysical imagination, the loss of

> the faith, the will, the love,
> The energy of intellectual passion
> That built the greatness which we have resigned. (CP, 142)

Even so, Belmonte's is not an easy espousal of traditional forms. He acknowledges the inherent difficulties of narrative verse itself, of learning how

> To shut the sounding Ocean in a book
> By verbal spells; charm to an ampersand
> Each curling seashore; teach rough waves the dance
> Of formal metre - might one not sooner chance

To draw our huge Leviathan with a hook? (CP, 141)

He acknowledges as well the difficulty of writing a Christian poem, where the voyage becomes a "solemn rite", a baptismal passage into the redeemed world. This difficulty is attributed not merely to "the age", with its "demonic powers"; Belmonte also notes the difficulty of mapping "spiritual cosmography" and of integrating his story within the biblical mythic pattern. As he then proceeds to defy literary fashion and to celebrate the poem's ordering influence on one whose "life's concerns have seemed like ships dispersed/ On different coasts without a rendezvous" (CP, 142), Belmonte continues to avoid a simplistic stance. The dignity and difficulty of the poetry to which he aspires expose a restless relationship between the poet's will and his failing world:

> So lightly may the poet's will refuse
> To hold the difficult height of the sublime;
> Soon tiring, soon distracted, it pursues
> Some lesser fancy, trifling for a rhyme.
> O God, amidst distractions manifold,
> And in a failing world, let me uphold
> A wonder-working icon against time! (CP, 143)

Here, as often in McAuley's work, heroic will and stoic faith provide a way of defying the dark time, of resisting its invitation to disorder and despair. It is the dying Quiros who reveals the theology of redemption which reciprocates such an imaginative structure: he invokes the via crucis notion that one person's sacrifice may be of benefit to others - if in an unseen and mysterious manner. Such suffering may participate in the redemptive suffering of Christ and may, therefore, mediate its eschatological efficacy to the fallen world and its incomplete history. His final hope in poetry is illumined by this theology:

> "Terra Australis, heartland of the South,
> In the Great Lauds your myriad creatures raise
> May there be never wanting the singer's mouth

> To give words to that canticle of praise
> Which from all beings pours forth to the Spirit.
> And from our broken toil may you inherit
> A vision to transform your latter days." (CP, 176)

If we do inherit a vision, it is not simply related to a theology of divine providence. Rather, that theology helps construct a restless relationship between history and eschatology, itself reinforced by a comparable relationship between despair and hope. In this way Captain Quiros is deeply informed by McAuley's Catholic belief in original disobedience and sin and in redemption through the cross of Christ. In the story of Old Adam it finds rehearsed the problem of human will and its relationship to evil. In the story of New Adam it finds a promise, often derived from "broken toil", that the will may be elevated by grace and achieve, if not paradise on earth, an endeavour of honourable love. However, while the language of Catholic theology gives McAuley a new way of saying this, he has, in many ways, been saying it since his first volume. Remembering how Belmonte invoked Aldebaran as his guiding star, I want now to return to Under Aldebaran: to show how the fundamental framework of McAuley's religious imagination is established there, before his conversion to Catholicism, and so to argue a profound reciprocity operating between "faith" and "sensibility" within his religious imagination.

SECTION FOUR

THE ARTESIAN HEART

Quiros sails under Aldebaran. He is, as "The Inception of the Poem" (CP, 108) acknowledges, a theme of McAuley's youth and there are significant indications that Under Aldebaran is already shaping the world that Quiros will discover. Quiros is explicitly introduced in "Terra Australis" (CP, 16), where McAuley announces his own exploration of "mythical Australia", his ambition to discover profound correspondences between the land's contours and those of the heart. At other times, Quiros is present by association - but the associations are very strong. For instance, McAuley's "Jesus" (CP, 20) - a figure of solitude, sacrifice, and destiny - is very close to Quiros.

"Henry the Navigator" (CP, 21-23) anticipates Captain Quiros: Henry has maps "where the soul/ Finds its similitudes" (CP, 22); his adventurous idealism is endangered by the disobedience and greed of his subordinates (who seek Moorish cargoes instead of honour); his mild government is eventually rewarded when Gil Eannes gathers sufficient willpower to overcome doubt and sail beyond the known world. Furthermore, the analogy McAuley draws between Henry's age and the modern world is very similar to that drawn between the modern world and the voyage of Quiros:

> Our age is early too, and must prepare
> Its new projections, of great-circle routes
> Into an unknown world. Thus our despair
> It put to the Straits again, although in air;
> And the old terrors take new attributes. (CP, 22)

In addition, the apocalyptic figures which feature in Quiros's dying vision have earlier counterparts in poems like "The Blue Horses" (CP, 7) and "The Incarnation of Sirius" (CP, 23-24). The former also

expresses a conflict between aspiration and achievement:

> But we are never in possession
> and nothing stays at our command. (CP, 8)

This is a tension central to Captain Quiros - as, indeed, to the whole of McAuley's work. "Chorale" (CP, 25-27) has a similar structure: while it celebrates the possibility of achieving, in art, a world much like Malope's with its "algebraic/ Choir of symbols" (CP, 26), it also resists paradisal illusions and reminds itself, in terms a voyager would find congenial:

> And yet our praise, intent upon one truth,
> Distorts the truth as maps do in projection:
> The centre gives a perfect azimuth
> But other bearings have a false direction. (CP, 27)

"Celebration of Love" (CP, 34-37) reveals love as the new continent that "Awaits a bold devout discoverer" (CP, 35), but, the lover's hope is explicitly described as "Alternate" (CP, 34) and his aspirations to union are held in play with his recognition that "by continual growth love keeps us strangers" (CP, 36). It is "The Incarnation of Sirius" which links this with the "sad alternate fire" of Aldebaran (CP, 24) - a description which, of course, is still working in Belmonte's vision of Aldebaran,

> Guiding the heart through memory and desire,
> The dark alternate tenses of our days. (CP, 146)

More importantly, both Under Aldebaran and Captain Quiros experience this "alternate" character of life as a threshold for hope, even if it is a disciplined and astringent hope: as Captain Quiros believes "the promise does not fail" (CP, 175), so "Envoi" claims that beauty "does not wholly fail" (CP, 6).

This suggests more than a continuity of diction and imagery. The continuity is generated by and contained within important imaginative patterns - and these, if explored, will manifest the fundamental framework of McAuley's religious imagination, as well as the reciprocity operating between this imaginative foundation and his Catholic belief. In Under Aldebaran there is a dialogue taking place between a deeply ingrained sense of imminent disorder and a persistent search for transcendent meaning. In a poetry which is everywhere empowered by his own reasoned will, McAuley draws from the artesian heart whatever he can of beauty, and rescues from a faintly alien, even hostile world of remote disorder whatever he can of order and meaning.

"Envoi", in which McAuley explores his identity as an Australian poet, opens with a sense of remoteness and disorder, and closes with an uneasy tenderness towards the land and the "fretful seed" it resentfully bears. Poet and land are unified by a sense of common ambivalence: for both any triumphs are hard-won, for both they are triumphs over waste and indolence, and for both the truth is born in bareness:

> And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,
> I know its contractions, waste, and sprawling indolence;
> They are in me and its triumphs are my own,
> Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence. (CP, 6)

As land and consciousness choose each other's shapes and tones, we see demonstrated the active receptivity of McAuley's imaginative process. Details of the observing landscape are selectively observed, and the interaction supports a feeling of distant intimacy appropriate to both speaker and landscape.

> There the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
> And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillsides;
> And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs,
> Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides.

> Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
> A futile heart within a fair periphery; (CP, 6)

The opening stress on "there" immediately communicates a sense of distance, yet the "blue-green gums" and the brown sheep poking at dreams are introduced with a tone of familiarity. The geographical contrast between Australia's central desert and its coastal sea is internalised as a contrast between the troubled, private heart and the public appearance: "A futile heart within a fair periphery". The poet is an observer in a landscape to which he has difficulty belonging. His place is difficult to define: the fringe, the hillside, the shifting airs. These are places of transition. At the same time, these places of transition exist in the poem alongside the "Salty sunken desert". There is transition, but there is also a central and enduring deadness. The poem resists and contains its own faintly sterile heart. While "disorder" gives a falling, deadening inflection, the third line picks up the rhythm and employs it as an invocatory ritual - "in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs". The ritual, however, is mildly subversive: what it summons is "faint sterility". McAuley's ritual invokes, as if often does, a contained negative experience of life.

The artesian heart is, therefore, the dominant image. The water from the artesian bore is hard and bitter, but it does bring life to the centre where there is a deep reluctance. In the final stanza, McAuley associates this image with the problem of individual will.

> Beauty is order and good chance in the artesian heart
> And does not wholly fail, though we impede;
> Though the reluctant and uneasy land resent
> The gush of waters, the lean plough, the fretful seed. (CP, 6)

While beauty may be the result of order, which implies positive willing, it is also the result of good chance, which is involuntary on our part (and which may later be called "Providence"). The restraint we feel in the line, "And does not wholly fail, though we impede", is typical of McAuley. We may generate a negative force either through reluctance (which is our failure to will) or resentment (which is our negative willing), but we cannot prevent Beauty's final, hard-won triumph, a triumph somehow beyond our will. Transcending the conflict between disorder and order, the final victory goes to "The gush of waters, the lean plough, the fretful seed". This is the remote order. Beauty and order are believed in because they do "not wholly fail" - the negative utterance is contained in a verbal discipline, as the negative sense of existence is contained in discipline of hope. The poet's pen has become a "lean plough".

In "Terra Australis" McAuley's heartland is again charged with both positive and negative forces. The reader is asked to voyage within and is guaranteed a correspondence between the external world and the internal: a "land of similes". Once again, the poet's union with the land is one of uneasy tenderness. While the wattle is present as the healer of doubt, the contortions of the angophora, which represent the preaching gestures of Moses, give us a prophet disfigured by his destiny. While there is something menacing about the white cockatoo which "screams with demoniac pain", the magpies assume the camaraderie of mates: "There you come home; the magpies call you Jack/ And whistle like larrikins at you from the trees." As the poem's focus moves towards the inland, the images suggest a growing solitude. The emu is insolent and will not say what mystery it bears - but its place is "between" and "on the edge". McAuley is at his best summoning the desert's ascetic loveliness:

> But northward in valleys of the fiery Goat
> Where the sun like a centaur vertically shoots
> His raging arrows with unerring aim,
> Stand the ecstatic solitary pyres
> Of unknown lovers, featureless with flame. (CP, 16)

Red ant-hills are transfused with the sun's light. Yet why should this lead to a combination of "ecstatic" and "solitary", of ecstasy and "pyre"? It is noticeable that the landscape is wasted away and becomes, as if by a contemplative detachment, itself "featureless with flame". The closing sense of pain and joy is close to Brennan's image of "the cicada's torture-point of song". ("Fire in the heavens.") We already have, therefore, the dominant elements in McAuley's religious consciousness: the contemplative detachment of the via negativa and the ambivalence, under Aldebaran, of the heart's will.

In "Celebration of Love" (CP, 34-37), love is ambivalent. This poem opens as a song of praise and communion. The landscape announces love, and the communion of the lovers is mirrored and vindicated by a communion between the external and internal worlds:

> the living day's
> External presences attend and bless
> Her coming with an inward happiness. (CP, 34)

Creatures, wild, natural, free, join in the celebration and contribute a tone which is playfully exuberant. The experience of isolation is incorporated as a way of strengthening love. Love itself is pictured as a voyage, a discovery of the self. It is the epitome of creation. It is also recreative, recovering innocence and order. Despite such grandeur, love is at ease with the familiar and the ordinary, as the poem's final transition indicates. Yet there are subversive

---

1. Christopher Brennan, Selected Poems, chosen by G.A. Wilkes, Angus & Robertson, 1979, p. 57.

elements. Even in this apparently serene ceremony, McAuley is resisting a violent and negative impulse. The almost desperate avowal that "every living fruit the soul can bear/ is born of patience and despair" is supported by a belief that the "soul/ Is born a solitary". This sense of a barely contained negativity is given forceful utterance in the third stanza:

> Until we made life new I had not known
> What force lies in our being to defeat
> The emptiness that seems an active power
> Assimilating life. But we have grown
> So full of being that we can complete
> The gap in things where time and fear devour. (CP, 35)

This existential sense of world-woundedness[1], coupled with a desire for some redeeming order, is basic to McAuley's religious imagination. Not only does it inform the explicitly Christian poem, "Jesus", but it also helps explain his early interest in mythic figures whose divinely-inspired destinies link their service of others with suffering as well as with honourable heroism.

"Jesus" opens with a sense of quiet familiarity, focused by the tone of "Touching" and the image of "workman's hand":

> Touching Ezekiel his workman's hand
> Kindled the thick and thorny characters;
> And seraphim that seemed a thousand eyes,
> Flying leopards, wheels and basilisks,
> Creatures of power and of judgment, soared
> From his finger-point, emblazoning the skies. (CP, 20)

Here the familiar world has very quickly been revealed "Under the aspect of another meaning"[2]. The literal description of the Hebrew script - "thick and thorny characters" - becomes a symbolic hint of

---

1. I am following R.F. Brissenden's argument that McAuley's sense of despair "has nothing to do with the specific problems of the twentieth century", but relates to something "inherent in the inscrutable order of the universe". Cf. "The Wounded Hero", Southerly, 4, 1972, 270.
2. "One Tuesday in Summer", Surprises of the Sun, CP, 199.

Christ's redemptive suffering. This description also reminds us of the prophetic contortions of the angophora in "Terra Australis". Jesus's own prophetic consciousness is then conveyed in lines which recall the visionary quality of "The Incarnation of Sirius". At the same time, McAuley is careful to connect his description of Christ's visionary experience with a world of sense and use. As the poem releases the strange, awesome figures of an undisguised and immediate revelation, it also keeps itself grounded in "workman's hand" and "fingerpoint", still recalling the quiet familiarity of the opening, and modifying any impulse towards a remote, abstract symbolism. For all his apocalyptic status, this Christ remains a carpenter's son.

Even so, the apocalyptic language, mediating Christ's divine consciousness, does threaten to pull both poem and Christ away from the more familiar world. It creates an almost poignant sense of the vast interior distances which constitute that consciousness - distances which tend to make him an ideal figure isolated in the real world he is destined to redeem and love. As the second stanza turns us back towards the world of ordinary animals and flowers, this sense of Christ's distance is heightened rather than diminished.

> Then turning from the book he rose and walked
> Among the stones and beasts and flowers of earth;
> They turned their muted faces to their Lord,
> Their real faces, seen by God alone;
> And people moved before him undisguised;
> He thrust his speech among them like a sword. (CP, 20)

As McAuley describes Christ's relationship with people, there is strongly present a quality which persists throughout his work: a sense of distant communion. He phrases the experience negatively: "people moved before him undisguised". This use of negatives to create an affirmative awareness and stance is one of the most significant aspects of McAuley's style, which has its own via negativa. Here too

people stand before Christ in attitudes of passivity and loneliness - attitudes which are, as it were, unredeemed counterparts of his sense of destiny and solitude. He alone can known them (for God alone knows the soul born a solitary); he can know them because they cannot hide from him. They do not know him. Any possibility of an easier, closer communion is undone by the sense of distance which the poem confirms and expands with its closing line:

> And when a dove came to his hand he knew
> That hell was opening behind its wings.
> He thanked the messenger and let it go;
> Spoke to the dust, the fishes and the twelve
> As if they understood him equally,
> And told them nothing that they wished to know. (CP, 20)

While the dove's terrible purpose distances it from its more usual symbolic function, the last line acknowledges at once Christ's challenging, close perception and some reluctance or failure of will which makes his listeners draw back from what he says. In this way it extends and completes the play between intimacy and distance which informs McAuley's imagining of Christ. As he contains, but does not reduce, Christ's remoteness, McAuley is transforming the kind of feeling which structures itself in phrases like "love keeps us strangers"[1]. into a religious perception.

Since that perception is still illumined by Aldebaran's "sad alternate fire", it is not surprising that McAuley uses the biblical sources for "Jesus" in a way which increases its underlying ambivalence. In the first two lines we seem to have Christ reading the scriptures - an incident such as that recorded by Luke, where Christ reads in the synagogue at Nazareth.[2]. There, however, Christ is reading Isaiah and the text - to do with liberation - is very consoling. McAuley does

---

1. "Celebration of Love", CP, 36.
2. Luke, 4:16-22.

not take that option. Instead, he uses Ezekiel, the visionary and apocalyptic prophet of exile, isolated within a rebellious society, and preaching against false prophets. This easily authorises the "wheels and basilisks" of the first stanza and introduces a feeling that God is a power poised on the edge of fierceness. This is then modified by the almost Franciscan attention to "the stones and beasts and flowers of earth", which recalls gospel texts on divine providence.[1] However, the consolations derived from meditation on the natural world are brief: "He thrust his speech among them like a sword." This line reestablishes a complex toughness in McAuley's portrait of Christ, as it catches up a number of references which modify any image of a mild Messiah. While primarily referring to the word of God as sharper than any two-edged sword,[2] McAuley is also presenting the Christ who said he brought, not peace, but the sword.[3] This in turn serves as a disturbing reminder that throughout Ezekiel, the sword is the instrument of God's destructive fury. Nor does the dove displace these darker associations: not only does Noah's sign of peace become Christ's sign of the terrible suffering to which the spirit leads, but doves are also associated with sacrifice.[4] There is, arguably, an even darker resonance at work: in Ezekiel God says of the faithless Israelites, "I shall slaughter them all like doves of the valley each for his sin."[5] Such associations, especially as they operate within a context of verbal restraint and implication, build up, powerfully, the sense of some incommunicable pain. Even the possible consolation of speaking with "the dust, the fishes and the twelve" is now denied him, since this possibility moves so finally into the close, where his mission meets their reluctance.

---

1. For example, Matthew, 6:25-34.
2. Hebrews, 4:12.
3. Matthew, 10:34.
4. Cf. Luke, 2:25.
5. Ezekiel, 7:16.

If this combination of inner pain and public power makes McAuley's Christ something of a wounded hero, it also encourages us to examine how "faith" and "sensibility" reciprocate in "Philoctetes" and "The Hero and the Hydra", where some wounded heroes of classical mythology embody McAuley's concern with coherence and chaos, guilt and redemptive responsibility. These heroes act between a sense of "care" and a sense of "despair" (to anticipate the highly significant rhyme employed in "Music Late at Night"). As Brissenden has remarked:

> The main figures in these myths - Prometheus, Heracles, Chiron and Philoctetes - are all heroic, strong and benevolent. Moreover the courses of action towards which their divinely given courage or wisdom, their sense of justice and loyalty, their basic good nature and philanthropy, impel them are seen ultimately both as having a beneficent result and as being part of some total process which is not without significance. Yet at the same time what they do also involves them and sometimes those whom they most wish to help in a degree of injury and pain which seems calamitously disproportionate.[1]

In "Philoctetes" (CP, 39-41), Philoctetes, exiled on the island of Lemnos, wants to make his world cohere, but cannot quite decide whether his wound is the result of personal carelessness or divine design. Thinking of how the honour intended him by Heracles has become his downfall, he is attracted to a general irony: "- The highest gift more readily destroys us -" (CP, 39). Yet he also refers the blame to himself and his "careless hand". This is why Philoctetes is so concerned to "name" his guilt: he cannot reconcile his sense of its large obscurity with his experience of its precise individuality.

> Sometimes in dreams
> My soul is le.d before unknown tribunals
> Where I must plead before a faceless judge
> Whose silence is the weight of my own guilt,
> Which, though a thousand witnesses accuse me,
> Is never named, but none the less condemned.
> Where in this waste is there a tongue to cry
> My guilt before my face, that I may know? (CP, 39)

---

1. "The Wounded Hero", Southerly, 4, 1972, 271.

When, finally, Philoctetes is confronted with the possibility of returning with Achilles and Ulysses to Troy and of being restored to fellowship, this tension is still unresolved. He is not at all consoled by Heracles's promise that Achilles and Ulysses will name his guilt: because they will name it "not as it is,/ But as it seems to them" and because the redemption they offer recognises only part of the problem and is only "Purgation in men's eyes" (CP, 41). Philoctetes ends as a figure of "hard choice", keenly aware of the inscrutable patterns represented by words such as "myth" and "fate" and wanting the objectified coherence such forces provide, yet also aware that these forces can destroy or at least inhibit individual freedom and responsibility, particularly in the way they can become "excuses" for evil. Philoctetes articulates the shaping problem of McAuley's poetry:

> Hard choice, between this barren pain upon a rock,
> And fellowship of kind and hope of home.
> The oracles, the myth itself,
> Require me; and when I turn my back
> I feel the iron hinges of a fate
> Turn in my soul,
> And loud accusing voices fill the air.
> - The myths are lies.
> Men must either bear their guilt and weakness
> Or be a servile instrument to powers
> That darken knowledge and corrupt the heart.
> I shall not go:
> Let them resolve the legend as they will. (CP, 41)

If the later poetry accepts the Christian myth as true, this does not so much resolve this question of the relationship between evil, order and human will, as relocate its creative possibilities and its language.

"The Hero and the Hydra" (CP, 45-49)[1]. is also concerned with the

---

1. Although these poems were first published as a whole in A Vision of Ceremony, I am considering them here because they were written in 1947-49, and because they anticipate McAuley's commitment to Christian myth.

precarious possibility of coherence in a world where irrational forces (both human and divine) continually wound the will. Prometheus, giving heavenly fire, intends "to make man rational" (CP, 50), but Zeus prefers to rule by deceit and fear. Their disagreement creates discord in human history, where the Promethean fire "Inflames (the) will and multiplies desire" (CP, 50). As Io finds Prometheus bound to his punishment, he tells her how in "this exhausted hour" gods and men see clearly "the irrational knot/ Of flesh and feeling" which writhes in their inner "empty darkness" (CP, 45). Io has herself been punished: because she aspired to union with Zeus she has aroused the jealousy of Hera, lost her childhood innocence, suffered a "bestial transformation", and incurred the curse of wandering the earth. Since Prometheus seems calm in his suffering, she asks him to share the secret of his hope with her. At first, he projects a world redeemed, where gods and humans will cooperate. He promises Io that she will bear a son, Heracles, who will break the "cyclic torment" which he, Prometheus, suffers and represents. This promise is almost immediately undone. As if the vulture returns on cue, suffering renews itself and Prometheus becomes the giver of "blind hopes, that blow the sparks up from the fire,/ Contriving many arts in search of rest" (CP, 48). He has to fall back on a defiant form of hope as he invokes the phoenix to image a future age of peace when

> the meek will learn
> In suffering and patient thought to share
> The task of gods, and hold a world in care. (CP, 51)

That age, however, will mean the destruction of Zeus's rule by deceit and fear, and the cooperation of divine and human wills. It will also mean the reunion of Prometheus and Ceremony, who once provided law, dance, courtesy and tradition, the "inborn rituals that can save/ From self-destructive fear" (CP, 51), but who "fled/ And left her former

works untenanted" (CP, 52) as humankind more and more identified with disorder and abandoned rituals and myths.

Chiron too remembers a wonderful and pastoral age when the senses and their pleasures were naturally attuned, but is wounded by the "blind frenzy" of Heracles, his friend. While he sees that such a destructive possibility brings about the need for law, and while he offers his own death "To free the Titan from his banishment" (CP, 54), Chiron also sees that the Promethean heritage of rationality, combined with the stoic will of Heracles, will not be enough to recapture the sinless, sensual earth he loved. He sees himself located within a much larger pattern, where "guilty care" substitutes for freedom and encourages despair:

> Men will bewail my fate when I am gone
> And in it see the pattern of their own;
> Their poisoned instinct writhes incurable
> Within the ancient cave of touch and smell;
> They feel the Hydra-taint of guilty care
> Rankle their joy and bring them to despair. (CP, 55)

Chiron cannot guarantee to break the cycle of this despair. Though he sacrifices his immortality, he does not expect the efficacy of his sacrifice to extend beyond this individual instance and initiate an all-inclusive economy of regeneration or resurrection. This awareness is mediated through the contrast he draws between the dry stalks and the regenerating corn, a contrast which incorporates the gospel's image of the grain dying to give life as well as McAuley's emerging appreciation of the difference between stoic and Christian hope:

> In winter when the owl sat humped with cold
> I came down to their firesides and told
> Stories of gods and heroes; and often then
> Would tell of one who brought down fire to men,
> And how, before the Hero sets him free,
> Some god must give his immortality
>
> And die: not as the sacred ear of corn
> Lies in darkness waiting to be reborn,

> But as the dry stalk falls and vanishes.
> A dear exchange it seemed - nor did I guess
> What Hydra-poisoned arrow, from what bow,
> Would send me willing to the shades below. (CP, 53)

Similarly, Heracles dies with the knowledge that he "fought the monsters of the lower world", but that his victory was momentary, merely "Clearing a little space, and time, and light/ For men to live in peace" (CP, 58). Here the only response available to death is "the fierce mercy of the flame's embrace" as Heracles is burned to release him from the poisoned shirt of Nessus. Even so, the structure of evil is remarkably similar to that employed by the Christian myth of the Fall. Heracles has in some sense participated in the evil by first killing Nessus. Deianira has been tempted to cooperate with evil because she hoped for greater love. Heracles himself recognises the duality of good and evil when he declares "heaven is divided" (CP, 58). The mystery of evil, therefore, is related to forces greater than human knowledge and malignant will. Heracles asks his followers not to seek revenge for his death because he senses that it is not merely the result of individual choice:

> I cannot search the weave, but partly see
> More error will be found in it than crime.
> When heaven persecutes it clothes its will
> In ignorance and unintended acts.
> I strove to please the gods, but their demands
> Are set in conflict; heaven is divided. (CP, 58)

"The Hero and the Hydra" concludes, in "The Tomb of Heracles" (CP, 59), with McAuley's well-known disavowal of stoicism, as both "superb and desolate". Though admirable, the heroism of Heracles cannot transcend the "classic anguish" of his world, where "rigid fate" ensures that every heroic resistance must circle back to death's disorder. If McAuley's conversion to Catholicism allows him to break through this impasse, it does not mean that he leaves behind the tension evidenced here between heroic effort (hope) and death's

disorder (despair). That tension is relocated: in the doctrines of Original Sin and Redemption, and in the distance between the great ceremony of traditional symbolism and the more private believer of "Private devotions" who treads "Between the reasons for despair".[1] In a sense, Bradley anticipates this when, remarking on how McAuley's use of myth is part of a search for objectifying ritual, he recognises that "the same contradictions exist within this form as in the previous poems" [2] of Under Aldebaran. Smith, too, implies something of the reciprocity between belief and poetry which I would want to emphasise when he writes:

> In tracing McAuley's thought up to this stage it becomes clear that stoicism is the only possible and logical attitude in front of a belief in eternal recurrence and the cyclic nature of time; his conversion marks the breakthrough from this Greek conception of time to an eschatological reaffirmation of an order in life and the universe . . . If one looks at his work as a whole one notices that his conversion is reflected in his poetry not as a turning to new themes, but as a penetration to the essential significance of the themes and a resolution of the tensions that have always preoccupied him . . .[3]

While I would argue that the tensions are more relocated than truly resolved, Smith appreciates the sense in which McAuley's conversion derives from his poetry. Bradley touches on the analogies operating between "The Hero and the Hydra" and the myth of the Fall:

> The epic fragments, pressed to prefigure a Christian symbolism, are made to yield complex instances of the function of guilt and rejection of guilt in the life of heroic endeavour, especially in the image of the Hydra, that taint of unredeemed desire or original sin, which drives the Hero to madness and despair.[4]

While I would suggest that the Greek myth also presses "to prefigure a Christian symbolism", this demonstrates the interaction between

---

1. Music Late at Night, p. 6.
2. David Bradley, "James McAuley: The Landscape of the Heart", G. Dutton, ed., The Literature of Australia, p. 451.
3. Vivian Smith, James McAuley, pp. 17-18.
4. Bradley, "The Landscape of the Heart", p. 452.

Captain Quiros, A Vision of Ceremony and Under Aldebaran: the drama enacted between disorder and hope, and within that the central role of the will - whether this drama is presented in terms of Greek or Christian mythology, whether it examines the stoic or the graced will.

This commitment to coherence can be seen emerging in the earlier, apocalyptic poems, "The Blue Horses" and "The Incarnation of Sirius". These poems are preparing to reject any poetics, any metaphysics, of unrestrained freedom. They show McAuley's fascination with and rejection of what he was later to call "the Magian heresy" (as well as his reaction to the destructive possibilities of the war years). Though they are obviously not as visible as in A Vision of Ceremony and The End of Modernity, notions of metaphysical reason and disciplined will can be heard, as it were, in the background, waiting for their cue.

"The Blue Horses" (CP, 7-9) is the closest McAuley comes to affording allegiance to Dionysian forces in his poetry. In his own words, the poem expresses "that animal imaginative passion which creates the forms of a culture but will not rest in them, eternally invoking chaos against the simplifications of reality on which custom depends".[1]

It is also a poem which cannot quite make up its imagination, cannot quite believe in unfettered inspiration. The final stanza demonstrates this uncertainty - the poet is trying to see with Blake's inner eye and also to accompany Prufrock and friends along some real, industrial streets:

---

1. Under Aldebaran, p. 75.

The hoof-beats thunder in my ears.
Leave to the councillors the garbage-plot,
The refuse and the greasy tins
Of this slum-culture - these are not
The area where love begins.

The brutal and the vile are set
As watchers at the gate,
But the Blue Horses scream aloud:
A sudden movement shakes the crowd
Stampeded on the hooves of fate. (CP, 9)

In "The Incarnation of Sirius" (CP, 23-24), the revolutionary hope of a millenium is reduced to a moment of bloody destruction and abortion. Then order returns. Peter Coleman argues that this poem is symptomatic of a new freedom in McAuley's work, a recantation of his anarchic and revolutionary ideas.[1]

Coleman's is essentially a reading of the poem as ideology, showing the poet's new intellectual certainty. Where does the final image of Aldebaran, so powerful and so disturbing, fit into this reading?

And then the vision sank, bloody and aborted,
The stars that with rebellion had consorted
Fled back in silence to their former stations.
Over the giant face of dreaming nations

The centuries-thick coverlet was drawn.
Upon the huddled breast Aldebaran
Still glittered with its sad alternate fire:
Blue as of memory, red as of desire. (CP, 24)

While this poem may advance an anti-millenarian position, that position is itself informed by an implicit myth of Eden Lost. In McAuley's conception, the error of millenarian hopes is precisely their denial of the fallen world, which then engenders their belief in a false (entirely natural) order and an inverted redemption (to suit the "great anagram of God"):

---

1. The Heart of James McAuley, pp. 29-31.

> For the millenial instinct of new flight
> Resolved the antinomy that fixed their light;
> And, echoing in the troubled soul of Earth,
> Quickened a virgin's womb, to bring to birth
>
> What scarce was human: a rude avatar
> That glistened with the enclosed wrath of a star.
> The woman died in pangs, before she had kissed
> The monstrous form of God's antagonist. (CP, 23)

Though McAuley himself often feels that the forces which threaten his poetic and religious order are external, the more significant forces are, in fact, internal. This disorder may be contained by the poetry, but it cannot be denied. "Chorale" (CP, 25-27) tells of the transforming, healing function of art. The thirst for order, the search for symbolism, is given its most ideal expression:

> The universe becomes an algebraic
> Choir of symbols, dance and counterdance,
> Colours and forms in shimmering mosaic:
> Man enters it as an inheritance. (CP, 26)

However, there is still an undertone of uncertainty: such praise easily "Distorts the truth as maps do in projection" (CP, 27); the seraph holds his lamp "above the time/ And places of our deepening despair" (CP, 27). Nor does the poem close in certainty - the final stanza gives the sense of the "Seraph in the soul" as someone who heroically resists the gathering forces of disintegration:

> When the delirium swirls within the gyre,
> And comets die, and iron voices wake,
> Be witness to the sun; and mounting higher
> Hold the lamp steady, though creation shake. (CP, 27)

Significantly, McAuley's imagination here reveals the hierarchical impulse which is correlative to his emphases on disciplined will, metaphysical reason, and the supremacy of the sacred. The seraph exercises control from "above", having climbed "The orders of creation as a stair" (CP, 27). If this supernatural force is called upon a little desperately, it may be because McAuley is so deeply aware of

how creation can shudder from its forms.

Poetry which values and expresses the power of will as McAuley's does courts the danger of a lofty coherence, where the rational dimension of poetry (as of experience, as of faith) has its authority privileged, with imagination assuming a role which is more illustrative than genuinely expressive. If I see this as a problem, it is not because I am assuming that poetry must avoid certitude, but because I am arguing that poems like "Envoi", "Chorale", "Gnostic Prelude" and "The Incarnation of Sirius" establish uncertainty and despair as integral and enlivening elements within McAuley's particular search for adequate symbolism and ceremonial form.

Indeed, in these poems, a kind of repression - which I prefer to call "restraint" - operates expressively and mimes, in its interaction of discipline and freedom, the structural sense of artesian hope which underpins so much of McAuley's best work. This becomes more evident as, with Surprises of the Sun, McAuley's religious imagination renews contact with its lyric foundation, and as, in Music Late at Night and Time Given, his landscape lyrics express, with a force at once terrible and tender, the little that can be said. Yet the seeds of this development are present already in Under Aldebaran: in a little poem like "At Bungendore" (CP, 5), where the underriding tension between hope and despair expresses itself in the speaker's disciplined stance between the world's good will and his own sorrow.

"At Bungendore" assumes a real and objective world which operates according to natural law, and from which humankind has been alienated by some unspecified failure of will. In this way, it too anticipates

the myth of the Fall and the theology of Original Sin. More importantly, however, it anticipates the lyric mode which will mature in McAuley's later work. Particulars are flatly observed, yet given a pressure of symbolism so that a line, such as "A far-off bird-cry falls", becomes suggestive and mysterious. Details are placed side by side in the poem, details which have no immediate similarity: lamb, rain, bird-cry, peach-buds. Then, a hidden thread is discovered. Yet, as if to keep hope restrained, the poet finds his own sorrow even as he finds the world's secret:

> The blossoms have their will;
> I would that I had mine:
>
> That earth no more might seem,
> When spring shall clot the bough,
> Irised by the gleam
> Of tears, as it does now. (CP, 5)

"Revenant" (CP, 19) also anticipates what will happen when the poetry finds a receptive stillness before the particularities of immediate experience. The speaker is at once identified with and isolated from the scene (described with the intimate observations of a stranger). Yet, as the simple objects are named with reverence, the pressure of reality builds - until one feels another world coming through, full of connotations and correspondences:

> And here's a plate
> With a bread-crust turned to mould; a glass
> Stained with the dregs of wine. That's all.

This perception somehow transforms the poet, who is now liberated from the past and its terrors: "One need not even be afraid./ There's nothing." A world of correspondences has been evoked to show that there is "nothing", and the poet now discards that world of immediate sensations and goes off as a solitary, "Walking like a man that has been freed". In its theme of reconciliation, its conjunction of

familiar and strange, and its mood of contemplative detachment, this poem anticipates the religious awareness of "In the Huon Valley" and "Fingal Valley".

If there are profound correspondences operating between McAuley's poetry of belief and his pre-conversion work, these are not simply the result of some happy chance where belief finds experience amiably receptive to its frames. Rather, the receptivity of Under Aldebaran is more active, and it is reciprocated by a similar receptivity in Captain Quiros and A Vision of Ceremony. The correspondences are, therefore, being generated from within the imagination itself, as it integrates and mediates between uttered experience, myth and dogma. It is because of this that I describe the religious character of McAuley's poetry in terms of the interactive convergence of these elements. At the heart of Under Aldebaran is the hope for some coherence which might, largely by an act of will, contain and sustain its metaphysical intuition of despair. This hope receives meaning from and gives meaning to the myth of the Fall, a myth whose imaginative structures disclose analogies which both comfort and challenge the stoic will. Not only does the myth objectify disorder and deepen the tension between its voluntary and involuntary character, but it also reaffirms the terrible responsibility of freedom. It tells its story of a fallen world and so confirms, more profoundly, the anguish of history, even as its eschatological direction demands of hope an even stricter discipline. This interaction is itself extended into and encouraged by those Catholic doctrines which McAuley selects for special emphasis: the doctrines of Original Sin and of Christ's redemptive function in the sacraments.

If I have also argued that the certainties of "A Letter to John Dryden" are dangerous to McAuley's religious imagination, it is not because I am implying superficial distinctions between "dogma" and "life". It is because I am trying to name the power working in poems like "Pieta", "Morning Voluntary" and "Parish Church" - poems which are less certain, but more integrally religious, poems which refuse to employ a religious symbolism which is merely consolatory. McAuley's public-polemic mode can weaken those tensions which structure his imagining and can then actually inhibit the convergence of uttered experience, myth and dogma. Rather than imply that this temptation enters his poetry with his conversion, I have tried to show that it operates in moments when Under Aldebaran opts for remote order. Yet I have also suggested that this first volume, in a poem like "At Bungendore", predicts an eventual, liberating convergence of lyric and religious inclinations. In order to develop this argument, it is necessary now to turn to Surprises of the Sun.

SECTION FIVE

THROUGH MEMORY AND DESIRE

While A Vision of Ceremony is more inclined to locate disorder in the individual will and to counteract it with universal meanings and "old mysterious symbols", Surprises of the Sun is more aware that disorder is not always voluntary and that ceremony may visit the informal moment. While these poems also evidence an attempt to incorporate more contemporary concerns and styles, they return to what might be described as the earliest landscape of McAuley's religious imagination. The promise of "Envoi" is recovered and renewed as they lay bare the private ground of the remote disorder and break it open with the lean plough. Moreover, as they make a positive art out of a negative situation, these poems also confirm and strengthen the receptivity, detachment, and bare attentiveness which characterise McAuley's maturing religious imagination.

With "Numbers and Makes" (CP, 199) the poetry returns to its origins and critiques its basic instinct to frame disorder within the disciplined search for meaning. The speaker, who as a child once tried to make order from the random details of passing trains and cars, now resists an impulse to betray historical fact with symbolic truth: "Why change the memory into metaphors/ That solitary child would disavow?" This indicates a new reverence for the particular, coupled with an awareness that a "selective stress upon certain details" [1] can suggest an adequate symbolism. McAuley's technique of selective stress respects the tension between the particular and the general. For this reason, it is a kind of symbolism which offers a

---

1. Cf. McAuley's Introduction to his Selected Poems in the "Australian Poets" Series.

middle path between too much meaning and too little, between the order of doctrine and the order of private impressions and sensations. The denial of metaphor itself becomes a characteristic kind of affirmation:

> Pure research,
> Disinterested - but why, and into what?
> There was no question then, no answer now. (CP, 199)

There was no question: the sensations were sufficient "answer" in themselves; they rendered the question unnecessary. Now, the adult experiences dissatisfaction: a sense of a limited world, coupled with a desire to order sensations, to link them with some transcendent "why" and "what". The answer, however, will not come - if it did, it would betray the experience. The possibility that words might betray as well as serve is for McAuley a kind of pruning. His confidence in words is brought up against his personal sense of what cannot be - and this confrontation results in the strengthening of a language which is bare and slender, yet carries a powerful charge, a mixture of positive and negative. This resistance to metaphor is not a retreat from meaning, but a disciplining of theoretical and doctrinal preconceptions. What is happening is that the poet of "Envoi" is re-emerging to speak, with renewed voice, of "the thin and bitter years without pretence".

There is also, at this time, a shift in McAuley's poetic theory which reciprocates this imaginative development. Surprises of the Sun was published in 1969. In his 1975 Blaiklock Lecture, McAuley recalls:

> Since 1960 I have written short poems, and the lyrical vein is strong in many of them. There is some lowering of formality as regards tone and diction, and at times a greater acceptance of the poetic possibilities of accidental particulars as they occur in experience. The poems are written mainly in a language of immediate impressions, and any view of the world they offer

> is suggested by this means and not by a declared theoretical or doctrinal framework.[1.]

In 1963 he argues that Brennan's work suffers because the personal experience which is the "vital core" of his poetry "is expressed only in accordance with the canons of art which he maintained".[2.] He repeats this judgment in The Personal Element in Australian Poetry (1970): "The conclusion I have edged towards is that Brennan might have done better if he had been content with a less formidable poetic technology, and a more direct use of his personal experience."[3.] Also in 1963, considering the problem of "adequate symbolism", he seems to shift away from his preference for a traditional symbolism:

> The hardest problem confronting the poet in my time has not, I think, greatly changed or become less urgent: it is the struggle for an adequate symbolism. I use the word in its wide sense. Even a selective stress upon certain details in a realistic account of a situation can charge those details with meaningfulness beyond themselves. Or such details may be separated out of any particular occasion and used in a more general and abstract way . . . Particularity or generality, concreteness or abstraction, colloquial diction or formal, and all other such matters, are not to be decided upon in advance by some general critical prescription: they are means at the poet's disposal, to be used in fulfilling his specific intention in each poem.[4.]

This movement may indicate some increasing uneasiness with the worldview encoded in Catholic dogmas, and suggest "that the sense of that 'rhythm of profound analogies', characteristic of the earlier lyric verse, has faded to a much humbler and more fitful mode of poetic perception which emerges at times in barely shaped statement . . ."[5.] I read it more as a relocation of the

---

1. "The Rhetoric of Australian Poetry", Blaiklock Lectures, p. 90.
2. Christopher Brennan, p. 41.
3. The Personal Element in Australian Poetry, p. 40.
4. Cf. McAuley's Introduction to his Selected Poems in the "Australian Poets" Series.
5. David Bradley, "The Landscape of the Heart", p. 459.

persistent order/disorder tension. In The Personal Element in Australian Poetry, McAuley, trying to assess and accept the significance of autobiographical poetry, imagines the question in terms of a balance which must be held between public and private, between meaningful and random experience, so that poetry can still restrain internal chaos:

> Why had modern poetry made this effort to digest particular, personal experience? In one aspect it is surely a product of that unfolding realization of the unique value and significance of each individual human person, and his life-history, which characterizes the western and Christian tradition . . . On the other hand, it is also possible that some of this poetry is a retreat from meaning and an abandonment of rational control. When no structures of belief and rational interpretation or moral principle remain, the poet can fall back upon a record of his random sensitivities: the private world does not then complement the public one; it proclaims the ruin of the public world as well as its own disorder. [1].

Rather than accept the distinction between "belief" and "experience" which McAuley himself seems to be implying, I would suggest that the poetic theory keeps its mythos even as it modifies its logos. McAuley may indeed be realigning his allegiance in regard to general and particular truths, but he is also still imagining poetry as some kind of redemptive order. The "evil" is still imagined as some principle of chaos which might corrupt meaning so that the world seems "eaten hollow with despair" [2]. - though evil is now located more reciprocally in internal and external worlds. The "good" is still associated with some principle of coherence and discipline - whether it manifest itself as "selective stress" or "moral principle" - and this principle is still located in the exercise of reasoned will. In this sense, McAuley's suspicion of the personal element in poetry indicates, not so much a withdrawal from experience in favour of belief, as an

---

1. The Personal Element in Australian Poetry, p. 61.
2. "The Tomb of Heracles", CP, 59.

imaginative need for and commitment to discipline, whether he is intoning praise for "angelic hierarchies" [1] or flatly observing the everyday routines of a hospital ward.[2]

Because of their discipline, McAuley's own autobiographical poems play between freedom and restraint, and do not collapse their meaning into "random sensitivities". As they become more "confessional", they become, ironically, more available for public meaning. In "Wistaria" the symbol is at once localised and universalised, so that it can perform its mediatory function and "absorb all feelings into sight". Abandoning an abstract mode, it finds in something very concrete a truth of feeling which transcends the private experience:

> Of all things, I liked best that tough old vine
> Roping our side fence, offering my days
> Clusters of hope that stirred the sense like wine. (CP, 202)

The wistaria also mediates between McAuley's own ambivalent heart and a world where only hope can complete the gap in things. The heart, with its "mute aching sweetness", calls upon the imagination to transform its flowers into "bells, pagodas, pale balloons", to give another meaning to "long afternoons/ Where time stretched forward, empty of event". This is momentary: the images change back to flowers; the imaginative power was escapist. There is nothing escapist in the way the child's desire and need is now recorded by the adult: without pretence, without the luxury of irony, and with only bare meaning. Still, this grim realism does not destroy the symbol. The wistaria remains to receive, even rescue, the deeper meaning of the child's fantasy. It signifies how hope, to resist death in the soul, will make do with little:

---

1. "Celebration of Divine Love", CP, 73-76.
2. "B.P.I", Quadrant, December, 1976, 4.

> The soul must feed on something for its dreams
> In those brick suburbs, and there wasn't much:
> It can make do with little, so it seems. (CP, 202)

This hope is made even more precarious once we remember that the poem is a memory, and that it opens by asking if the wistaria is, in fact, still there, still powerful.

Such an astringent hope is given an even more private application in "Father, Mother, Son" (CP, 181). For fifty years McAuley's father, a lapsed Catholic, has secretly held to his old faith by saying the "Hail, Holy Queen". This prayer captures that deep Catholic pulse of sorrowing hope before the Mother of God:

> Hail, holy queen, Mother of mercy; hail, our life, our sweetness, and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn, then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us; and after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

That his father should, all the same, say the prayer slightly wrong represents his fumbling integrity. This prayer is a hidden thread, holding the people as it holds the poem. Family relationships are characterised by the same sense of exile and hope:

> But here three people smile, and, locked apart,
> Prove by relatedness that cannot touch
> Our sad geometry of family love. (CP, 182)

Mother and father have been faithful to "Their terms of plighted troth", but each, in the deeper privacy of the heart, is distant from the other. Love's communion exists at the level of public choice, but within is isolation. The son identifies with his father in common helplessness.

Yet the helplessness is restrained by the poem. End-of-line stress communicates a submerged stubbornness in the father: "he has held", "he has said". While stress also conveys the captivity created by these relationships ("stand between", "locked apart"), the placement of "to gain" underlines the ambiguity of hope. These stresses build in a stubbornness, a tight grip. They themselves become the thread to hold hope. They, therefore, lend the grief and despair its restraint, enacting the slender hope of "unless that gold thread hold, invisibly." This slender hope is the poem's properly subjective truth, and it is here that Catholic belief is incorporated into McAuley's elemental image of exile.

"Tabletalk" (CP, 202) also refuses to generalise. There is a question ("What is the wisdom that a child needs most?"), but the poem presents precisely the absence of any answer. Instead we have the lapsed Catholic's bravado attack on his old religion and his affection for "Anglican restraint" (an affection formed, one suspects, more by temperament than theology). Family and friends are equally opportunities to practise the virtue of prudence, which "consists in learning to withhold/ The natural impulse of the sharing mind". With an ascetic honesty McAuley exposes the fundamental anti-naturalness of this isolating perspective which parades as religious commitment. In this the poem does not so much assert an alternative, as resist the heritage of distrust. Its strategy is to meet one form of restraint with another: the negative and destructive restraint of personal experience is transfigured in the positive and creative restraint of the poem. At its deepest level, McAuley's verbal discipline is a method, not for celebrating order, but for containing disorder.

While these autobiographical poems represent change - particularly in their use of confessional matter and colloquial mode - they also focus the continuity within McAuley's religious imagination. This is particularly true of "Because" (CP, 200). While the theology of Original Sin which so concerned Captain Quiros is merely hinted at here, the tensions identifying the "mystery of sadness", which relate it to the Fall myth, are even more powerfully operative - perhaps because they are able to discover and express themselves within the shape of their experience, the "sad geometry of family love".

The poem depicts a family experience dominated by an inexpressive father, who keeps spontaneous impulse at bay - because of his own unacknowledged fears, fears which he passes on to his son (who later recognises them as a kind of inherited evil). With typical irony, McAuley has pain enter at the moment of expected love: when the son expected a kiss, he received instead his father's embarrassment and rebuff, which teach him to hide his feelings. The mother shares this irony: she is intimidated by her husband to the point where her own "more generous feelings" are submerged in a routine where there is no casual touch, no unexpected excitement, but only something as predictable as the daily newspaper. This irony of fallen expectations is enacted in the way the third line "falls":

> My father and my mother never quarrelled.
> They were united in a kind of love
> As daily as the 'Sydney Morning Herald'
> Rather than like the eagle or the dove.
>
> I never saw them casually touch,
> Or show a moment's joy in one another.

Irony begins to interact with hope - the McAuley style of hope, that is - as the second stanza introduces the ascetic realism which characterises the poem's central mood. By having the mother sing the

wedding song, "Because", the poem at once comments ironically on the marriage and yet holds to hope, through connotations of providential design and reasoned commitment. While the poem throughout indicates repression and depression and exposes the fallen nature of love, its flat framing initiates and enacts an interesting collaboration between repressive and redemptive energies.

That such sadness can still be "a kind of love", is supported by the complex response which the flattened tone embodies and invites. It is possible that the reader will feel the hurt more deeply because it is delivered in so casual a way. It is possible the reader will find such understatement penitential, as if it holds the speaker back from self-pity and from condemnation. There is, in the tone, a suggestion of feeling about to break through, becoming chaotic and explosive. McAuley's best poetry quite often communicates this sense of controlled violence. Here it is indicated in the emphatic positioning of a phrase like "Cut like a saw", in the stiff separation on the page between "The rebuff still stuns" and "My blood", and in the way the factual record of the mother's songs is suddenly charged with sentiment: "her voice was sweet".

Although the tone disciplines, it does not deny the loss - of innocence, time, and love. This experience is being admitted even as it is being changed into meaning - as can be seen in the slight end-of-line pause needed for "once they stood", where the poem acknowledges disillusionment, but also, very discreetly, introduces an allusion to the Fall myth. In this sense, the poem situates itself as a play between "Fall" and "Redemption". As the parents fall into reality, the speaker shares and saves their sadness. He at once

deflects blame away from them and locates the "fault" within himself:

> I never gave enough, and I am sorry;
> But we were all closed in the same defeat. (CP, 201)

While this turns the alienation each experiences into a thin thread of community, it also incorporates the tension, dramatised by the Fall myth, between voluntary and involuntary participation in the mystery of "evil". The poem is redeeming hurts by realising that the speaker can take responsibility for these hurts, even though he is not guilty of them.

Even so, these attempts to construct hopeful meaning do not displace the fearful effect of the closing stanza:

> It's my own judgment day that I draw near,
> Descending in the past, without a clue,
> Down to that central deadness: the despair
> Older than any hope I ever knew. (CP, 201)

There is darkness, as well as meditation, in the rhythm. "Down to that central deadness" slows, then stops starkly on "despair". Here the centring, still focus is achieved, then the transitory nature of life is picked up again in the fall-away flow of "Older than any hope I ever knew", until the end is almost a whisper against the dark.

Yet, precisely because it utters such disorder, this in turn directs the poem back to its title. Its irony is now more savage (and vulnerable), its acceptance of necessity more thin-lined, but its commitment to meaning is still intact: it is "thin", it is "bitter", but it is also "without pretence".

"Time Out of Mind" (CP, 179) likewise presents the soul in crisis. The speaker acknowledges conflicts between being and action, between

interiority and exteriority, beween intention and achievement. These conflicts, which frustrate his desire to achieve "True form or feature", are not so much resolved as restrained, and that by a structure which sets despair in relation to joy and then casts this within an eschatological perspective. The first step is expressed:

> Only those joys that lie
> Closest to despair
> Are mine to hold on by
> And keep me clear. (CP, 179)

This is further framed by an eschatological perspective, where mind and time both find meaning "Only in knowing/ My self's Self". Yet for a work which so foregrounds the issue of the "self", this poem illustrates an interesting irony, as when it confesses:

> In youth my range
> Was fear, vanity, lust.
> Shall I take in exchange
> Fatigue, rage, self-distrust? (CP, 179)

This may be confessional in content, but its mode is more abstract and remote than that of "Because". The language disguises more than it discloses: terms like "vanity" and "lust", though indicative of general moral principles, nevertheless have a private meaning and feeling depending on the individual's experience and conscience. One might agree that lust is a disordering of human nature, but one does not thereby agree that the particular experience which the poem disguises is lust. In this way, bringing an abstract term to bear on a concealed particular experience, McAuley subverts the universal meaning of the terms and closes the poem off from the reader. For all its public manner, the poem remains very private. It also authorises a conflict between the human "self", as unsure, "unknown", and potentially shapeless, and the divine "Self", as absolute form and meaning. In this way it displaces and weakens the interaction of

order and disorder which characterises the poetry generally. That is, it simplifies the tension, associating all order with God and all disorder with the human self's internal confusion, and fails to achieve that enlivening complexity which occurs when God is more shadowed and the human self less culpable.

What the autobiographical poems achieve is a more complex and evenly weighted distribution of the tensions and meaning-directions which operate throughout McAuley's poetry. They represent a process occurring in his imagination which is analogous to the process of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness. "Because", as it negotiates the distinction between blame and responsibility and the distance between condemnation and forgiveness, integrates the voluntary and involuntary character of the evil it signifies in "despair". It also, in the relationship it establishes between its last line and its title, between its personal and theological dimensions of reference, manages not only to hold despair against hope, but also to synthesise the public and private directions of that interaction. A Vision of Ceremony is much more inclined to locate the cause (as distinct from the manifestation) of "evil" in the self/will (which seems more sinning than sinned against), just as it is more likely to associate "redemption" with an order received from above and protected in a language where objective, universal, public, metaphysical meanings cohere. Captain Quiros is aware of the involuntary character of evil, but it cannot quite make the voluntary and involuntary present in the one moment. "Because" does manage this. It represents McAuley's imaginative model acknowledging its temptation to disguise and simplify the meaning of "evil", "disorder", or "despair", and realigning its balances.

Vivian Smith, arguing that A.D. Hope's attack on the lyric actually encouraged its development, makes a very interesting point about the change in McAuley's lyrical mode:

> If one compares a beautiful earlier lyric like "Nativity" with a later poem like "Because" one notices a similar development . . . Both poems use a basic quatrain form; both are related to religious concerns; but the first is again timeless . . . looking back to an early tradition of medieval or Latin hymns and songs while the second is more ironical, social, critical and self-placing, firmly set in a particular time and place. "Because" is more discursive and explicit than "Nativity".[1]

As a corollary to this, it could be said that another effect of McAuley's autobiographical sequence, "On the Western Line", is that it encourages and expands the religious possibilities of the lyrical mode. The lyrics of Surprises of the Sun and "The Hazard and the Gift" incorporate a new appreciation of the possibilities of a vernacular situation and language. They also integrate McAuley's religious tradition - again, at the level of mythos, more than logos. They express a metaphysical intuition, an instinct for transcendence, in the way they occupy the space between situation and speaker. In this they extend the poetry's characteristic frames: landscapes, for instance, are at once objectified and fragile; language is disciplined and yet barely contained; and the "self" is at once consoled and confronted by the scene it receives and shapes. This framework of contained negativity also establishes a mode which is poetically and religiously appropriate - a meditative lyric which corresponds to a via negativa.

This convergence of lyrical and religious impulses is acknowledged in "Late Sunday Afternoon" (CP, 221), where a landscape and a liturgy engage in conversation.

---

1. "Experiment and Renewal: A Missing Link in Modern Australian Poetry", Southerly, 47, 1987, 16-17.

"Late Sunday Afternoon" releases much of its power in the surprise and ambiguity of its last line. Throughout the poem there is a tight control which carefully prepares for this sudden release of power and meaning. We are presented with a landscape which has a latent unease, which comes to us as "muddy pools" and "failing light". The poem tells of change, but the verse itself is deliberately still. Because of double stresses, the slow succession of impressions takes on a symbolic suggestiveness. Colour is used to underline the mixed feeling:

> Bronze foil and russet overlap
> New shoots of green. Black starlings clap
> Their yellow beaks, announcing change. (CP, 221)

The third stanza transfers this landscape into the soul. The scene shifts to a Mass being celebrated. A bell signals the moment of consecration and the poet observes his fellow believers (there is still the watchful distance) move to receive the Eucharist. Their movement parallels the slow procession of the first two stanzas. McAuley then focuses the ambiguity, and focuses it within himself. Caught between desire and dread, he takes communion - "Tasting death upon my tongue". Death and renewal in the natural order stand in relation to death and renewal in the Christian order of mystery and each enlarges our vision of the other. It is a beautiful poem in the way the sacred and profane are allowed a dialogue.

It is important to resist any assumption that these "landscape lyrics" represent an escapist language, withdrawing from public commitment in order to rest in the private consolations of belief. The landscapes continue to trouble the will. "St John's Park" (CP, 222) is a very good example. It creates its own picture-book of hours - the worldly scene, depicted according to selected detail, framed by the stasis of

an eternal perspective. Contrasting impressions are rendered with bare simplicity, but framed by a detachment which is the outer tone of a commitment to something greater, something present behind and above the blue sky and the cold air:

> The mountain is streaked white, the air is cold.
> Under a pure blue sky the players begin.
> Thickly-clotted prunus lines the way in,
> And wattles put on helmets of heavy gold.
>
> A dark-green gum bursts out in crimson flowers.
> Old people slowly rot along the wall.
> The young ones hardly notice them at all.
> Both live in the same picture-book of hours. (CP, 222)

This is powerfully suggestive, and disturbing. "Thickly-clotted prunus lines the way in": the "clotted" suggests an ageing bloodstream; the "way in", by remaining indefinite, is layered with a suggestion reminiscent of "Winter Nightfall" (CP, 103). At the same time, the wattle tells us that it is spring - but why are its flowers referred to as "helmets", why is its gold "heavy"? While it is conventional to contrast the carefree, careless young with the neglected old people, there is a brutal confrontation with mortality in the verb "rot". Faced with such inevitable loss, how could one believe? Instead of forcing an answer, the poem travels further into the pain:

> Four-turreted a square tower balks the sky,
> Casting a shadow; an organ softly plays.
> The afternoon wears out in a gold daze.
> On ragged wings, uttering its carking cry
>
> A raven scavenges; a flock of gulls
> Flies from the tip. The last teams leave the park.
> The old have crept inside to meet the dark.
> Loss is what nothing alters or annuls. (CP, 222)

Is there a reference to, even a refusal of, Brennan's decision to abandon faith in the allusion to the four-turreted tower?[1]. If the

---

1. Cf. Brennan's "1908", Poems (1913), (Facsimile Edition).

tower "balks the sky", does this symbolise a loss of faith, occasioned by a growth in secularism and positivism? Organ music, coming from somewhere (and again the indefinite becomes more suggestive), provides a counterbalance for the scavenging raven's carking cry. The raven and the gulls are scavenging on a tip. Are the old seen as life's refuse? Why, when they leave, do the teams of young people seem unaware of the old people who have "crept inside to meet the dark"? Why must death be so lonely? Does life feed upon itself?

The effect of the poem is to evoke our own doubts, by raising these troubling questions, and refusing to answer them. Once again, the poem's ascetic honesty leads it to face the dark pit at the heart of nature. It keeps from falling by balancing the negative almost against itself: "Loss is what nothing alters or annuls." This technique is at the heart of the peculiar quality of hope which distinguishes McAuley's poetry. Out of it comes the possibility of transcendence. The sign offered by the stars struggles to dominate the noise and rush of traffic, and eternity takes on a beautifully fluid epiphany:

> At nightfall glaring traffic rushes by
> Filling the air with reek and the scream of brakes.
> Faint stars prick out a sign. And Vega wakes
> Liquid and trembling on the northern sky. (CP, 222)

While it seems that McAuley has found his most effective mode and subject, we have to recognise that Surprises of the Sun and "The Hazard and the Gift" still contain poetry more polemic in purpose. The worst example of this is "At Penstock Lagoon" (CP, 216). It is true that McAuley attempts to frame the poem within a positive-negative landscape. However, to know, at the end, that the landscape offers "one small bright patch of red" is insufficient consolation for

the stridency of Section IV. Even "Wet Day" (CP, 222) is marred by the final, discordant stress on "stink". What at first appears to be a meditation on time passing, gradually becomes an attack on "our vulgarity" - that is, the trust broken in our relationship with natural beauties and simplicities. There is, however, an uneasy relationship between those elements of transition which are not our fault and those which are (and the poem, unlike "Because", is delivering blame rather than taking responsibility). It intends to work on the disjunction between the clean, natural, passing of the pelican and the gulls and the dirty passage of man, who is blamed because "Cans, bottles, and junk appear as the tide runs out". This refuse is used, finally, to gesture towards Christian doctrine with: "I think/ The world has never been redeemed". Such a statement seems too heavy for the cans and bottles. This poem does not contain the negative. It releases it. In doing so, it makes a chance incident bear too heavy a weight of mythic and moral judgment.

Yet, in "The Garden" (CP, 218) a troubled murmur can become "a grace against despair". Without any need to apportion blame, with a willingness to accept responsibility for the deeper level of "broken trust", a level closer to the truth of the Fall myth, it can raise "From the wounded tree a balm/ From the depths a kind of psalm." Similarly, "Plein-Air" (CP, 226) suggests some kind of acceptance that "The world's the same whatever I may think". The burden of reconciliation is not given to the orthodox intellect. Existence will remain fragile and wounded no matter how certain our dogmas.

McAuley's poetry of this period does retain something of its hierarchial way of authorising even immediate experience. However,

even if it does in this sense retain faith in images of supernatural grace, that faith is called upon in order to confront experience, not to console it. This can be seen in "One Tuesday in Summer" (CP, 199), where the storm's apocalyptic possibilities confront ordinary perceptions, perceptions which in turn resist any religious interpretation. This tension between mundane and revelatory interpretations is the point at which the reader's experience begins to parallel the poem's:

> What Mr Pitt had said
> I didn't quite believe, or disbelieve;
> But still the words had got into my head. (CP, 200)

The poem sets up a distance between too facile a faith and too agnostic a realism, and it is precisely in this space that its religious imagination constitues itself. This space is also occupied by a tension between the familiar and the strange:

> By nightfall things had their familiar look.
> But I had seen the world stand in dismay
> Under the aspect of another meaning
> That rain or time would hardly wash away. (CP, 200)

The meaning itself is only just held. It is a faith which exists almost in default of scepticism, present because it cannot be made to "wash away".

"In the Huon Valley" (CP, 208), though calmer, has a similar method and sense of explosive stillness. The particular and familiar details are so presented that we feel something is about to burst through from beneath the apparent serenity and order. Much of the effect lies in the way double stresses are set against more subtly moving rhythms, so that the ear alternates between a heavy stillness and a rhythm that runs slightly away from stillness. The double stresses build up a

scene of fullness and largeness - propped boughs, pears ripen, windfalls lie, grow rich, elm-gold, big-white plumes. These give a meditative focus, but out of the stillness comes a liberating sense of continuity and change, of a transitory world made positive with promise. The small image of fall and decay is transformed, as rotten fruit is transformed for the wasp, so that a larger life is harvested from small instances of fall and decay. Again, the benefits of Autumn are presented in the contained negatives: "It isn't true that one never/ Profits, never learns". But this poem is not heavily explicit about the meaning of life; it does not want a definitive position: "Something is gathered in,/ Worth the lifting and stacking". Life's worked-at worth is now suggested rather than stated. This is not so much a decline in certitude as a growth in compassionate unobtrusiveness. The poem allows the symbolic pressure to work for itself. It allows its reader more space. It is not so concerned with creating an order. It is more confident in letting it be released.

"Vale" (CP, 206) also disciplines its autumnal heart. The poem, which tells of the death of Ulrick King, is a world of pared-down reality. The gain of life is expressed negatively as "nothing to regret". From Ulrick's suffering the poem takes a picture of warm courage and "sensual strength of deep organic love". Spiritual vitality compensates for physical deficiency because the spiritual law is that joy is born of pain. This is what the symbol teaches: the rose is root, and thorn and crimson (and so the blood of love's passion becomes the blood of sacrifice). The negative becomes a kind of affirmation: "The end was a decline. What does that prove?/ There's no melodic close." The astringency of this hope is clearer if we compare this treatment with Francis Webb's Ward Two sequence. Webb

finds in deformity and suffering a more positive paradox. Webb's is a deeper vision of mercy and forgiveness. McAuley's is a stubborn hope that silence and darkness tell of a place where every tear will be wiped away. Both poets have a via crucis spirituality, but for Webb Christ is a more full-bodied presence in the suffering, whereas for McAuley he is more an outline through and beyond the suffering. In "Vale", McAuley sounds his authentic note, his torture-point of song:

> Kindness and courage like a stream flow on
> Into the living. Grief dries out, the pain
> Fades too. The honours that our flesh has won
> Like flowering trees remain.
>
> The pulsing clang of the cicada choir
> Fulfils the night: I am back thirty years;
> Your voice throbs in the cadence of desire
> To silence beyond tears. (CP, 207)

This poem also contains a moment when concerns for order, for suffering, and for contained negativity, are quietly registered within the selected detail of Ulrick's life:

> I can still feel the keys and see the score;
> You take time out to roll a cigarette;
> I hear your crutches creak across the floor.
> You've nothing to regret: (CP, 207)

This is a very clear illustration of the continuity and change within McAuley's religious imagination. There is still the mystery of sadness, here manifesting its involuntary dimension, and the attempt to contain this - signalled in the image of music as well as in the formal character of the verse. There is the vernacular observation. There is the via negativa style of "You've nothing to regret".

This via negativa style shows its cleanest edge in "Pieta". (CP, 179) This is a perfect example of the poetry's ability to place the dark emptiness of despair within a slender frame, which then contains and disciplines the negativity of the hollow heart, until there arises an

insistence that there is hope - even if that hope is no more than an outline shaped when the inability to understand encounters the determination to believe. The poem has its biographical foundation in the death of McAuley's son. The title places this within the tradition of Mary, mother of sorrows. Even though that tradition has expressed itself in the "Stabat Mater" and the "Pieta" itself, it could as easily authorise sentimental resolutions of such a painful, and inexplicable, experience. Here, though, belief is signified only by two words - "Pieta" and "Cross" - and the rest of the language is given over to a detached, objectified record of utter pain. This means that theological language is contested more than privileged and that any belief it encodes is characterised, not by facile consolation, but by a refusal to give in to terror. This terror is, within the pattern of McAuley's poetry, an evil beyond the will and beyond the reason. If the refusal is transformed by stoicism, by the via crucis spirituality earlier associated with Bishop de Boismenu, that spirituality is itself transformed by the poem's halting, hurt rhythm and by its emotional and visual bareness.

> A year ago you came
> Early into the light.
> You lived a day and night,
> Then died; no-one to blame.
>
> Once only, with one hand,
> Your mother in farewell
> Touched you. I cannot tell,
> I cannot understand
>
> A thing so dark and deep,
> So physical a loss:
> One touch, and that was all
>
> She had of you to keep.
> Clean wounds, but terrible,
> Are those made with the Cross. (CP, 179)

Surprises of the Sun and "The Hazard and the Gift" do, therefore, indicate important developments in McAuley's religious imagination -

particularly the convergence of religious and lyrical impulses, the more vernacular sense of the lyric (and, with that, a new reverence for random particularities), and the way the landscape lyrics at once objectify and interiorise the fragile quality of existence, as also of the human will. These poems also keep continuity with the poetry's persistent tensions - whether those tensions are manifested in terms of desire and dread, discipline and freedom, hope and despair, or even in the distance between the unredeemed and littered world of "Wet Day" and the "world of sense and use" of "At Rushy Lagoon". With Music Late at Night and Time Given, it is the lyric meditating a landscape which gives final expression to the "true form" of life, and it is a rhyming of "despair" with "care" which signals how the old tensions still attend that last commitment to coherence, and to hope.

SECTION SIX

BETWEEN THE REASONS FOR DESPAIR

> In 1970 I had a serious illness and emerged with that exquisitely keen sense of life and its fragility which such experiences give. The result was a number of short poems which use a language of sense-impressions to render aspects of a world. . . It seems that in the last decade I have come full circle back to the kind of poem I began with, but with a greater depth of experience which has brought me closer to fulfilling the persistent desire to write poems that are lucid and mysterious, gracefully simple but full of secrets, faithful to the little one knows and the much one has to feel.[1.]

It is tempting to see the poetry of Music Late at Night and Time Given as a confrontation with the real and desacralised world, in which ceremony surrenders to melancholy as

> The likelihood of hope recedes
> Into the contours of the day.[2.]

As "Private Devotions" (MLN, 6) and "Parish Church" (TG, 42) indicate, the traditional and public rituals, the confident coherences of Catholicism have lost any immediate power to "complete/ The gap in things where time and fear devour".[3.] The poetry no longer asserts itself theologically, and only rarely - and less forcefully - renews its attack on metaphysical and moral incoherence. It no longer speaks explicitly of universal patterns printed in being, but withdraws to very particular landscapes, where it wonders about the worth of the world and of human effort, as it tries to articulate and accept death, its last mystery of sadness.

Yet, it is also a poetry which has not forgotten its own "Anonymous Message":

> Believe O believe a native
> Of the country of despair:

---

1. James McAuley, A Map of Australian Verse, p. 204.
2. "Motel, Burnie", MLN, 13.
3. "Celebration of Love", CP, 35.

> You must never give up hope,
> Even just as something to wear. (CP, 218)

What occurs in Music Late at Night and Time Given is not so much the loss of (one kind of) religious confidence as a process which holds that loss in relation to its corresponding gain: a process, that is, which reduces the great meanings held by the "old mysterious symbols", but which enlarges the little meanings, the secrets within sense-impressions. As what "one knows" decreases, what "one has to feel" increases - and in a way which is still both disciplined and free. The short, end-stopped lines which now predominate have the effect of constructing a landscape at once objectified and frail - and it is this, more than anything else, which prevents these landscapes from becoming surrogate religious objects. These lines also contribute to an eschatological effect commonly achieved in the last line of a poem, where a sudden expansion of the space between observer and landscape ensures that the observer is at once taken beyond the sensate moment and yet returned to the small, uncertain self. The landscape continues to confront as well as to console. What occurs is not so much a decline in religious belief, as a consolidation of religious imagination.

This involves a consolidation of those tensions which have always characterised the poetry, and which are now focused in the rhyming of "despair" and "care". Indeed, "care" when it is so rhymed, operates in the poetry so as to reveal its tension-point. It can indicate an anxious resistance to disintegrative possibilities, as it does in "Private Devotions":

> Trespasser now tread with care
> Between the reasons for despair
> All the way as far as death. (MLN, 6)

It can also indicate a less reactive, more creative commitment, a style of desire and hope strangely heightened by the thresholds apprehended in Music Late at Night:

> Again that soundless music: a taut string,
> Burdened unbearably with grief
> That smiles acceptance of despair,
>
> Throbs on the very threshold of spring
> In the burst flower, the folded leaf:
> Puzzling poor flesh to live and care. (MLN, 23)

This double-edged quality of "care" is reinforced in the way the last poems deal with the (often implied) theme of death, which is seen as confirming the natural order, but also expressing its disintegration. Employing a tension very similar to that used to relate voluntary and involuntary aspects of evil, "Realities" imagines death as both necessary and chaotic:

> And I lie quiet, thinking
> Of those other dominions
> We place above and below:
> And how in the end we go
> In no particular order
> Through holes in our reality
> There, and have no returning. (TG, 35)

While they very rarely refer to Original Sin and Redemption, these last poems still operate within the relationships represented by such religious doctrines and stories. Their disciplined forms gather meaning "Which they gradually let go"[1], thereby creating a visual and verbal counterpart to the work of reasoned will. The two titles are also characteristically suggestive. Music Late at Night holds itself between an almost redemptive kind of commitment and its darker sense of gathering grief. Time Given balances the fragility of existence - the loan of time - against the fidelity of one who must give it back, one who has known victories and defeats and who has asked "how time should be used".[2]

---

1. "In Northern Tasmania", MLN, 15.
2. "Convalescent Walk", TG, 37.

It also corresponds to an attitude of "active receptivity". Whether in its private devotions or in its observed landscapes, this poetry still treads with ambiguous care "Between the reasons for despair".

In "Winter Morning" (TG, 32), the vast and aching heaven is set against and around the smallness of the dog's howl "thrown up like a rope-trick". With the immediate introduction of "It is an hour for prayer without words", an association is established between the rope-trick hurled up at hollowness and the speaker's own prayer. This sense of distance is at one with the poem's sense of displacement. Stars and trees are without any article to anchor them to the concrete order. The speaker's face becomes "a face". Time is included: "Time is moving through displacements". In the very moment of displacement, though, the poem establishes a cold, bare communion between soul and world inasmuch as the face in the mirror is as brief and brittle a reflection as the winter morning:

> Spring stars glitter in the freezing sky.
> Trees on watch are armoured with frost.
> In the dark tarn of a mirror a face appears. (TG, 32)

The poem's suggestive technique is evident if we isolate the double stresses. We find the central and controlled ambiguity: spring stars, dark tarn, blind earthworm, dog's howl, rope-trick. Something very similar is at work in the opening of "At Assisi" (TG, 33). The stress-pattern of "Pools of light down steep alley-ways" enacts a faith seen as light-in-darkness. This is suggestively linked, by the succeeding image ("A stray dog seeks companionship"), to the faith of the exile, existing between solitude and community. Within this web of suggestion, the image of "St Clare's body like dark leather" evokes the notion of a faith that is stern, a sanctity that is hard. After some simple description, we are once more confronted with the "sad

alternate fire" of Aldebaran. There is something sharp, as well as something clear, in the presence of this star: "Aldebaran glitters in the cold." By cataloguing simple impressions, "Walk and grappa and prayer and sleep", the poem attempts to name the totality and the ritual of ordinary experience. Then it strikes echoes with an older symbolism:

> Gnarled vines and crippled olives drive
> Stubborn roots in stony ground.
> It's not the past that matters here. (TG, 33)

Agony is suggested - ultimately the agony of Christ (the vine) in Gethsemane (an olive grove) and on Calvary (where the cross is driven into the ground, and nails into the hands and feet, making them crippled). We recall "Wistaria" (CP, 202) where the tough old vine offers clusters of hope. We must also remember "New Guinea Lament":

> Desire like a rusty nail
> Pierces time's foot until it seems
> His aching tread will fail. (CP, 21)

In "At Assisi", desire and time are reconciled in Christ, who makes present the timeless: "It's not the past that matters here." This final line is typically affirmative in its negative way. As well, the declarative stance does not so much teach as trouble. The alternatives - that it is the present or the future which matters - are foreign to the poem's complex resonances. In this way, the final line forces us back into the suggestions for a less obvious meaning.

"Another Day, Another Night" (MLN, 16) seems to lose all confidence in coherence:

> And we sit down to wine and meat and bread.
> The pain of loss infects the loneliness,
> And there is less and less that can be said.
> When the wind lapses in a vast silence,
> Pale blue and amber target the clouded moon.
>
> Things have a way of turning out absurd. (MLN, 16)

While this may seem to abandon hope in that "pure transparency" of things which "An Art of Poetry" (CP, 70) so ardently desired, it also returns us to the unfulfilled mind and disconsolate sense of "When Shall the Fair" (CP, 3) . Lowering its expectations with regard to universal order, it also relocates the tension between order and disorder - and complicates it: the things of this world are at once precisely present and threatened by the wind's will. This resounds with the manner in which the observer values their particularity and presence, but in such a way that he feels more deeply the absence of a more permanent coherence. In this way, the poem exemplifies a pattern of departures and developments found throughout these last poems.

Perhaps "Another Day, Another Night" is an expression of the "exhausted will" described in "Nocturne" (MLN, 5), where nightmares and angels take on an eerie familiarity. With the opening line, and its triple stress, the possibilities of movement are deadened even as they are introduced: "A gull flies low across the darkening bay." At the same time, the world is summoned only to be abandoned: "The world sinks out of sight." This emptying is analogous to that purged perspective earlier described as "bare attentiveness".[1] It also anticipates the final symbol of the empty field:

> The world sinks out of sight. The moon congealed
> In cloud seems motionless. The air is still.
> A cry goes out from the exhausted will.
> Nightmares and angels roam the empty field. (MLN, 5)

The implications of this are disturbing - and perhaps more so because they are in no way definite. Is the empty field a place of desolation, or of denuded faith? While McAuley does not usually make his angels and demons into friends, here nightmares and angels are

---

1. "Nativity", CP, 69.

put together, and given a common action - "roam" - which connotes carelessness, delinquency, and even malevolence. This ending is very effective: after carefully creating a still scene, the poem breaks it down, and frees the troubling image of nightmares and angels journeying through the exhausted will, the will whose cry for order cannot repress their roaming.

Yet it is too easy to see these two poems only as confessions of defeat. "Nocturne" may confess its "exhausted will", and it may enact that exhaustion in its closing lines, but it also holds itself back from disintegration by its rhymed quatrains, and its strategic use of multiple stress - as, for example, in "A cry goes out from the exhausted will", where the stubborn character of the cry is coded in its triple stress. "Another Day, Another Night" may succumb to a depressing sense of absurdity, but the final line is a little more complicated. "Things have a way of turning out absurd" does, in fact, believe in a "way" even as it admits absurdity. Indeed, the line has its origins in the battler optimism of "Things have a way of turning out". While "absurd" then gives the "fall" to such optimism, it cannot quite cancel its memory, so that the final line actually works a confrontation between a contemporary style of cynicism and an older form of hope. Moreover, such poems are balanced by others, such as "Book of Hours (TG, 38), which reaffirm the will's commitment to meaning.

"Book of Hours" admits that there are random elements in life which may be included in a framework, but not completely explained by it: "Two little girls pass by and one is lame;/ Six yachts ride at anchor on broken light." There is a code in "ride at anchor on broken

light". This is what the poem says and does, holding together stillness and movement, unifying visible fragments. The second stanza allows the movement and fragmentation, then the poem makes another hold on the mind:

> And all this seems to make a kind of claim,
> As if it had been given that one might
> Decipher it: if there were such a skill
>
> Which one could learn by looking - get it right,
> As children learn to read a word, a name,
> Another, until meaning comes at will. (TG, 38)

Despite his polemic moments, McAuley's commitment to transcendent truth is not arrogance or escapism. It is, rather, an exercise in responsibility: an attempt to give disciplined meaning to the casual sadness of one little girl who is lame.

If meaning does come "at will", this is now less because the discipline is directed at creating coherence, and more because it is concerned to enhance a condition of active receptivity. This is certainly the way meaning and will cooperate in "Morning Voluntary" (MLN, 12). This poem enacts the transformative vision of the abandoned heart: a distant, observing eye, by receiving, becomes one with the landscape. There is a sense of standing still before ordinary things and finding a suspicion grow that they are no longer quite the same. McAuley chooses particular sounds, colours and objects which, when given selective stress, create a symbolic mood. Imagery and language are pared down until they have a fragility - a kind of transparency. It is as if, having a lot he wants to say, yet recognising that "Very little can be said", McAuley tries to get the words out of the way.

The images have a bareness, but little detail - they are small, single

moments in a larger, more unified perception. Impressions delineate the familiar: milk and bread, puddles, clouds. Then the white birch is introduced and it lingers because it is given more space. It is a beautiful, but unsettling image: the tree opening its arms to surrender its autumn leaves (their wealth of life turned into the gold of death) which drift to earth and to decay (mound). The poem hints at a crucifixion motif (a tree "with arms outspread"). It hints - but refuses to have its own mystery broken. "Stalky vines glow darker red." Following the birch's three lines, this single line borrows extra stress. Red suggests a dark vitality, as if the familiar landscape is glowing with a deeper life and darker blood. (Nor is it impossible that the image carries a eucharistic resonance.) Bare, brief statements are again used to record unwelcome impressions: bad newspapers, loud music. Then a second image is given a large breathing space:

> Flat strokes dinned out overhead
> Dropping through the red and gold
> Tell the tale that must be told (MLN, 12)

Into the red and gold - colours in which he has seen his world, colours which could easily symbolise Eucharist and hope - come sounds of mortal destiny. This is unavoidable ("must be told") and sets a distance between himself and all that he has felt close and familiar: "Friday's child is full of dread." Life's colour is spotted by the flat strokes, the tale, the dread, the cold, the starlings, the doubt, the sense of a deep, black death. "Spots of black invade the red." Still, the final stress falls on "red".

This is why the poem's voice is so important. A tone is created by the controlled rhyme (which gives the impression of a "centring"), by the single-sentence lines which slow down, by the long vowels and soft

consonants. The overall voice is very gentle, and the emotional rhythm amazingly still. Combined with the fragile imagery and form, these aspects create a voice which is meditative, sombre and calm. This is the sound of a disciplined, stubborn, yet still-feeling hope.

To appreciate this kind of controlled ambiguity, which by now occupies so central a place in McAuley's religious imagination, it is helpful to add a note on Trakl's influence. In The Grammar of the Real, McAuley declares his preference for the poems of Trakl's penultimate phase: "well-formed lyrics of extraordinary, intense inward and mysterious beauty, unease, disgust, and suffering dread" (202). He admires "a controlled ambiguity, a range of multiple meaning kept afloat by the simple words and images" (203). McAuley goes on to speak of an "interplay of positive and negative in a value-changed landscape" (214), and of how, in Trakl's mind, the coming of Christ opened for "man" his uttermost heights, but also his uttermost depths (217). McAuley comments: "The tendency of Trakl's mind was to see his world, and himself, as involved in that uttermost fall." (217) Yet, he stresses:

> Because there is so much that is fearful and horrible and distraught in the poems, it is important to establish that their foundation is a vision of innocence, of peace and happiness, of goodness and rightness, and of intimacy with God. (211)

We could be reading a commentary on McAuley's work. The affinity McAuley found is clearly, cleanly, even leanly, expressed in the translation of "Monchsberg" (MLN, 17). This poem is very like McAuley's work in its vision of birth in brokenness, and in the multiple meaning whereby "bear", by suggesting "carry", "give birth" and "suffer", sets up a Christian resonance:

> Heavy is such a task:
> Born in a broken time,
> To carry it all within,

And bear it into freedom,
In a world toward evening where
Insatiate hungers prowl.

O music out of decay
Intoning a dark prayer!
Rooks build in the sound

Of bells. A level mild sun
Lights up new sprigs of green
On boughs that shiver with cold. (MLN, 17)

"Music Late At Night" (MLN, 23) has its own controlled ambiguity. It uses double stresses to create a painfilled stillness in which "The helpless heart says, hold and wait". Within the stillness and restraint, there is a "rigid silence" promoting the voice of despair, the dread of never-ending night. Within the stillness and restraint, there is also - on the other edge, as it were of the poem's "taut string" - a "soundless music" by which the poem accepts despair and affirms poor and puzzled flesh. This ambiguity is further establishe in the interplay of images. While the moon is cold and withdrawing, it is, so to speak, framed by the gate which is "clouded with spicy prunus flowers". If the street is empty, it is also "lighted" and expecting a new day. In this way the "empty street" lends a little hope to the "helpless heart", which cannot hold the moon. If the "helpless heart" is itself held between despair and acceptance, it i because its condition corresponds with both the "rigid silence" and the "soundless music". The paradoxical character of such music is then keyed in the connection established by its accompanying rhymes: the "taut string" is related to "the very threshold of spring" and "grief" to "the folded leaf".

This controlled ambiguity has authority within Music Late at Night a Time Given because it expresses profound and interreaching correspondences in the way the hopeful imagination constructs its world, self, and death. The hope expressed in "In Northern Tasmani

(MLN, 15) is keyed by the rhyming of "cold" with "gold" and by the image of "Bare hawthorn thickets pearled with rain". Later rhymes corroborate this structure: "shine" and "decline"; "know" and "let go". Such control gives this statement of decline an accepting tone:

> At dusk I look out through old elms
> Where mud-pools at the gatepost shine.
> A way of life is in decline,
>
> And only those who lived it know
> What it is time overwhelms,
> Which they must gradually let go. (MLN, 15)

This poem is constructing its world and self so that both shape a pattern of renewal and decline, but shape it receptively, since world and self can only contain ambiguity. They cannot so order it that it becomes certainty or even simplicity. The line, "Wattles are faintly tinged with gold", and the rhyming of "gold" with "cold", is remembered in "Explicit" [1], which constructs a death consonant with this self and world:

> So the word has come at last:
> The argument of arms is past.
> Fully tested I've been found
> Fit to join the underground.
>
> No worse age has ever been -
> Murderous, lying, and obscene;
> Devils worked while gods connived:
> Somehow the human has survived.
>
> Why these horrors must be so
> I never could pretend to know:
> It isn't I, dear Lord, who can
> Justify your ways to man.
>
> Soon I'll understand it all,
> Or cease to wonder: so my small
> Spark will blaze intensely bright,
> Or go out in an endless night.
>
> Welcome now to bread and wine:
> Creature comfort, heavenly sign.
> Winter will grow dark and cold
> Before the wattle turns to gold.

---

1. Quadrant, December, 1976, 5.

If McAuley's instinct for belief is exemplified in the way his sense of self, seen as "small", is related to an "all", this relationship carries as much dread as promise. Death may enlighten. Death may darken. Death, that is, is as much reason for despair as for hope: rather than introduce the believer into the divine understanding of all things, it may initiate the ultimate incoherence, the "endless night". This death is suitably attuned to the world it is about to visit, for that world struggles between Milton's argument for heavenly purpose and modernity's broken order. Victory is expressed, with characteristic astringency and in a negatively affirmative tone, as a kind of rescue mission: "Somehow the human has survived."

The closing sense of the poem is that it does resist despair, but does not easily affirm faith. The seasonal metaphor is used to hint at spring and new life - but the effect is neither clichéd, nor certain. The double stress on "grow dark" presents winter as a dark and cold necessity, while spring becomes a muted possibility. The tone is not serene: it moves from grim jocularity to raw hope. The question of tone is critical when speaking of this poem's religious consciousness. Whether we read "Explicit" as tired doctrine or stubborn faith depends so much on what tone we hear. (This is often the case with McAuley, and the tone is not always easy to discern.) If we miss the grim jocularity which opens "Explicit", then our reading may give too serious and heavy a stress to the rhyming words and misrepresent as certainty (even banality) the poem's carefully controlled uncertainty.

In "A Small Testament", speaking of the "final aloneness" at the core of the self, McAuley writes:

> The new thought that occurred to me is that perhaps it is at this inmost point of isolation that the possibility of the genuinely mystical begins. May it be that the possibility of contact between the self and the truly transcendent, with God, opens precisely where empirical contacts fail? [1].

If this is a variation on the via negativa theme, "Fingal Valley" (TG, 39) outlines the failure of empirical contact:

> Insect and bird are owners,
> But nothing here is mine,
> At most a moment's leasehold,
> To cherish and resign. (TG, 39)

The tension between "cherish" and "resign", which is anticipated in the subdued contrast between the poem's steady sensuousness and its isolated impressions, indicates a kind of sacred place in the poetry, a place towards which the shapes of self, world and death are continually moving.

From one point of view, this place can be approached only through "aspects of a world", only if the poetry learns to be at peace with randomness and particularity. The honeyeater from "Autumn in Hobart" (TG, 41) becomes an emblem of this more forgiving poetry, where selection may yet constitute sufficient coherence even as it receives and renders impressions:

> Snow-cloud, a rainbow, blue sky, rain,
> All at one time: the wet streets shine
> In pale gold sunlight, a cold breeze ruffles
> The reds and yellows of wet streets.
> The yellow-throated honeyeater knows
> How to like this place: he's active, greedy,
> And defines his world with music (TG, 41)

Just as this manages an affirmation without loss of ambiguity, so "Convalescent Walk" (TG, 37) manages, which chastened simplicity, to contain the achievements and losses of history with a perspective which is immediate, yet eschatological. A picturebook stillness

---

1. Quadrant, December, 1976, 7.

is created, then, at the end, the eye is suddenly lifted:

> November wanted to stand still.
> The air was so full of thistledown drift
> Each spider-web strung in the trees
> Had changed to an opaque white disc.
>
> The full-blown roses seemed huge. The world
> Was nothing but intense pure colours,
> And breath of eucalypt and lilac.
> We spoke of victories and defeats,
>
> And how time should be used. The dog
> Rolled on daisies and dandelions
> As we returned through Ogilvie High,
> And sunlight burnished the breasts of starlings. (TG, 37)

Here November has a will of its own, but it is a flawed will: while the world is intensely present, it also pauses on the edge of frailty in thistledown drift, spider-web, and full-blown roses. Just as this world, where full-blown roses seem huge, constructs itself as promise and decay, so the self-defining memories of the walkers shape a story of "victories and defeats". If they discuss "how time should be used", the poem itself argues that time cannot be commanded - thus setting up a tension between their use of time and November's - a tension heightened by the eschatological resonance of the last line, which, by deferring judgment beyond time, actually extends the ambiguity of time.

This is not to say that all the last poems are works of controlled ambiguity. "At Jeanneret's Beach" (TG, 40) is, for McAuley, remarkably, simply affirmative. As it records impressions from a particular day, the poem builds an atmosphere of relaxed freedom and of creative purpose. The first stanza ends with the theme of will, but without anxiety: "The day is here for anything we choose." It is possible, perhaps, that the poem's unassuming nuances reconcile some of the poetry's long struggle. The campers who "wade out beyond the foam" are not so unlike solitary swans in outline. Those voices which

"come half up the dry hillside" remember the exile and the dry heartland. Aldebaran and Vega were never as securely, positively illuminative as these stars:

> How bright we see the stars, the planets shine,
> The Milky Way, the Magellanic cloud.
> The day was there for everything we chose;
> Now sleep and silence enter at the close. (TG, 40)

The chance and freedom for creative possibilities is complete, and the will is resigned.

Still, most of these poems retain some version of the will's struggle and many speak more painfully than this. World, self, and death are more often discovered at the point where the voice comes "Out of the bowed darkness".[1] Such a point is "Moulting Lagoon" (TG, 36), in which the artist prays that he may be allowed to enjoy the natural world a little longer. Here, once more "In a Late Hour", he holds to his belief in beauty. Yet, even as the poem testifies to this belief, it is at once troubled and defined by the limits of its own response: "My marks on paper are a kind of postscript." It is content to reapply the Flemish master's saying, "As I can", which in turn reinterprets persistent relationships between aspiration, inspiration, craft and discipline. So too the "black swans" reintroduce, but so much more quietly, the ambiguities combined in the companion poems of A Vision of Ceremony: "Mating Swans" and "Tune for Swans". (CP, 64-66) The refrain, "if so it may be", is so structured as to sharpen both uncertainty before death and resignation before God. "It sounds so simple": this final statement is, in its effect, remarkably complex since it combines tensions between aspiration and achievement, between hope and disappointment, with the poem's underlying belief in a

---

1. "Celebration of Divine Love", CP, 74.

beauty which becomes more vulnerable as it becomes more desirable.

"Moulting Lagoon" is also a prayer. Its refrain and diction ("Grant" and "Let") indicate its petitioner's stance before the power and will of God (although God is, characteristically, more an outline, and is never present by name). As a prayer, it constructs belief after the poetry's predominant images of self, world and death. It observes the natural seasons, where death and renewal keep their order, but privately hopes that God might intervene to delay the speaker's death. The refrain, "if so it may be", reacts against a submerged appreciation of "so it must be", so that belief is being shaped at a tension-point where the will of God interacts with the mortal necessity of nature.

In "Private Devotions" (MLN, 6) it is the necessity for care which impresses itself on Friday's child, whose belief is both reluctant and resigned. While the title hints that these devotions might be out of tune with public ceremonies, they actually show that the poetry's "motives for credibility" are imaginatively consistent and persistent. The focusing image of the empty tabernacle recapitulates, reinterprets and perhaps reconciles the interior emptiness earlier imagined as a world eaten hollow with despair. This is the liturgical image for Christ's death, and it also recalls "the three hours' darkness of the soul", which combined that public imagery with a more private application.[1] While it does, within the symbolism of the Easter Triduum, expect Christ's resurrection, that hope is disciplined by the poem, which finds its "rumour of resurrection", not in the liturgy, but in the landscape:

---

1. "Celebration of Divine Love", CP, 75.

Ghostly-pale a full moon climbs
Out of the folds of linen cloud. (MLN, 6)

While this lacks the determined style of "the epileptic will/ Convulsing vomits forth its demons" [1]; it still has a delicacy and a muted determination more in keeping with this poem. Here the Christian pattern of death and resurrection is not so much a resolution of despair, as a dreaded and desired necessity. This particular version of the will's struggle to believe is introduced in the first line, "Twisted vines are turning red". This releases a eucharistic implication, which immediately remembers and anticipates other references to the sacrament. Certainly, "Morning Voluntary" (MLN, 12) is anticipated - "Stalky vines glow darker red" - as is "At Assisi" (TG, 33) with its "Gnarled vines". This is no easy ritual. Even when "Explicit" makes appeal to the sacrament, the mood is moving between comfort and desolation. Furthermore, "Private Devotions" is here powerfully remembering "Winter Nightfall" (CP, 103), where the wanderer is welcomed by death's ambiguous embrace:

Hard with pain the stony sill;
Indoors on the table shine
With pure brightness bread and wine;
Enter, wanderer, take your fill. (CP, 103)

These complex associations gather in the opening line, preventing any entry into a world unsimplified. Similarly, the conventional metaphor of life-as-journey blends beautifully with the image of the rosary as a thin, but guiding thread. This itself recalls and redeems all those images of the labyrinth and the maze of despair which have gone before - and particularly that of the fumbled prayer of "Father, Mother, Son" (CP, 181). Further, the image of the exile trespassing homewards keeps the rosary image from becoming sentimental. Since

---

1. "Celebration of Divine Love", CP, 75.

the fingers are "reluctant" and the speaker is aware of reasons for despair waiting on either side of him, these devotions are rigorously realistic. This realism dominates the final line, where the will's struggle to believe is expressed as a kind of resigned choice: "There's no escape from what we need." Here, the word, "need" should not be restricted to a psychological connotation; it may also imply some intrinsic necessity in the created order.

If McAuley's belief seems here to be relying on its private coherences, and to be empathising with that part of the liturgical year which celebrates Christ's battle with darkness, it is fascinating to read one of Gwen Harwood's memories:

> We talked sometimes of the cloudy sadness that descends in middle age; not the profound despair that can lead to illumination, but the greyness no act of will can lift. Jim said the true cause of this state could be found in the story of the fall. Man in his unfallen state would have known the nature of the world without having to learn it through the use of a flawed intellect; but now he is troubled by obscure questionings. The liturgy, Jim said, restores to us some of Adam's lost knowledge; he called it "the key to metaphors". [1].

Whatever it may say about McAuley himself, this memory reflects the imaginative structures which describe his religious imagination: the fall which causes flawed intellect and wounded will, the sacred symbolism which restores a lost and integrated way of knowing, but only partially, since "in the midst of time God has not willed/ The End of Time" (CP, 163), so that the human wanderer, even should she or he aspire to perfection, cannot escape the "obscure questionings" of the divided heart.

"Parish Church" (TG, 42) uses the stained glass window to indicate "the key to metaphors", even as it gives immediate expression to

---

1. Gwen Harwood, "Gentleness", Quadrant, March, 1977, 15.

"the story of the fall" in its story of personal disillusionment and isolation within the Catholic Church after Vatican II. This poem gives final expression to McAuley's religious poetry, showing the changes, continuities and complexities which constitute his image of faith. While the stained glass window symbolises the "cosmic map" of Christ's birth, death and resurrection, and implies an objective, transcendent model of religious symbolism and language, it also represents a concrete, descriptive focus and contains a less than comfortable repetition of "bonewhite", as if redemption is very much a process experienced by lean and brightening bones. This note of suffering extends into the disillusionment and loneliness of the second stanza. It is easy - and, surely, sensible - to read this in the light of McAuley's own professed dissatisfaction with some of his Church's liturgical renewal. Typically, he opposed, not the renewal, but some of its formless expressions. His own contribution to liturgical renewal was considerable - and highly disciplined.[1.] However, it is more relevant to see this stanza as another version of the Fall: high hopes have arrived at the point where the individual, lonely for Adam's innocent delight, must confront those ambiguities, within and without his will, which have charted his own voyage under Aldebaran:

> I bring with me my griefs, my sins, my death,
> And sink in silence as I try to pray.
>
> Though in this calm no impulse stirs my breath,
> At least there's nothing that I would unsay. (TG, 42)

Beneath this uncomplicated, colloquial surface, there are crucial reconciliations being achieved. It is not only that the lines sustain an interaction of self, world, death and belief; they also remember

---

1. Cf. Richard Connolly, "Sounds Late at Night", Quadrant, March, 1977, 75-77.

and largely reconcile the poetry itself. The image of someone trying to pray recalls the father's fumbling of "Hail, Holy Queen", and the reluctant rosary of "Private Devotions". It also anticipates the line in "B.P.I", where McAuley describes himself in hospital, trying to pray "as badly as (he) ever did". The accompanying stress on silence recalls "Winter Morning", when

> A dog's howl is thrown up like a rope-trick.
> It is an hour for prayer without words.

It also remembers the dead Ulrick King whose "voice throbs in the cadence of desire/ To silence beyond tears". These memories constitute a kind of hermeneutic background, so that we realise this is not a silence which represents religion's escape from language, but one which gathers these memories - of desire and of dread - into its own "cadence of desire". Similarly, "Though in this calm no impulse stirs my breath" does more than depict life as a stilled voyage. The calm is a variation on the "bare attentiveness" of "Nativity", on the "windless shade" of "Invocation", and possibly on "the giant face of dreaming nations" which restores itself in "The Incarnation of Sirius". Certainly, it interprets and applies the meditative, yet active, stillness of many of the later lyrics. Further, it summons "the ships of Quiros", linking itself to all the ambiguous achievements and failures of that adventure. Little wonder, then, that the final line is, because of its negative mode, so affirmative. This line works between the stubbornness once exercised "In a Late Hour", its kind of Christian stoicism, and the achieved simplicity with which "Moulting Lagoon" continues and changes that belief. Let the artist of "Moulting Lagoon" have the final word:

> Late, it always seems too late, but it isn't:
> The beauty almost destroyed, or the light fading;
> The true proverb is still the Flemish master's,
> <u>Als isch kan</u>. It sounds so simple.

SECTION SEVEN

A LAST PIECE

Jim was profoundly moved by the film of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice. He held a small company spellbound during a whole lunchtime while he spoke of the beauty and pathos of the film, and of "man's search for absolute beauty". He said that the film in its own way "spoke the language of desire". He said that when we are closest to grasping what we most desire we are closest to the possibility of despair.

Gwen Harwood
"Gentleness", Quadrant, March, 1977, 16.

It is necessary to understand
That a poet may not exist, that his writings
Are the incomplete circle and straight drop
Of a question mark

Ern Malley, "Sybilline".

P A R T T H R E E

WHEN GOD CAME STUMBLING

Francis Webb

PART THREE

WHEN GOD CAME STUMBLING: FRANCIS WEBB

SECTION ONE:	A First Piece
SECTION TWO:	The Model of the "Suffering Servant"
SECTION THREE:	A Vision of Suffering
SECTION FOUR:	Vision and Strategy
SECTION FIVE:	Imagination and Religious Experience
SECTION SIX:	Imagination and Religious Tradition
SECTION SEVEN:	Suffering, Art, and Sanctity

Abbreviation:

CP	Collected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969.

SECTION ONE

A FIRST PIECE

After World War II, Francis Webb decided to write poetry which was more overtly religious and so counter what he saw as increasing godlessness. His decision was not, however, entirely free of anxiety:

> what of such friends as Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart: would they not forsake me altogether if God came stumbling into my poems?1.

Obviously, Webb is here concerned about the reaction of his friends. Yet why does he use the word "stumbling"? Does it simply express a pious anxiety about his ability to write of God? My thesis is that it is much more than that, that "stumbling" is the key to his imaginative and religious mode. The word functions at once to hold "God" and "poems" apart, and to bring them together.

---

1. Cf. Sister Francisca Fitz-Walter, "From Word to Wonder", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 74. Michael Griffith also records how Webb "at this time felt that his poetry should become both more religious and more political in orientation": "Francis Webb: 'The Poet of our Desolation'", Southerly, 2, 1982, 189.

SECTION TWO

THE MODEL OF THE "SUFFERING SERVANT"

Let me begin simply with "Five Days Old" (CP, 150). I would argue that it is not appropriate to interpret this poem's religious character as originating in Webb's belief in the doctrine of redemption (even though the poem does express such belief). Nor is it appropriate to locate the poem's religiousness in an experience of sacred dread, as the small moment of light is surrounded by great darkness - not because that is not very much what the poem is "about", but because that is more imaginative structuring than "raw experience". What is appropriate is to see the way both "doctrine" and "experience" are determined by an underlying imaginative structure which informs, integrates and enlivens both. The religious quality of the poem is to be discovered (as it reveals itself) in its structural relationships.

In that sense, the poem's imaginative foundation rests not so much in Webb's theology of redeeming grace, nor in his personal devotion to Christmas, but more in the tensive structure of the situation from which the poem arose:

> This poem was written by Frank in response to the experience of holding a five-day old baby, named Christopher John. His kindly doctor had provided this experience in the hope that Frank would begin to write poetry again after a time of silence and protested barrenness.[1]

The imaginative sympathy between Sister Francisca's narrative and Webb's poem is instructive. In both, a saving power is centred in one who is very vulnerable. In both, the structuring tension is that

---

1. Sister Francisca Fitzwalter, "From Word to Wonder", Poetry Australia, 56,1975, 75. Sister Francisca is now known as Sister Pauline, but I refer to her as Francisca so as to be consistent with bibliographical information.

between the tiny, simple moment of peace and the large, surrounding world of complex pain. Simplicity is achieved within suffered complexity:

> To shrive my thought for perfection
> I must breathe old tempests of action
>
> For the snowflake and face of love,
> Windfall and word of truth,
> Honour close to death.

Webb is here recognising that he must discover the proper, if paradoxical, relationship between weakness and strength if he is to see the mystery of the child. If he is to cleanse (and heal?) his understanding, and so be able to appreciate the child's perfection (its existence as utter act), then he must struggle along the breath, must live through his tormented history, and hope in that way to achieve, not so much a state of resolution, as a state of sacred tension between the weak and tiny snowflake and the strong and strengthening face of love. The phrase, "face of love", incorporates a reference to Christ (as the often unrecognised but ever revealing face of God's love).[1] So does the phrase, "word of truth",[2] but the absolute, steady presence of this phrase is set in play with "windfall", which can connote fragility (and so recapitulate earlier references to "trembling" and "blown straw"), yet can also suggest unexpected good fortune (and that could have its theological correlative in the notion of redeeming grace). From within this structure, Webb indicates that the way to appreciate the birth is to enter the paradox of death.

This becomes clearer as we find comparable structures throughout the poem. The title has a sound which is as solid as an immediate fact,

---

1. Cf. John, 1:1-18, 6:46, 12:44-46, 14:1-21.
2. In Johannine theology, Christ is the Word (John, 1:1-18) and the Truth (John, 14:1-21).

yet also as fragile as the awed perception of mystery. "Christmas is in the air" operates as a statement of fact, yet lifts itself, with "in the air", towards some presence which is insubstantial, yet possibly transcendent. The poet's own presence is similarly complex: "You are given into my hands." This conjures power, something of the independence of the ego, but it is also receptive and relational. When the child is described as coming from "quietest, loneliest lands" and when "lands" is rhymed with "hands", Webb creates a complex interaction between transcendence and vulnerability. His own response is both inarticulate and eloquent - "My trembling is all my prayer", where "all" can mean both "merely" and "completely". He follows this with: "To blown straw was given/ All the fullness of Heaven". What is clear at this point is that Webb's imagination is in conversation, not with the entire Christmas story, but with that aspect of it which emphasises Christ's kenosis or self-emptying[1]. and which reflects on how the Creator became subject to the very world he had made.

Webb next utters what is effectively his religio-poetic creed: "The tiny, not the immense,/ Will teach our groping eyes." There is a gentle interplay here between the active and the receptive self, which represents a coming together of spiritual journeying and unearned epiphany, of effort and grace. Yet the centering impulse is directed always toward the tiny, just as in other poems it is towards the broken, the ugly, the leper, the idiot, the dead.

We have heard, and have not quite forgotten a line about "All the fullness of Heaven", but we are asked to search its meaning, not only as a "given" (the rhyme stresses grace), but also in an unexpected,

---

1. Cf. Philippians, 2:6-11

nearly contradictory, mode: in the tiny. Not only in the tiny, but in the wound of one taken to be guilty, yet returning innocence:

> So the absorbed skies
> Bleed stars of innocence

Here the skies are in sympathy with the speaker: their absorption bringing them both to renewed innocence. The "absorbed skies" continue the "groping eyes", and the stars, in the night sky, are tiny points of light. The word "Bleed" strongly emphasises that such innocent perception (itself reminiscent of the gospel's invitation to become as children) is attained through the wound, through suffering. It is because this is the way of Christ that Webb can now make explicit:

> So cloud-voice in war and trouble
> Is at last Christ in the stable.

It is interesting that the repetition of "So" not only suggests a logic operating (the logic of redemption), but also continues that sense of strain so central to the poem's effect. The notion of a journey, of the child coming out of "quietest, loneliest lands", and of the eyes "groping", is continued with "at last", and then taken up:

> Now wonderingly engrossed
> In your fearless delicacies,
> I am launched upon sacred seas,
> Humbly and utterly lost
> In the mystery of creation,
> Bells, bells of ocean.

As he is launched, the poem's concern becomes more metaphysical: the relational "you" disappears, the focus momentarily widens, moving from the child, out to the mystery of creation. Yet the characteristic structures persist: the large ocean is focused in the "bells" just as the skies were focused in the stars. So too the strong and the weak are combined through the combination of "fearless" and "delicacies", and of "humbly" and "utterly".

However, Webb's instinct has him return to the immediate and the particular. Any abstract mystery is quickly centered in the fascination with the baby's wonderful movements: the yawn and the "dawn/ At an eyelid". In each of these Webb finds something fragile and something great, just as he meditates on the tension between this delicate creation and the "maker of days". Power (absolute and creating) and vulnerability are held together, and he admits how the wonder of the new baby is "Too pure for (his) tongue to praise" even as his words stumble into beauty.

It is then that we arrive at the lines quoted at the beginning, where Webb hopes to cleanse his mind so that it may truly value the mystery of creation present in Christopher John. Webb next prays to the Holy Spirit:

> O eternal truthfulness, Dove,
> Tell me what I hold -
> Myrrh? Frankincense? Gold?

Here patristic symbolism operates, giving us the complex combination of death and triumph by which Christ redeems: myrrh symbolising the suffering and death of Christ, yet frankincense symbolising his divinity, and gold his royalty. Even in the manger scene which closes the poem, this tension is maintained:

> If this is man, then the danger
> And fear are as lights of the inn,
> Faint and remote as sin
> Out here by the manger.
> In the sleeping, weeping weather
> We shall all kneel down together.

The poem operates like a camera, drawing back, making us more aware of how the light of Christ is surrounded by pain and sin, by danger and fear. What holds this darkness back is the small moment of peace focused in the child - and also in the fragile community which the child brings, for Webb uses "we" for the first time.

It is possible, I would argue, to describe the religious character of Webb's work in this way: by apprehending its structural relationships, by perceiving the model through which his predominant imaginative framework is made present.

It is not too difficult to indicate some of the significant relationships which constitute and are constituted by Webb's model. There is the spiritual paradox in his preferred vision: "All beauty, all joy?/ Yes, and all pain and disfigurement."[1] There is the drama of recognition, in which the tiny, pitiable, rare, often the rejected, are unexpectedly found to contain a saving revelation and power. This vision, however, is most often attained at the centre of very immediate suffering, where the centre of reality and perception appears almost as a redeeming wound: "Light is the centre of our darkness. I am to tell you/ Of all light, all love, fast to the Cross and bleeding . . ."[2] (Webb so often applies the word "all" to a broken situation.) There is the constant combination of words evoking strength with those evoking weakness. There is the preoccupation with failure as somehow a sanctifying influence - Webb's vision here is eucharistic (as Eyre is finally transformed into an Emmaus traveller). Even Webb's metaphoric density shows the presence of his model: the usual individuality of words suffers a breakdown and thereby enters a new fellowship of meaning. The model is also seen in the way Webb creates dramatic absences which are then surrounded by diverse and partial perspectives, so that truth is always breaking towards wholeness and speech. Truth, for Webb, seems to lie at the heart of a secret, wounded sanctity, rather than in public statements which are

---

1. "The Knight", The Canticle, CP, p. 81.
2. Peter, The Chalice, CP, p. 155.

clear and coherent. The imbecile Harry speaks a Word deeper than all acquired learning.

These correspond to a classic model in the Judeo-Christian tradition: that of the "Suffering Servant". This model has its primary formulation in the four "Servant Songs" of Isaiah. The first song (Isaiah, 42:1-9) contrasts the great and final justice which the servant will accomplish with the unassuming, delicate way he will go about it. So too, the servant's call is described in terms which are at once intimate and awesome, and his mission identifies him with those we would today describe as marginalised. In the second song (Isaiah, 49:1-6), the servant, now in exile, is reminded that God's saving design is secretly at work in failure. In the third song (Isaiah, 50:4-9), the servant recalls his ministry to "the wearied", his vocation to suffer and so co-operate in God's redemptive purpose. In the fourth song (Isaiah, 52:13-53:12), the servant's ugliness and disfigurement, almost inhuman, break open as revelation: it is his very suffering which brings peace - and peace to those who neglected, even despised his truth.[1].

In the space between Yahweh's voice, which promises a future glory, and the servant's pain, which is so immediately and emphatically conveyed, we could easily locate Webb's dramatic quest for a way of recognising and uttering the (saving) truth about suffering. The very emphasis on the servant's inglorious condition not only prevents any easy transition into a transcendent mode, but actually makes the servant's suffering the questing centre of the song, thereby

---

1. I should point out that I am concerned with the imaginative pattern within these texts - not with their varying theological interpretation and application.

deepening the causal connection between suffering and justification. That the one who suffers is innocent, while those he justifies are guilty, also makes this song sympathetically predisposed to Webb's imagination. So too does the tension created between this innocent core of truth and its surrounding surfaces of shame and repudiation. From this is derived an ironic balance - between his isolation in "evil" and our fellowship in justification, between his punishment and our peace - which in turn keeps the song searching between immediate reality and ultimate hope. These are then contained by and consistent with the primary tension: between historical suffering and eschatological glory.

The "Suffering Servant" model is an obvious choice for New Testament writers as they try to imagine and interpret the redemptive mystery of Christ. Christ too is found and identified at the place where suffering and glory paradoxically connect, and he too centres a drama of discernment very similar to that which surrounds the servant. Sometimes the identification of Christ with the servant is made directly, as when Christ names his mission by quoting the first song of the servant. (Luke, 4:16-30) At other times, it is implied by the use of imaginative patterns which are basically the same, as when Paul reminds his hearers that it is the "foolishness" of God which is the way to "wisdom". (I Corinthians, 1:21-25) Either way, the "Suffering Servant" becomes one of the most important models in Christian theology, imagination and culture.

Mark, in shaping Christ's three prophecies of his Passion, stresses how this suffering is the way to exaltation, and how Christ's listeners fail to appreciate this. Their failure is related to their preference for self-preservation over obedience, greatness over

smallness, and lordly power over service. Mark closes the third passage ironically, by introducing a blind man who has his sight restored. (Mark, 8:27-38, 9:30-37, 10:32-52.)

When Matthew has Jesus forbid people to speak about his healing, it is so that a prophecy may be seen as fulfilled - the servant's second song. (Matthew, 12:15-21.) In a central passage, that dealing with the Transfiguration, Christ is shown as choosing the Cross (rather than the Tabernacle proposed by Peter) as the proper mode of glorification. (Matthew, 16:21 - 17:8.)

Luke has Jesus quote the first servant song in order to name his mission. (Luke, 4:16-30.) Mary, the chosen mother, is strongly associated with the anawim, the poor and unimportant ones. (Luke, 1:46-55.) Christ himself is prophetically described by Simeon as "destined to be a sign that is rejected". (Luke, 2:34.) Most significantly, in his Emmaus story, which enacts his drama of discernment, Luke has Christ say to the slow perceivers, "Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?", and he has the disciples recognise the glorified Lord through brokenness: "Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised him at the breaking of the bread." (Luke, 24:13-35.) Luke's commitment to a Suffering Servant Christology is strong. It informs his presentation of the church's primitive preaching: Peter, having learned his lesson, declares that death was Christ's destined way to exaltation. (Acts, 3:12-16) When Philip converts the eunuch of Ethiopia's queen it is after an explanation of the fourth servant song. As Luke puts it: "Starting, therefore, with this text of scripture Philip proceeded to explain the Good News of Jesus to him." (Acts, 8:26-40.)

It is Paul who places the "Suffering Servant" model at the centre of personal spirituality. Finding a parallel between Christ's incarnation and ascension, his dying and rising, his debasement and exaltation, Paul urges Christians to make this the pattern of their lives:

> In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:
> His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
>
> (Philippians, 2:5-11.)[1].

This may seem somewhat remote from Webb's poetry, which is not, after all, riddled with references to Isaiah. However, in a more immediate, profound and pervasive (if less tangible) way, Webb's Catholic culture receives and reinforces the model. Where it appears in that culture, even if it does not acknowledge explicitly its Isaian origins, the model of the "Suffering Servant" preserves its fundamental imaginative structure: the almost reciprocal relationship between suffering and glory, coupled with the need for a darkly heroic faith.

We have to imagine Webb - by all accounts a deeply devout participant in Catholicism's spiritual culture - frequently attending Mass: a ritual re-enactment and reminder of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, as well as a continual call to believe Christ present in the breaking of the bread. We have, with him, to follow the liturgical year, which culminates in the Easter Triduum, and find how deeply the "Suffering Servant" model influences these central

---

1. Paul's personal and spiritual application of the model can also be seen: Romans, 6:1-11; I Corinthians, 1:17-31; 2 Corinthians, 12:7-10; Colossians, 3:1-4; 2 Timothy, 2:1-13.

liturgies. For instance: on Palm Sunday Isaiah 50:4-7 (third servant song) is read, along with Philippians 2:6-11 and one of the Synoptic versions of the Passion; the readings for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week are from the first, second and third "Servant Songs"; on Holy Thursday, the Mass of Chrism has Christ quoting Isaiah to name his mission (Luke, 4:16-21), while the Mass of the Last Supper has him leading by washing feet (John, 13:1-15); on Good Friday, the solemn reading of John's Passion is preceded by a reading from the fourth "Servant Song". We have also to imagine Webb participating in paraliturgical practices. During the "Stations of the Cross", which in the fifties was a common Friday devotion, and which Webb himself frequently attended, Webb would focus again and again on the paradox in the Cross, since each of the fourteen stations was marked by the refrain, "We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee, because by Thy Holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world."[1] Three times a day he would say the "Angelus" and, having recalled the mystery of the Incarnation, would conclude with a prayer that he might "by (Christ's) Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of his Resurrection".

The model is perhaps even more influential in the area of personal spirituality. Spiritual writers and preachers urged believers to accept suffering and to make sacrifices without complaint, so imitating Christ who "never opened his mouth". They even suggested praying for those who persecuted you - for Christ was "taking their faults on himself" and "praying all the time for sinners". If the faithful thus learned obedience through suffering, they would have their reward in heaven. (And, of course, this somewhat passive image of obedience was corroborated by the authoritarian aspect of

---

1. Emphasis mine.

Catholic culture - though we shall see that Webb uses the model to critique institutional authority.) At times of exceptional eloquence, believers were even encouraged to imagine their personal sins as the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails by which Christ suffered. In a less introverted way, the most common theme for advocating works of charity was that of seeing and helping Christ as one of "the least of these".[1].

I am not suggesting that Webb imagines within the energies of the "Suffering Servant" model because he is a close reader of Isaiah and Luke, or even because he lives within Australian-Catholic culture. It is not my intention to show why Webb's imagination and this model might seek each other out. My intention has been simply to suggest some of the range and dynamism within the model. I have referred to biblical texts because they contain the classic expression of the model, at least as it is articulated in Christian culture. Yet I have also suggested, tentatively, various other incarnations, some more partial than others, essentially in order to prevent too explicit an identification of the model with its classic texts, hoping thereby to prevent it becoming too constrictive an interpretative instrument, to establish it, rather, as an atmosphere of influence.

---

1. Cf. Matthew, 25:31-46.

SECTION THREE

WEBB'S VISION OF SUFFERING

While it is accurate to describe Webb's vision of suffering as Christian, this description is not yet sufficiently precise. In Christian belief, suffering is more than brute fact and disorder: it is an opportunity for incorporation into Christ's own redemptive purpose and activity. However, there can be, within this general belief, different theological models. One way of describing these differences is to talk of a continuum between an eschatological model of suffering and an historical one.

The more eschatological model hopes to find the meaning of suffering beyond this world, in a place (or state) of eternal happiness where every tear will be wiped away. Suffering is a test which is passed by endurance. There is, then, a strong emphasis on self-discipline and willpower, while, at the same time, the person has little creativity, has primarily to submit to the "will of God". While the "will of God" guarantees the relationship between suffering and glory, it implies that the connection is an extrinsic design ultimately established in a transcendent realm, in the "otherworld". Passing through pain and into the glory of Christ (who, in this model, seems to be on the other side of suffering), the person then achieves a victory over suffering.

In the more historical model, the victory is a victory <u>of</u> suffering. Christ is more an immediate presence within suffering. Rather than have the human figures struggle to a point beyond pain, this model has Christ move into the pain and be discovered among them. It encourages the kind of fellowship Webb himself valued: the community of

compassion and consolation.[1] In this it also challenges the presumptions of power, as suffering is more intrinsically connected with redemptive power and becomes a "sign of contradiction". This also affords the sufferers, in collaboration with (rather than in submission to) Christ, a more creative role: whether their suffering is destructive or recreative depends largely on their shaping imaginations. The purpose of suffering is discovered (and created) not so much without, in the divine understanding, as within the barely articulate fellowship and humanity it can constitute:

> At this ruthless curve
> We are driven to live. O sudden, the rags of our pity
> Come back to us as a portrait of pain, a city
> Of glory and torment - human.[2]

Webb's vision of suffering is, surely, most informed by the historical model (itself sympathetically attuned to the "Suffering Servant" model). His sense of its mystery rarely displaces his feel for its actuality, and he locates the mystery within the fact, just as he finds saving power within the wound. The sacralising effect of suffering is that it can create humanity as fellowship, as it does for the dying man at Winson Green, who becomes through brokenness "all life". Yet Webb's vision of suffering is also a critical one. His sufferers have more than a submissive role: they witness a contradictory and challenging truth in their very weakness. It has become a conventional piety to claim that the poor are especially identified with Christ, but Webb takes this view beyond sentimentality. His imagery closely critiques the oppressive structures which help create and sustain some suffering, yet these structures are overturned, not by power, but by poverty of heart.

---

1. Cf. Webb's "Introductory Note", 12 Poets, 1950-1970, ed. A. Craig, p. 20.
2. "The Stations", CP, p. 95.

There is a wonderful moment in Part II of The Canticle (CP, 69-84) when Francis urges Brother Ass to "Prance, play up as you will . . ." and to "Bray, brag, whichever you like: we are setting the pace." (CP, 77-78) Yet this piece does not set the pace for the entire poem. Its energy is remarkably unencumbered, full of "the gaities of Grace" (and of unstressed syllables). Francis even pities the sun, a long way from the top of its climb, and suggests that he and Brother Ass might "tip the earth over, sparing him all that climb". This liveliness is more than natural: Francis feels such power over the sun because he lives beneath "the greater Host" - the eucharistic bread which nourishes the life of grace. This is the second "round symbol" operating in the poem. Here Webb is expressing a traditional theology of grace: grace raises the natural order beyond (though in line with) its own power. He is also acknowledging a popular image of Francis: almost a saintly version of Doctor Dolittle, talking to the animals, at ease with the universe, and radiating kindness, peace and love. Yet the Knight is soon to remind us of Webb's favourite tension: "All beauty, all joy? Yes, - and all pain and disfigurement." (CP, 81)

Francis's cheerful chat with his donkey (self) is framed by suffering. The Canticle opens with an image of Christ carrying his cross and closes with the image of the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ which were believed to have manifested themselves in the saint's body. Further "Brother Ass and the Saint" occupies a space in the poem during which the other characters are changing their hearts, as if the saint's words to his donkey encode the wisdom these characters learn from their (unseen) contact with Francis. This dramatic structure implies that Francis's holy laughter may be akin to the Pauline notion of the "foolishness of God"[1]. - a foolishness not only wiser than

---

1. I Corinthians, 1:17-25

"human wisdom", but also expressing itself through the sign of contradiction, the cross. It also implies that the poem's overall strategy is to enact a problem of discernment: we are invited to ask how the moment of simple joy is related to the more pain-filled utterances which constitute a great deal of the poem, to arrive at the final line and then appreciate how the song has come from the stigmata: "Five Wounds, and the Canticle." (CP, 84)

We are from the first involved in a process of discernment. As darkness shifts away, the eye searches for the early morning landscape, which shows itself in the image of Christ carrying his cross:

> 1210 A.D. - too much of that. Anno Domini,
> When the brawny Umbrian moon, cloud-tethered, browses
> At the poor edge of the plain, and breaks away.
> Gusty needle, baggage-minute - call the bearers, prepare
> harness!
> For windlass-turnings of a light have rallied mountains:
> The frost eyes open very cautiously,
> Grey stone knuckles knock and fidget for a hand-hold
> In the loose air, as Mount Subasio clambers
> Dawnward, the town of Assisi fast to his back. (CP, 69)

With the next line Webb even buries an almost mocking reference to the way discernment often fails for lack of simple attention: "Hard to see, Assisi lies straight ahead of us." This is followed by a busy, crowded text, from which Francis himself suddenly breaks into view. While Webb does not let us see his face (again, there is an ironic observation that it is "too soon" to do so), Francis is represented by a verse form which is slender before the eye, a "poor edge" on the page. Yet even as he is presented as a break in the movement and mass of crowd and "common language", Francis is, in this condition, one with the mountain and with Christ:

> Because of the Rabble,
> All shapes, who streamed
> From gates at the double
> In his wake, he seemed

For a solitary
Moment of dim
Morning to carry
Assisi with him. (CP, 69-70)

Apart from "Brother Ass and the Saint" (itself problematically related to the whole), Francis then disappears into the spaces between the diverse perspectives which comprise this pilgrim-poem. The Canticle is concerned not so much with Francis as object, as with the proper mode of searching for him - that way of seeing which might enable one not so much to admire, even idolise the saint, as to imitate his reality - which, Webb says, is his vision. If the old Franciscan, speaking slenderly, is right, it is a vision of climbing - climbing in sure shadows rather than brash certitudes.[1]

The companion, one of the poem's final speakers, is of the company which had known Francis well: the mother, St Clare, even the sun. Though each speaks in the slender verse form, their language is more abstract and theological, more mystical and hymn-like. They perform an oracular function, proclaiming the mystery by which "St Francis at the end of his life was very similar to Christ in all the multitudes of the Saints". The ageing mother is nourished by the same mystery into which her son has been assumed and "Drinks his faithful gold": the mysteries of eucharist and resurrection are seen to fulfil natural relationships and to nourish a new and deeper life. (CP, 83) St Clare, while acknowledging her grief, is confident of glory:

There was a hand that rolled
Timbers from the doorway, stressed
A warm Word that arranges
Kindling from thorns and cold. (CP, 83)

This is Francis: reconstructing the ruined church, living poverty and charity. It is also Christ, pushing at the door of the grave, his

---

1. "The Companion", CP, 83.

power symbolised in his crown of thorns. What "The Sun" says is that time ("the sun") and humankind ("the man"), identified as "only" in a way that encourages in them humility and simplicity, must surrender their power to a light which is not their own. In that surrender they find fellowship (become "we") and enter the mystery of the five wounds, which is the song:

> Small hours fattening, darkness losing
> To the day that is begun,
> The lean hours, and the vesper-dowsing,
> These are only the sun.
>
> The honest blue and the rainward treason,
> The ball of pride and plan
> Skittling vapours in damp collusion,
> These are only the man.
>
> But five times we shall rise in the night
> When the halo over the hill
> Is not of my own light.
>
> * * * * * *
>
> Five Wounds, and the Canticle. (CP, 84)

However, these speakers are privileged witnesses. They have a degree of achieved understanding and mystical insight, of clean and abstract utterance which is not so apparent in the other characters: the leper, the father, the wolf, the jongleur, the serf, and the knight. These are the voices, struggling for a more human authority, which carry the body of the poem. They shape its drama by the way they undergo a change of heart as they come to recognise some of the saint's meaning (and, for each, this meaning is represented by an appropriate fragment from his canticle). In each case this involves a new appreciation of suffering.

The leper, whose disease has (metaphorically) affected all he sees and says, suffers most from oppression: oppression seasoned as much by his own bitterness and self-disgust as by the wall, town, people and

seasons which conspire in one malign community of judgment, rejection, and, worse, false and fast charity. Even the official charity of the Church is wanting: shunned by the scampering priest with discreet senses, the leper loses faith in the eucharist - "Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands." (CP, 70-71) He learns from the saint's song how to praise forgiveness and patience, then discovers fellowship in active and receptive forgiveness. His "Grey obdurate" way disappears and the walled town is open before "a white way,/ Love aloft in those hands". His physical disease is also healed as his white, leprous flesh is tactfully transformed into that "white of embodiment" which is now the eucharist. (CP, 78)

The father first sees his son, Francis, as another piece of cloth which he must possess and profit by, and is outraged to find a "wilful swerve" in the cloth as Francis not only commits himself to poverty, but shows his father how to follow suit by sharing some of that merchant's gains with the poor. His last words convey his realisation that the deviate thread now brings a greater wealth:

> But again one obstinate loitering thread
> From dead twilight fibres coaxes a sun.
> A continent is unbound,
> Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,
> Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,
> Still of my trademark - but of daylight and vine. (CP, 79)

There is, in the reference to "vine", a neat combination of natural and supernatural graces. Not surprisingly, the lesson Bernadone learns from his son's canticle is how to praise the wealth of nature, gift of providence.

When the wolf hears the saint sing in praise of fire, his first, ice-cold world becomes more warm-hearted. When he finally realises that "Now all's a twig to my fire", his attitude is more celebratory

than predatory. At first, though, the Wolf of Gubbio is obsessed with survival in his own instinctual life, whose axis is food or fear. He obeys the "kill or be killed" rule and lives only in disparate and sensate moments, forgetting everything but the basic actions of his belly. (CP, 73) Under the saint's influence, he surrenders fear and eats "the meat of a fearless stare". His final sense of the world is more open - and more remembered:

> Summer, ice, thunderbolt, come: you are the immense
> World of my imposition, you are response.
>
> Night on my axis, weep, sing, be leisurely, strive.
> I forget nothing. There is no other Alive. (CP, 80)

Somehow "There is no other Alive" is not exclusive. It seems as if the wolf has opened himself to existence, to the axis of the real, and found that the world is not a matter of violence and power. With the loss of fear, his world becomes one of invitation and response. Struggling to create a high-sounding art in which he himself no longer believes, (CP, 73-75) the jongleur must listen to the saint's praise of the moon and stars, which the Lord has "placed . . . in the heavens, bright and precious and beautiful". (CP, 80) He sees then that the "old stories", for all their omissions and inadequacies, are affirmation of love, and that, in their very limitation, they tell a liberating truth:

> The story comes to an end - not the pause for refreshment.
> Loyal voyage, loyal vision, loyal bones,
> Freed from the story, come closer and still closer. (CP, 81)

Even though he seems very much at peace with nature, the serf is actually afraid of the unusual. (CP, 75) He fears disturbance of his quiet seasons. He cannot control his world - power belongs to his lord "absolute as God". Though this lord is not as "single-rooted" to the land, he does determine its fortunes by involving it in his own political and military manoeuvres. So the serf's relationship to the earth is flawed by his anxious dependence on this lord. Before this

world of power the serf is passive and neutral: "I have no words: I am a man, and silent." His fears are unfounded: "If anything came at all, it was only the usual." (CP, 81) The usual is the miracle - or, as Francis puts it: "Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for our sister the Water, which is most useful, humble, precious, and chaste." (CP, 81) The serf's final wisdom is easier and more independent (his lord "absolute as God" has been replaced by the "Lord" of the Franciscan fragment):

> The bank has been always my granite knowledge; the source
> Unknowable. Who is it sees, from desert to ripe trees,
> A river, truly a river: no bridge, no boundaries
> Nor left/right guardsmen, but the miracle of a course?
> I am the one who sees. (CP, 81)

Approaching Assisi, the knight refuses to be perplexed by images on the road:

> Today, then, shall I be perplexed by the swarms
> Of roadside images flung from the uncalendared dreams?
> By this woman whose gaze is token
> Of a passing, by this room's
> Mud and wattle under my hooves, by this broken
> Foeman's lispings, word of what is unspoken?
>
> (CP, 76)

These are not worthy: they are weak. His preferred images are those of heroic adventure, his dreams those of power. The only conquest he admits is that of being conquered by a woman's love: "And to you, lady, fell my young golden Yes." Yet this is made ambivalent when, telling how he gave her love songs, he describes the "troubadour's crying" in terms of a trained hawk, "whose flying/ Leaves unscanned not a stanza of daylight, living to dying". Even the more savage aspects of his knightly experience are accommodated: "Things clumsy as cloud, the heathen, bloodshed, rapine, and grief/ Ran tidily venturesome as the veins of a leaf." He is not about to discover God among the weak - but the next time he speaks he has surrendered power and taken the "last place". (CP, 81-82) By then he has heard the

saint's praise of that power of God which sustains all things. He destroys his artificial dreams, dismounts, and finds himself within "the dream":

> Slashing the canvas of dreams, I have entered the dream
> And dismount within it, observing, not from the stirrup,
> Its signs and seconds, truthful core of the idyll,
> Pilot of morning, core of my green vows,
> Setting the pulse awake in a young man's dreams.
>
> All beauty, all joy? Yes, - and all pain and disfigurement.
>
> (CP, 81)

The knight is growing older - that in itself means that he is losing power in his world of brave action. But his dismounting ritualises a more spiritual loss of power: it signals an entry into fellowship, an abandonment of vertical, mounted authority and a commitment to community around the "truthful core". Weakness and community place him within the dream, whose centre is the relationship between joy and pain. Next he remembers how, even in his strength, he was haunted by an elusive sense of "the Centre" - "rather as a face/ Among the circling faces,/ The pandering elements, and the veal and the wine." (CP, 82) After he listens to Francis, the knight has reached more deeply into his own powerlessness - it is "Evening. Time to dismount."

Although dismounted, the knight still sees much the same suffering and evil. The difference is that he is not detached. He is part of suffering - indeed, he is the last part:

> When I was looking down, these were looking upward,
> Tillage, mist, flame, drawling watercourse,
> Adventurous good and evil, and you, you.
> But here, on this level, there is also land
> Laid waste, dying mist, fire's desperate subsidence,
> Swift glittering ankle bolted to ice,
> And you, and in the last place myself. (CP, 82)

This vision is more relational. It is also more participatively real. Here Webb again resists too easy a transcendence: "in the last place myself" at once acknowledges the reality of suffering, and reaches towards the gospel's promise that the last shall be first.[1].

These transformations might be interpreted simply as a structure which affirms the power of divine providence, whereby each of the characters is guided through suffering to spiritual abandonment. That is not quite the effect we receive in reading the poem. We are still reading within its overall framework, which begins with a strong emphasis on carrying the Cross and ends with a promise of resurrection uncomfortably close to the emblem of "Five Wounds". To discover how the characters change, we have to pass not only through "Brother Ass and the Saint" with its holy foolishness, but also, before that, through "Brother Ass", where the fatalistic donkey accepts that his mission in life is to carry burdens. (CP, 77) When we do discover that changes have occurred, we have to engage in a process of reading backwards, reading forwards, in order to appreciate those changes: in this way, the poem keeps to its fundamental impulse, which is not to state the meaning of suffering, but to invite us into a dramatic enactment of suffered vision. Along with the knight, we are invited to "Enter: see the many faces come closer . . ." - one of them may be the saint's. Whether we see his face or not, we have entered his meaning by engaging with the interpretative task of linking all beauty and all disfigurement.

The Canticle also includes moments when other individual aspects of suffering are closely and critically examined, and these should not

---

1. Cf. Matthew, 20:1-16.

be too smoothly absorbed into its final affirmation of glory. Rather, these help us appreciate the kinds of saving activity which Webb identifies within different experiences of suffering.

Webb's treatment of Bernadone is, at one level, quite conventional: his suffering purifies his materialistic and selfish attitudes and teaches him true wisdom. However, to paraphrase the Bernadone poems into such a proposition is to distance them considerably from their own imaginative dynamic. Bernadone speaks within a metaphor of weaving - a metaphor over which he presumes total creative control, yet a metaphor which assumes an independent and ironic power. The suffering which comes by way of this metaphor is obviously self-induced, even though the metaphor also allows that there may be a greater design at work.

Bernadone begins in an aggressive, macho manner:

> I am the merchant Bernadone,
> Also the weaver, artisan,
> Full face, full pocket, everywhere known,
> All this - and very much the man. (CP, 71)

Thereafter, everything is centred towards his power as he controls the metaphor through which he relates the life of Francis. Francis is born from his "clean fibres", his birth happily coinciding with financial success which "wove continents". Love is a matter of "Obedient threads" which "figure (his) increase". When the mother seems to devise "some wicked warm design/ For (his) son to tread the unruly way", the father not only thwarts such a design, but greatly enjoys his own authoritarian display. Yet when his son reaches adolescence and uses women to experiment with manhood, Bernadone is happy with his liberal craftsmanship and blesses "Whatever is carefully profligate". Not even war is powerful enough to warp the

father's weaving of his son. Then, suddenly, metaphor and son break away:

> But within him was born this contravention
> And wilful swerve from the one true shape.
> Now from his absolute dimension
> A man of my fibres would escape
>
> Floorwards, displaying for a badge
> Mere snippets, formless. Thrown outside,
> He renders the final sacrilege -
> Almsgiving of my hard-won pride.
>
> I say, as a man: what was of me
> Is offal. Can a last obstinate
> Thread get past the double eye
> And tinsmith's beauty of my hate? (CP, 72)

While Bernadone is here employing words with his habitual, unthinking authoritarianism, the relation between his use of biblical images and their more usual association becomes ironic. At the very point where he thinks he is using language to display his power, the language itself, out of its own memory and integrity of reference, initiates an independent judgment of his weakness. In order to describe how Francis denied his wealthy lifestyle and adopted the dress of poverty, Bernadone, still seeing himself as an absolute creator, invokes a parodic image of the Fall, speaking of Francis's fault, his fall from fatherly grace, his quasi-nakedness and expulsion. This does not, as intended, justify Bernadone's position - rather, it contrasts his intransigence with the redemptive inclination attributed to the Creator in Genesis. When he celebrates his capacity for hate and asks whether "a last obstinate/ Thread" can get past its "double eye", he judges himself as that rich person who will enter heaven with more difficulty than a camel passing through the needle's eye.[1] Since Bernadone draws this irony down upon himself and since it evolves organically, if not intentionally, from his own metaphor, the moral

---

1. Matthew, 19:23-26

judgment is muted. This does not mean that Webb softens his attitude towards Bernadone's kind of suffering. That suffering remains wilful and unnecessary - indeed, Webb underlines this by giving Bernadone such a gratingly self-congratulatory tone. The biblical references also underline Bernadone's culpability. Yet they also cooperate in another more redeeming irony: at the point where Bernadone declares his determination to keep his son's fault an unhappy one, he has introduced biblical language which more usually speaks of the "happy fault" - the Fall which occasioned Christ's becoming human. This leaves Bernadone in a state which he would be the last to recognise: subject to the design of the divine weaver.

That state is confirmed in his second speech. (CP, 79) Here he admits the futility of his money-mania, the deeper hurt he experienced in losing his son, as well as his responsibility for the break. In this he starts to appreciate and express the ironic pattern itself: "Creator declared journeyman of undoing." He has obviously been involved in some soul-searching and now when he speaks of his fabric - "the needle-prows of a schism/ Tormented my fabric" - he is wanting to possess his own vulnerable self. The basis of his perception has shifted from a tough, exterior world to a gentler, interior one. Yet he has not replaced his metaphor: he is able, rather, through suffering, to find new, liberating possibilities within it. His metaphor can express his confession of fault and failure:

> Each of my honourable words -
> He has stolen, imprison him, my son no longer my son -
> Was the groping, gaining yellow signal,
> And failure, the cere-cloth's moth-eaten pallor,
> Printless under any advance of my craft. (CP, 79)

It is able to include his wonder at the paradoxical way the obstinate thread, earlier seen as deviate, is now seen as regenerative: "But

again one obstinate loitering thread/ From dead twilight fibres coaxes a sun." It is able to utter at once his fellowship with his son and his surrender of him:

> A continent is unbound,
> Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,
> Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,
> Still of my trademark - but of daylight and vine. (CP, 79)

This wonderful fulfilment of Bernadone's metaphor encourages a sense that redemptive possibilities, though they may be of an order higher than his conscious choice, are yet contained within the imaginative pattern of his suffering. Some very unassuming biblical resonances reinforce the effect. The Franciscan praise of providence recalls the gospel's lesson to trust providence rather than one's own financial prowess. "Continents I claimed and charted against the Last Day/ But to no avail . . ." recalls the rich man who filled his barns only to find he was to die that night.[1] The reference to moths echoes the gospel's injunction to store treasure in heaven, where moths do not devour.[2] However, the great difference now is that the relation between these references and Bernadone's voice is not ironic, but sympathetic (and the references are more deeply woven into the text, so that they create a mood rather than give the message I have here extracted and made explicit). If this is so, then the final reference to "daylight and vine" also contains a judgment that Bernadone's suffering has changed its meaning and incorporated him into the symbolism of the risen Lord. The metaphor, then, has followed its own way: it has shown us and Bernadone the weakness behind his brusque power and turned that weakness into a loitering thread with which to weave a redeemed cloth.

---

1. Luke, 12:13-21.
2. Matthew, 6:19-21.

With "A Leper" (CP, 70-71) we are faced with suffering which originates in factors beyond the leper's own control. Webb does not take the opportunity for a devout meditation on the mysterious ways and permissive will of God. Instead he exploits the confrontative capacity which such suffering can have, and he attacks the values which lie behind oppression. Even as he does so, he continually emphasises that it is the leper's very deterioration which so powerfully contradicts the presumptions of power.

The image of the "high wall", expressing both inclusion and exclusion, shows how oppression is motivated by self-preservation and fear of the "enemy". As the passing crowds and passing seasons conspire to marginalise the leper, they betray the essential cowardice of an oppressive power structure: the majority singling out the minority, the group subjugating the individual to its own needs. The priest "Whose discreet senses dare not linger upon (him)" signals an indictment of cosmetic charity, where "a halfpenny's smug bandage" is used as a substitute for real engagement with suffering, particularly suffering which does not fit conventional moral interpretations, but which simply exists in all its inexplicability. Interestingly, the leper does not make a direct attack on such injustice and oppression. He is always on the edge, struggling to utter himself into some more secure and acceptable reality. Webb does not let him achieve that sort of power. It is the leper's act of being (or just-being) which is his most potent and most frightening word. Because people find his existence disgusting, the leper's broken fact of being enters their mind (as it does the reader's) as an irrefutable speech:

> There is always this question, this something, in its yellow
> Rags which prefigure the almost living ulcer
> Beneath them, whose words are the filthy vivid trickling
> Never quite congealed by a halfpenny's smug bandage . . .

> Look aside, look aside. Yet this non-human thought
> Cannot furl its bewildering pennon, must utter itself.
> I am the graceless utterance, the question, the thought . . .
>
> (CP, 71)

In allowing the leper such an activity, Webb is also challenging fatalistic, stoical attitudes towards suffering (strong in mainstream Australian culture), which assign the person a role that is basically one of passive resistance. Webb implies that suffering needs a better response: the creative and sympathetic response of mercy. This is subtly and ironically conveyed when the leper describes how he is assigned a church:

> God's mercy upon all, then: a church is assigned me,
> Of Santa Maria Maddelena - so there are stones, eyes
> To contain my grossness without the blink of ruin?
> For Santa Maria there was mercy; for me only vengeance,
> An effigy sour as my body, and a scampering priest
> Whose discreet senses dare not linger upon me.
> Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands. (CP, 71)

The leper questions whether the church and people use charity so that their walls/eyes may house his ugliness without their having to become him, to discover in their strong eyes "the blink of ruin". This is enough to expose their hypocrisy. Webb, however, is doing more: the association of "church" and "ruin" reminds us that, in Franciscan lore, Francis found his mission when he dreamed he had to restore a ruined church. Here, the devout ones, refusing the ruin, refuse the Franciscan vision. They also effectively deny the eucharist (as bread that is broken). For all their well-established structures of devotion, they lack the brokenness needed for mission and for such love as is symbolised in the eucharist. The leper, however, is drawn by his words more deeply and more barely into the true meaning of "the Love".

When, in "Ball's Head Again", Webb again confronts the presumptions of progress, he does so through a suffered landscape, and through an

Aboriginal symbol which stands neglected by the road:

> O within this land a hungry eloquence
> Tortuous on hillock, simple in cave.
> The upright flagstaff and the leaning fence
> Could hear it - even was lightened
> The burned-out scrub by an imminence, called Alive.
> All the hammers and drills of night after night,
> The cross-grained rainfalls, the whistling nine-tail years
> Stir up the shark on his rock. Let him cast loose,
> Be filled with them, welter in peace or war,
> Be twisted and turned, be lifted up and let fall,
> Have weeds in his teeth at the end of a day's scavenging,
> And come home with the blue players, as now in December,
> To this old road and this rock-face I remember. (CP, 93)

The revelatory symbol (of the shark drawn in rock) is humble and could easily remain unrecognised, although it is "at once beyond death". Though itself tortured, the landscape confronts progress with something gentle and will "gently persuade the eyes of the audience, gently".

This conclusion is anticipated: throughout the text, Webb describes moments of revelation in terms which emphasise weakness. The lunchtime conversation which first reminds him of Ball's Head is a "Haggard recitative out of one spidery throat". The Head itself is imagined as an enfeebled thing, given the cold shoulder by the "islands, points, and bays". This creates the poem's necessity: to get through the limping memories and to "see". The way to see is "A road, hard involved with the Harbour's will". The object of vision makes its own approach, though it can easily be overlooked:

> Now cruised to the roadside the aboriginal's shark;
> Here a man brushed death from his wits, and what this rock
> Affirmed was at once beyond death. We have laid its passion
> Within abject bounds
> As a value; the fence cries out for a brush and crumbles;
> But these cool hesitant lines, swift arrowhead symbols,
> Will embalm a figure of truth -
> The few innocent, infinite hours of a vision. (CP, 92)

What is here characteristic of Webb is the fellowship found between what is "infinite" and what is "few" and "innocent", and the way the

fencing mentality crumbles before the almost unnoticed "figure of truth" embodied in the aboriginal's shark.

Although "Beeston Regis" (CP, 145-147) does not quite succeed, dogged as it is by obscurity, it does clarify whenever it abandons attempts at high-sounding grandeur and moves towards a simpler focus. It is a questing poem, searching the seasonal and historical passing of time and place (as also the passing between mind and place) for the core, here indicated as "beauty". It begins with sundown, beautifully rendered in swift impressions of "Wings, song, and sundown, wide outburst of orange." Then it enters the "entire darkness", broken only by the light of the moon and of the occasional house (and, of course, it is in this darkness that the poem begins to find its own light). Morning is "candid" and shows the "Coastline: the hunting fleeing blue, and the sky". It ends in the hour of monastic prayer - "this hour" - as the poem achieves meditative focus on the Priory ruins and its witness to Christ's hour: "In the arising is the Calvary,/ And the beauty of the passing."

The poem remains concerned with the meaning of "passing" - a meaning which shifts slightly as the word is repeated throughout the poem, so that, by the end, it refers as much to the passing or passion of Christ as to the passing of time. When Webb focuses on the Priory ruins, he has them show the effects of time's passing, but he also invests them with the power to reveal Christ's victory over time, the victory of "this hour", the eternal moment established here by the monks at prayer:

> Saxon, Norman, the Priory has answered
> Time and wind and space, come into ruins
> Lovingly, crumbled, O tumbled zealously.
> The Mass, or cantata of wind in the tall stones.
> And space between:

Dust is the silent labours of the men in their long robes,
But they are here, they move,
Genuflect, tell their beads in the dancing light,
They are risen, they shall rise.
Walls, mankind, yes something of hungry earth
Melt into everlastingness, which is this hour.

In the arising is the Calvary,
And the beauty of the passing. (CP, 146-147)

The process of decomposition is voiced so tenderly that it speaks a pattern of love. There is a clear affirmation of resurrection and of eternity's triumph over time, but this should not overshadow the complexity of the line, "Melt into everlastingness, which is this hour." This recalls the earlier "Dissolving into silence, death" and while it displaces silence and death with eternity, it also, simply by calling them back to mind, creates a question about the dark relationship between the three terms. Therefore, the tensive character of belief is restored rather than resolved by the affirmation of resurrection. This tensive character is deepened by the way the abstract "everlastingness" is neighbour to the concrete "this hour", the way reading is directed from the eternal unknown to the familiar moment. The tension and faith are strengthened in the double-edged movement of the close, which locates in ruins the eternal centre, but sets the eternal centre seeking "this hour".

"Wild Honey" (CP, 231-232) also presents some difficulty of interpretation, but in this case the effort is guided by the imagery and we have, I think, one of Webb's finest poems, one of his most closely blended works of tenderness and terror. The key to the poem's success is that all its secondary images are controlled by the one image of the honeycomb, and that, within this framework, Webb follows through from one image to another.

The opening imagery is superb:

> Saboteur autumn has riddled the pampered folds
> Of the sun; gum and willow whisper seditious things;
> Servile leaves now kick and toss in revolution,
> Wave bunting, die in operatic reds and golds; (CP, 231)

The autumn sunlight (hollows within gold) unifies inner and outer worlds - "the drones", the entirely passive sufferers/ patients of Ward Two, "Grope among chilly combs of self-contemplation" and move within their own riddled and pampered mental light. There is a sense then in which the final image of this first stanza, that of a brief appearance by the sun, applies as much to their minds as to the autumnal skyscape. It is also within the military bounds of the original metaphor: "the sun, on sufferance, from his palanquin/ Offers creation one niggling lukewarm grin."

There is also a wryness and frail assertiveness of tone which leads smoothly into the second stanza:

> But today is Sports Day, not a shadow of doubt:
> Scampering at the actual frosty feet
> Of winter, under shavings of the pensioned blue,
> We are the Spring. (CP, 231-232)

The voice itself is scampering, busy at being brave and positive and energetic - yet the image of a cloudy and ageing sky troubles this optimism. The word "shavings" connotes a fragmentation and crumbling not unlike that which might be associated with the honeycomb, although in this case Webb is including a process of hollowing which belongs more to the grey of experience than to the gold. This becomes clear when, hived in a memory of rain, he recalls the hollowed spaces of his appearance and memory and how all is washed into "the single sheet of rain" (the colour grey disputing with gold for emblematic preeminence).

> True, rain is about:
> You mark old diggings along the arterial street

> Of the temples, the stuttering eyeball, the residue
> Of days spent nursing some drugged comatose pain,
> Summer, autumn, winter the single sheet of rain. (CP, 232)

It is difficult to know whether this disclosure of the "chilly combs of self-contemplation" shows distaste or desperation in the way it clings to the frightfully physical. The "stuttering eyeball" superbly condenses and connects sight and speech - but also stresses the tortured gaps present in these activities (and these gaps are themselves a variation within the honeycomb image).

So the bravura mood of spring gives way to the grey, enclosed world where the patient must see his own boredom and illness staring back from his riddled window. This rain is of the mind - a single sheet of "grey finality" which confuses all seasons but spring into the one state of atrophy. Spring is soon surrendering before an anxiety which takes on apocalyptic tremors and which finds the flower symbol as a mendicant defeated by the wall of grey:

> And the sun is carted off; and a sudden shower:
> Lines of lightning patrol the temples of the skies;
> Drum, thunder, silence sing as one this day;
> Our faces return to the one face of the flower
> Sodden and harried by diehard disconsolate flies.
> All seasons are crammed into pockets of the grey.
> Joy, pain, desire, a moment ago set free,
> Sag in pavilions of the grey finality. (CP, 232)

This third stanza might seem a lapse in imaginative direction - except that I see it as precisely a victory for the grey, a moment cut off from the honeycomb and the gold, a moment of neither faith nor doubt, but only unproductive emptiness. The autumnal light is gone and, with it, the image of the honeycomb. Gone with the image is the precarious balance of hollowness and shape, of persistent toil and sweet reward, of dark ways to beauty. The flower is "sodden" - its spatial balances are lost and it is all washed into the "grey finality".

Now that his honeycomb is denied him in the geographical and seasonal world, the speaker finds it again in the yellow hair being combed by a girl - not just a pun on "comb", but a perception of how, when being combed, long hair will fill and empty spaces in the light. This girl with yellow hair attracts the imaginative structure contained in the honeycomb image: her icon-like presentation stresses a presence almost incorporeal, but fully present, an outline enclosing no emptiness, a mobile stillness, a saved and essential gesture. She attracts all of Webb's longing for heaven, but there is a sense in which her moment is known to be brief. This does not mean that she, as the apotheosis of gold, is defeated by the grey: the poem's final stress is on the gold (even though it is at the same time returning it towards fact by calling it "her yellow hair"). The battle is clearly indicated: he is in a grey state of atrophy when confronted by her hair; she combs her hair "before the grey broken mirror" (which is as likely to be a rain-whipped reflection as any actual mirror); she shows "beyond the swirl/ Of golden fronds" awareness of his "grey stare". Webb is not precisely setting up an epiphany: he is too self-conscious for that. He is setting up a drama between the speaker's desire for such an experience and his inability to be a "naked soul", to break free of the labyrinth (another, negative, honeycomb-like way of mind) in which desire is lost. More than the mind, it is the will which cannot regain the innocence needed to know a truly simple moment. It is stranded in ambiguity and complexity:

> And terror,
> Rainlike, is all involved in the golden glow,
> Playing diminuendo its dwarfish role
> Between self-conscious fingers of the naked soul. (CP, 232)

The further we fall from innocence, the further we find that self-consciousness makes us exiles:

> Down with the mind a moment, and let Eden

> Be fullness without the prompted unnatural hunger,
> Without the doomed shapely ersatz thought: see faith
> As all such essential gestures, unforbidden,
> Persisting through Fall and landslip; and see, stranger,
> The overcoated concierge of death
> As a toy for her gesture. See her hands like bees
> Store golden combs among certified hollow trees.
>
> Have the gates of death scrape open. Shall we meet
> (Beyond the platoons of rainfall) a loftier hill
> Hung with such delicate husbandries? Shall ascent
> Be a travelling homeward, past the blue frosty feet
> Of winter, past childhood, past the grey snake, the will?
> Are gestures stars in sacred dishevelment,
> The tiny, the pitiable, meaningless and rare
> As a girl beleaguered by rain, and her yellow hair? (CP, 232)

These stanzas are interesting in the way that they do not "transcend". They begin with a transcendent and strongly visionary tone as they seek the full and naked experience of Eden, the total and essential gesture beyond law's walls. But at the same time as the poem wishes Eden might persist "through Fall and landslip", it keeps those notions in its consciousness by concentrating on death. Then it assaults the wall of death - somewhere between command, hope and questioning the sentence lies: "Have the gates of death scrape open." Then the questions - they act like honeycombs in the texture of the poem, advancing towards and retreating from fullness of meaning, burrowing into the substance of things in search of gold. Then the last three lines turn back and the desire for complete glory cannot let go of the instinct for images which combine glory with suffering: the sacred dishevelment, the tiny and pitiable, and the golden-haired girl framed by grey rain.

Obviously, this section can do no more than begin discussion of Webb's vision of suffering. The pattern outlined here will, however, be reinforced as other angles and other poems are incorporated. This then is the structure through which Webb's vision of suffering, loyal to its "Suffering Servant" model, expresses itself: redeeming and

glorifying by its woundedness; by that woundedness also confronting and contradicting the usual modes of power and of perception; creating and revealing its cauterised centre as the place of humanity or compassionate fellowship (and, therefore, the place of Christ). It prefers ugliness and agony as a way to God, and sees the frailest gestures of language as "filled with the Word unwritten".

SECTION FOUR

VISION AND STRATEGY

Webb's vision of suffering is as much a process of suffered vision as a meaning-system. His poems continually invite us to play in dramas of perception. It is, therefore, necessary to consider not only how the "Suffering Servant" model relates to his vision, but also - and perhaps more importantly - how the model encourages a profound reciprocity between the vision of the poems and the strategy by which they invite and even structure our participation.

The way in which the model determines a reciprocity between vision and strategy can be illustrated by "A Death At Winson Green" (CP, 153-154). It is possible to find in the poem evidence of a theology which claims that death gives way to eternal life and, therefore, that the dying man moves towards the core of triumph won by Christ's redemptive suffering and death. This is not, however, quite the movement which the poem enacts. Its religio-poetic strategy says the dying man is himself the core of triumph. If Christ is anywhere in the poem, he is at that core, in the man's woundedness.

Our groping eyes are continually being directed towards the single word, "dead", and each time we see it we move closer to the core reality. It is here that Webb locates the gaping truth which is the poem's centre: "a man is dying at the core/ Of triumph won". As the man is dying, the sun is rising. Whereas those who assume redemption is an unambiguous process would expect to follow sunrise all the way to resurrection, Webb insists on holding the focus on "dead", so increasing the tension between dying and rising. At the end, the dying man does achieve a Webbean style of transcendence: he becomes

"all life". Yet this state, as much one of wounded fellowship as of triumph, is never separated from the broken fact, which has the last word: "thrown on the gaping bed,/ Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead." This is not because Webb's belief in resurrection is in conflict with his experience of suffering. It is because his imagination wants to speak the moment where power and weakness converge.

Webb introduces his characteristic tension at the very beginning of the poem, when he describes Winson Green as "a green spell stolen from Birmingham". Is Winson Green a thief, deserving the general world's suspicion and judgment? Is it a place of rest rescued from the city's movement? Or is it a restorative space of almost magical potency? It may even be that the "green spell" is effective for Birmingham, as well as for the patients of Winson Green.

Birmingham does not seem to recognise Winson Green as its saving wound. Omnibus and tram look over the fence at the hospital in a way which prefigures the embarrassed attention which visitors feel they must give to the patients, and which further intensifies the poem's drama of recognition, its tension between rejection and acceptance of suffering. If Winson Green is itself a gaping truth, it is generally disregarded, and here Webb sets the song of innocence. "Here, through the small hours, sings our innocence."

It is not an easy or sentimental innocence. Describing the ward in such a way that it appears like the frayed energies of any one of its patients, Webb allows the metaphor to lead us to the reality: the "one gaping bed" where a single patient, foaming at the lip, gathers all that surrounds him, then, through the rhyming of "bed" with "dead",

carries "all" through to the centre of the poem, which is also the centre of Webb's religious vision. This is not a movement where the actual is slowly transformed into the transcendent. The mysterious, disclosing and enclosing itself in an immediate, but symbolic world, is leavening, but never leaving, immediate experience:

> Joists, apathetic pillars plot this ward,
> Tired timbers wheeze and settle into dust,
> We labour, labour: for the treacherous lord
> Of time, the dazed historic sunlight, must
> Be wheeled in a seizure towards one gaping bed,
> Quake like foam on the lip, or lie still as the dead.
>
> (CP, 153)

Metaphor creates a sympathy between the ward, the patient and time's ambivalent authority, the suffered light of history. However, the direction of the metaphor is not to take the familiar into the Other, but to bring the Other into the familiar - or, more precisely, to allow it to come: the emphasis on "labour" seems to stress not so much the power of human activity, as the point where it becomes an achieved receptivity, a struggle not to overcome the ward, but to become part of it. This is how the poem's metaphoric pattern supports its interpretative structure, which is based on the belief that light will break into beauty, not on the edge of eternity, but within the heart of suffering: on the silver, but derelict, integrity of this dying man's face.

Visitors' Day is succinctly and starkly represented: the frozen smile, dazed discomfort, disinfecting indifference - "the graven perpetual smile,/ String-bags agape, and pity's laundered glove." (CP, 153) It is important to name the tension in "agape". It does more than describe a visitor fumbling through a bag. It tells how the visitors are afraid of the patients, how they stare in discomfort and (precisely) disbelief. In this way it encodes the attitude which

would make Winson Green a space to be peered at from the outside, a space where ugly truths can be tidied away and forgotten, except for the obligatory pity of Visitors' Day. Yet it also encodes the opposite attitude: by linking with "one gaping bed", it secretly reflects that the visitors' helplessness and fear might yet be their saving wound. It tells us to look again at the wound, to connect critically and ironically (as the poem does) the well-dressed woundedness of the visitors with the more innocent or less disguised woundedness of the patients. It is a little word which invites us to share in the poem's drama of recognition. The visitors do not see sanctity before them and are described as "heathens":

> The last of the heathens shuffles down the aisle,
> Dark glass to a beauty which we hate and love.
> Our empires rouse against this ancient fear,
> Longsufferings, anecdotes, levelled at our doom. (CP, 153)

Against the fear the patients provoke - of death, of ugliness, of the will defenceless before weakness - the visitors raise their structures of power (empires) and use patience and conversation to push back the unpleasant fact. While this directs the patients back into a space of rejection and "doom", it also constitutes "doom" for the visitors since they fail to find Winson Green a redemptive space. The aisle along which they go mirrors the shuffling journey into faith (here a balance of light and dark forces), with beauty at the centre of paradox.

Like the dying man, the poem moves away from the complexities of past relationships, away from "prying" attitudes (so often in Webb those who suffer are victims of an almost institutionalised misunderstanding), away from the world of technological power and religious consolation, and towards the utter fact represented by "dead". As each stanza finishes we come back to this word and move

closer to the man and his actual dying.

The third stanza (CP, 154) creates the effect of a camera tracking from a sunset landscape, through the gathering dark, through the lighted hospital window, and finally to the hospital bed. An external environment is established, then its "realities" are "cast down" as we cross the "squared electric shore". Webb often has such an image of a barrier or transition point - quite often it is a wall. On the one side is conventional knowledge and familiar security. On the other is suffered wisdom. Here we pass to the other side to discover that the highest reality is a shadow seen on a bedside screen: the shadow of the dying man's face.

Even as the surrounding scene is created and surrendered, it is dominated by a sacrificial image: "the slouch-hatted sun/ Gapes at windows netted in wire". This unusual and evocative image, by using "Gapes", once more combines the notion of perception with that of woundedness. The bloodied sun is here likened to the doomed, if slouch-hatted, heroes of war, the Anzacs, facing battle wire and death. The Australian symbol of Gallipoli is here in conversation with the "Suffering Servant" model, and the metaphor is thus in sympathy with the dying man's unrecognised heroism. The dying beams of sunlight must also be broken on the wire netting if they are to arrive at the dying man. As they are, we move into a more interior perspective, one that does not at first appear so powerfully real. With the death of the sun, we,

> Like early kings with book and word cast down
> Realities from our squared electric shore

Here we see that extraordinary quality of "fusion" which characterises Webb at his best. The image builds itself up from the actual effect

of the lighted window, which seems to knock objects (or "realities") off its own edge and into darkness. It is also sympathetic towards Winson Green itself - that is, the state of mind. The mental process evoked by these lines is very similar to the poem's own: in a context of instability and shifting uncertainty, it takes an almost obsessive fix on the one action or object. At one level the image implies that reality is jettisoned as part of this process of mental dissolution, and so it seems to support the conventional judgments about the mentally ill. Yet there is an undertow of meaning which is definitely released, although it is extremely difficult to capture it. There is an end-of-line pause which balances the "we" exactly between a position of magical power and one of weakness. We have to respect the placement of "cast down" if we are to realise that Webb is using the gap to suggest not only that we "cast down/ Realities", but also that we are "Like early kings with book and word cast down". This admits that the patients live in a world of fantasy, yet regrets that we are no longer rulers of such language-power as to determine reality. Having lost our mythic vision, we are ourselves cast down, the old magical space of power and green spells now replaced by the square of electric light. There is also, I would suggest, a functional ambiguity attending the use of "we": does it represent the visitors, the patients, or some paradoxical combination of both? It is never quite clear. Moving thus between disapproving visitors with their judgments and suffering patients with their innocence, the poem plays the tensive gap between two faces of suffering: alienation and engagement. To identify who "we" are, we have to discern how much patients and visitors are sinners, how much victims before reality. It is almost as if Webb is inviting the reader to struggle with Winson Green's own paradoxical wisdom.

Certainly he is inviting the reader to keep his attention on the core:

> Two orderlies are whistling-in the spring;
> Doors slam; and a man is dying at the core
> Of triumph won. As a tattered, powerful wing
> The screen bears out his face against the bed,
> Silver, derelict, rapt, and almost dead. (CP, 154)

This is superb writing. The casualness of spring contrasts powerfully with the laboriousness of dying. The end-of-line pause on "dying at the core" creates its own "core" in the text, and this passes into the notion of triumph, a triumph itself absorbed, in the same line, by the image of a wing which is at once "tattered" and "powerful". This tension between strength and weakness is then heightened by the final line, which yokes glory with dereliction and death. All the while, the core of the perspective, the space which might repel as easily as attract belief, is the dying. Webb's language never fades upwards towards the effect of transcendence. His religious imagination responds to the rapture of death while simultaneously and rigorously regarding its waste and ugliness.

When evening comes, it comes like a patient stumbling from or towards his own mind's familiar light: "Evening gropes out of colour". If "light is the centre of our darkness",[1] there is something marvellously open in this line: we are never sure if the groping leads towards or from a better state of understanding. While evening is shaking off colour, the patients are trying to rid themselves of memory's painful encrustrations: "we work/ To cleanse our shore from limpet histories". In contrast to the noisy crowd rushing home from work (whom Webb ironically describes as turning beserk), this patient is not released from his task, which is to become the metaphor:

---

1. "The Chalice", CP, p. 155.

> Inviolate, faithful as a saint he lies.
> Twilight itself breaks up, the venal ship,
> Upon the silver integrity of his face.
> No bread shall tempt that fine, tormented lip.
> Let shadow switch to light - he holds his place.
> Unmarked, unmoving, from the gaping bed
> Towards birth he labours, honour, almost dead. (CP, 154)

Webb has again placed integration at the centre of brokenness. "Let shadow switch to light - he holds his place" reads as if Webb were staying with the man, and refusing the conventional Christian symbolism which would transform death into resurrection. Potentially Christian metaphors - voyage, sunrise, birth - are all contained within the fact of the dying man. Satan's temptation is resisted as much by the poem as by the patient: "No bread shall tempt that fine, tormented lip."[1] Instead, the poem commits itself to serving a beauty which generates contrary responses, "a beauty which we hate and love". Here especially we enter the "Suffering Servant" model, see the man's face as "derelict", but also "silver" and "rapt", and so explore the reciprocal and creative influence which beauty and disfigurement exert within this suffering. Having so located itself, Webb's voice is able to declare faith in the redemptive role of the other's suffering: "I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me/ With every gasp at breath".

Webb opens the final stanza with a note reminiscent of Ecclesiastes, bringing that book's determined realism to bear on this one death:

> The wiry cricket moiling at his loom
> Debates a themeless project with dour night,
> The sick man raves beside me in his room;
> I sleep as a child, rouse up as a child might. (CP, 154)

Here the darkness is a very determined force. These lines work from a kind of parallelism and create the effect of one force "beside" another: the cricket beside the night, beside the sick man, beside

---

1. Cf. Matthew, 4:1-4.

the speaker. These relationships surround a "core" in which we debate (also in a themeless way) whether cricket and night are partners or opponents, whether sick man and speaker are partners or opponents, whether, then, cricket and night relate to sick man and speaker as partners or opponents. This range of possibilities, all of which could be simultaneously realised, is consistent with "a beauty which we hate and love". Though the emphasis here is on the darker side of these possibilities: despite the troubled creativity of his "moiling", the "wiry cricket" is an unpleasant creature to have control of fate's loom. Not only is his voice unrelenting and shrill, but its "wiry" threads make so much harsher the action of the loom, which, instead of weaving wool, seems to be weaving barbed wire destinies. Though it has no discernible meaning, the project which the cricket debates with night obviously places designs on the dying man. It has control. By contrast, the dying man himself has neither discernible meaning, nor control, in his voice: he merely "raves". The rhyming of "night" with "might" is extremely ominous. However, something else is happening: the rhyming of "loom" with "room" not only sets the forces of fate against the broken fact of death, but also directs the larger, darker mystery towards that simple focus. At the same time, the metaphorical language of the first two lines is displaced by a factual tone and statement: "The sick man raves beside me in his room". This brings us back to simple attention to reality, except that it does not make reality simple. The tensions established in the first two lines, and extended into the tension between metaphorical and factual language, continue into the final line: "I sleep as a child, rouse up as a child might." There are almost two opposing selves in this "I": the one which sleeps through suffering and is as innocent as the child, and the one which wakes suddenly and fearfully at the sound of pain and is as vulnerable as a child.

Webb now makes a characteristic shift: the one in power (the one with narrative power) is rendered helpless and must rely on the paradoxical power of the dying man. This man, disfigured and disregarded, begins to increase (as the speaker decreases) and to assume, first of all, the condition of the speaker, and then of all humanity. He finds fellowship with all the broken and, at the core of the despicable, the "all":

> I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me
> With every gasp at breath; his burden grows
> Heavier as all earth lightens, and all sea.
> Time crouches, watching, near his face of snows.
> He is all life, thrown on the gaping bed,
> Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead. (CP, 154)

Webb's hermeneutic is clear in the placement of "his burden grows": the pause provides for a sense of new life emerging, but does not ignore the fundamental experience of increasing pain. The new sunrise is firmly contained within and counterpointed by the dying process. Time is ambiguously presented: is it crouching in fear of resurrection's victory, or like an animal about to take and devour its prey? The transcendent and universalising effect of "He is all life" is firmly placed at the centre of "the gaping bed". The man's representative status is not his final one, at least not in the historical line of the poem. Instead Webb uses commas to confront us with the man as fragments of fact: "Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead". The man, with the breath, breaks apart. In this way Webb's religio-poetic imagination sets itself in tension with more established religious positions and propositions, and stands precisely in its weakness.

"Nessun Dorma" (CP, 246) has a slightly different strategy. It has not the same sense of a frame commanding the eye to focus on a suffering centre. Bjorling, whose death the poem remembers, is

already "past" the immediate experience of suffering which is Webb's preferred material. While most of Webb's other poems are deeply engaged within their object, "Nessun Dorma" is more a pilgrim poem, moving in search of its object. The movement is already present in the opening line: "Past six o'clock. I have prayed. No one is sleeping." The poem keeps to this, its movement widening and heightening as it moves further into its own basic images of light and music. This may give a strong sense of harmony, even of transcendence. The poem ends with an abstract transcendence which recalls the end of McAuley's "Terra Australis" and which is so different from the immediate and existential focus which Webb sustains at the close of "A Death At Winson Green":

> O broad light and tender, lucent aria,
> Lacerate my paling cheeklines with the steep
> Bequest of light and tears, flood me until
> The man is the dawning child; be anathema
> To man-made darkness. No one, no one shall sleep
> Till the cry of the infant emergent, lost and lame,
> Is the cry of a death gone towering towards the Flame.
>
> (CP, 247)

This expresses a theological hope that death may lead to new birth, that Bjorling, the dawning child, may be taken into a new day and consumed by the Living Flame of Love. Webb even prays that the new life of grace will cast out the old life of sin ("man-made darkness"). Even so, this final harmony is fretted with words which remember that suffering, surrender, even helplessness are the way to light's victory. There is enough evidence to show that Webb will not easily let go immediate experience, will keep to the "trawling" which is the poem's meaning and strategy.

When Webb expresses his desire to suffer vicariously for Bjorling, he expresses as well his sense of the Christ-like suffering servant. It is the "broad and tender light" which lacerates even as it redeems.

The "cry of the infant emergent" is "lost and lame", but it is that powerlessness which guarantees victory, as "lame" is rhymed with "Flame". In the final line, "a death" remains single, indefinite, yet "the Flame" has a size and solidity unusual for a Webb ending (though even this is qualified, since the Flame is more desired than achieved). The effect of "towering" is interesting: in one sense, it emphasises the expansion and incorporation into God which Webb sees as the meaning of death, yet it also highlights a typical Webbean structure: the tension between the size of the mystery, here "the Flame", and the small moment of humanity. (In "Beeston Regis" the great mystery is death and Webb achieves the same effect with "The firefly life in the huge palm of death" (CP, 145).) Taken together with the phrase "steep/ Bequest", "towering" also connotes a laborious ascent. Even though Webb, in this poem, is bringing us the wide sweep and high destiny of the world, he has not entirely abandoned the sense of broken effort which is present in the "labour" of death at Winson Green (CP, 154), just as, in "Beeston Regis", "An obsolete weather cock gesticulates towards life" (CP, 146), and, in The Canticle, "Mount Subasio clambers/ Dawnward, the town of Assisi fast to his back" (CP, 69). This same sense of struggle is present earlier in "Nessun Dorma" with the use of "Trawl".

Even as the poem opens, the poet is already trawling - dragging a net along the bottom of his own dark consciousness in search of lights and comforts. He has already gone beyond the familiar consolations of prayer and sleep. He has also "wandered past the old maternity home's/ Red stone fermented by centuries" - moved beyond the mothering and fructifying influence of time. It is when he is beyond all the usual consolations that light begins to come:

> and there comes
> New light, new light; and the cries of the rooks sweeping
> To their great nests are guerilla light in a fusion
> - Murmurs, echoes, plainsong; and the night
> Will be all an abyss and depth of light between
> Two shorelines in labour: birth and death. O passion
> (One light in the hospital window) of quickening light,
> O foetus quaking towards light, sound the gaunt green,
> Trawl Norfolk, and make shiver the window-blind,
> Harass nebulae for Bjorling. Find him, find.
>
> (CP, 246)

Something of Webb's metaphysical sense is here revealed: the human figure trawling for catches of light between those two shorelines of darkness, birth and death, while the light itself is somewhat darkly described as "all an abyss and depth", an image which approximates to that of a fissure or wound. Between the darkness faith carries on its guerilla exercise, rescuing fragmentary impressions received, I would guess, on a walk through the hospital grounds. This seems to be the poem's logic: confused with grief, aware of the existential chasm, the speaker searches his environment for signs. Even though they are jumbled in with the abstract agony, the signs are: the rooks sweeping to their nests; one light in a hospital window; the shivering window-blind; and the Norfolk evening itself. The images suggest that the speaker has arrived within a room and is looking out at the sky. Watching the homing flight of the rooks, he sees, in the shape of their movement, life itself, moving between the shore of sky and the shore of earth. He wants the light of his own room (mind) to overcome the growing darkness and this directs him to more abstract images of light: the "quickening light" and the "foetus quaking towards light", which later fuse in the image of the "dawning child". This, presumably, aims at figuring Bjorling's new birth into eternal light. It is noticeable, though, that Webb keeps this possibility contained within a sense of struggle with the use of "quaking", "passion", "gaunt" and "Harass". There is also complexity in the rhyming. If

"night" rhymes with "light", it might imply complicity rather than enmity, such that light remains "the centre of our darkness". Similarly, "blind" rhymes with "find". Not surprisingly then, "fusion", the word representing harmony, rhymes with "passion". While we are reminded to look up and search the skies for a new star, the departed soul of Bjorling, and so know that he has arrived safely, Webb is not so easily sure and introduces the quiet urgency of "Find him, find."

Here the search is made more uncertain by the absence of the second, expected "him". In the second and final stanza, however, the search becomes more certain: it proceeds more from the speaker's immediate environment and it incorporates a simpler, more personal, statement of suffering. As this stanza opens we are within the speaker's room, watching the light slide off the furniture and off the radio where Bjorling's voice is heard (possibly singing "Nessun Dorma", "None shall sleep"). The day has become strips or (whip) strokes of sunlight which cut into the flesh of evening. As Bjorling is given into the light and sound, the speaker remembers his voice:

> And now the bar, the feeble light, glissade
> Of tables and glasses, and the mantel-set
> Intoning his death. Broad tender sunlights fret
> Our twilight, his remembered voice has laid
> Cock-crow and noon upon harrowed palms of the sill.

This focus saves the poem, which has been on the edge of obscurity. If the final movement towards "the Flame" is unusually transcendent for Webb, we have still to recall where it begins: here, where the watching window, searching mind, receives from the singer by opening out its wounded hands.

By contrast, "Scherzo and Adagio of Bruckner's Ninth" (CP, 203-204) is a poem which resists finality. The opening line, neatly balanced

between "a day" and "this one", keeps the comparison open-ended, so that time cannot quite be fixed even if it is certain: "For certain it is on a day very like this one". The closing line breaks and trails away, as if the poem goes out in sympathy with Bruckner's unfinished Ninth Symphony.[1] Indeed, the last line of each stanza trails away, as if the vicarious relationship between speaker and Bruckner cannot quite be established. Each stanza shifts between the healing, reconstitutive energy of the open landscape, experienced by the speaker, and the destructive energy of Vienna, experienced (at least in the speaker's imagination) by Bruckner. This is not a simple contrast; the relationship is more empathetic. A contrast may appear to be established when the speaker escapes the closed and cloying care of the hospital, enters the healthy, kind world of the sun, and then remembers Bruckner's Vienna as if it were a patient trapped in a closed world where "All love is become this mothering smothering beast . . ." However, the process of empathy between the two worlds, though keen, is made very frail by the poem's dramatic situation: the open landscape is only introduced as a momentary respite from "the submarine and constricting circuit/ Of doctors and nurses - patiently woven algae". Moreover, the landscape begins to disclose a typically Webbean mode of power: the breeze is a "Pauper", the sun is "autumnal" and sifts the leftovers of time, and, in a delicate epiphany, the red flower shows the speaker grace and emptiness:

> He watches this flower, pistil and stamen in a ruby,
> Dilating of a sudden, flushing out all its pockets,
> Panning talents of fire from the old marl and stone,
> Squatting as a good tippler under the suzerain sun. (CP, 203)

As the poem moves, the speaker tries to make his escape vicarious, to let the harmonies of his present moment vindicate Bruckner and, as it

---

1. In dealing with this poem, I have derived biographical information from Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians and The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

were, complete his work. His attempt is at once sympathetic and troubled. After the red flower, the breeze, even the lounging cows, have given their support, the speaker still comes to a standstill with the sun-symbol and seems to be absorbed by Bruckner's own preoccupation with failure:

> The sun is at a standstill. And it is time to go back.
> Is not this his house, is not this the shining room?
> He weighs them: the room, and the ruined city of his failure.
> Where is the light at its most exacting, most truthful?
> (CP, 204)

That question might operate as a coda for the poem, which looks for truth in the transcendent symbol of the sun, in the tortured process of art, and in the "wasted and frail" old man. The old man is the one Webb cannot ignore. He next considers the unfinished symphony: "The huge Theme masses. You are wasted and frail . . ." On one level, this may simply suggest that the very human artist is but a frail vessel for the sacred fires of art. However, it also focuses the poem's tension: in the break between the "Theme" which is great and which gathers and unifies and the "You" which is small and which disperses and disintegrates. The poem strains after meaning, knowing it must leave the sun and return attention to "the room, the ruined city of his failure". Indeed, the poem does much the same as the sun:

> the autumnal sun
> Sifts archives with a warm paternal hand. (CP, 204)

This stresses the delicate, reconstitutive intention of the poem, sifting tokens of the past to see if something of Bruckner's will last. Despite our knowledge that Bruckner did achieve recognition (even in Vienna), while we are in the environment of the poem, the question seems to remain open.

Even the metaphor of a passing day, which could provide the sense of

an ending, is broken open by the way the rising wind offsets the setting sun and by the way the sun itself defers to the man. Nor is the rising wind necessarily an image of the Holy Spirit: it could equally represent a shifting, disintegrating force, as the man "shakes". As the day closes, the man (who seems by now a representative figure, especially uniting Webb and Bruckner) "taps homeward, with his acolyte shadow behind him". If this suggests shaking off his mortal coil and going to his holy home, it also encodes an important tension when, in "acolyte shadow", the sacred is joined to the transient. Something similar occurs with Webb's use of St Florian's. It could represent a completed circle for Bruckner. As a child, Bruckner was taken to this Augustinian monastery by his parents and, after his father's death (when Bruckner was thirteen), he enrolled as a chorister, and studied organ, piano, violin and music theory. St Florian's was in many ways the home of his musical and religious identity. Later he was schoolmaster and organist there. He was also, on his instructions, embalmed and buried in the crypt beneath the great organ. It is this note of decomposition, more than that of completion, which seems to strike Webb, who makes of St Florian's organ a symbol of the ironic and aching distance between the sacred music (he even includes reference to Bruckner's mastery of polyphony) and the dust (and even here he adds another irony: that the creator and player of sacred music remained very much a peasant, unable to assume the smooth social graces):

> - Old man, bones are breaching the very integument;
> St Florian's organ mumbles in its argument
> With the polyphonic dust settling like sin
> Upon stops and upon the pipe's smudged peasant-grin . . .
> (CP, 203)

It also needs to be noted that Webb's imagination favours the elements of failure in Bruckner's life (as Bruckner's imagination seems also to have done). Webb edits reference to Bruckner's triumphant tours, and

focuses on the antipathy directed at his symphonies by the Vienna Philarmonic and the critic, Hanslick. He forgets the twenty-five young musicians, including Mahler, who stayed on to applaud the badly received Third Symphony, and focuses instead on those other young musicians, treacherously kind, who advocated and even executed revisions in Bruckner's scores, making him more palatable, wanting the "savours of greatness", but not the "line and rigour" of suffered genius. Even Hans Richter, a conductor who supported Bruckner's work, seems to be absorbed by the imaginative atmosphere of failure and betrayal and to be cast in a predatory role as he "smiles in the ruined city,/ Like a fine cat on a gatepost. Pad and claw of pity."

"Scherzo and Adagio of Bruckner's Ninth", then, derives its imaginative force mainly from the empathetic relationship Webb establishes between the speaker and Bruckner. Many interactive associations are gathered into that relationship: the momentary respite from the hospital, the attempt to make meaning of Bruckner's failure (as of the speaker's hospitalisation), the uneven connection between life and art, and the fractures in the poem's text and address. Working within these associations is the theme of the artist as a glorious failure.

Perhaps the poem could be described as an expression of counterpointing love, holding harmony and distress, attempting to heal as much with sympathy as with power. Yet it does not have the ready assurance which occurs in "To A Doctor" (CP, 141), when Webb invests a gentle doctor with the healing power he wants in music. The doctor is an organist, whose counterpointing touch allows the dreary, importunate organ pipes their one and glorious sound, a sound which tells ultimately of redemption in Christ:

> All is in order, the close uniform dreary
> Tubular pipes stand glum with open mouths,
> Who spoke and sang together in their glory.
> Learned and gentle, you resume your station,
> Musician, or angel of Annunciation:
> Timbers, rooftops, with painful joy will move
> When your hands revive the contrapuntal love. (CP, 142)

Here the strategy is closer to that of "Nessun Dorma". Such clean strategy and song is, however, rare in Webb. "The Tower" (CP, 204-205) counterpoints a figure of innocence with one of battered experience. The young child is vulnerable before the future, which will bring "vats of the cruel smelter" - an image which may suggest suffering's refining process, but which stresses more its unjust and involuntary character. The speaker is very much attuned to pain, and the way it reaches out to involve "Costessey in every weather". In the third stanza, his sense of suffering is mediated through somewhat abstract images which burn with a sense of oppression, distortion and madness. One moment is quite concrete: "the dead gutted bird/ Lolloping in the wind". This becomes an unbearable focus and, as the image of wound occupies the speaker's imagination, he voices a desolation which is personal, poetic, and complete:

> the mad process gaining:
> I could not stand and feel, nor write a word. (CP, 205)

The speaker's suffering is all the more acute because his eye - of sad, mad experience - is estranged from that of the other, the eye of innocence:

> And why do I look from you at this dead thing?
> It cannot hold your innocence, nor your eye. (CP, 205)

This is potentially the worst suffering, since it images and dramatises isolation rather than fellowship and consolation. Without these, brokenness cannot exert its paradoxical, redemptive power. Yet Webb again redeems his art through the wound: from within the image of the dead bird comes another sign which is also seen to "stretch and

flap a wing":

> Out of the quicksands and the anarchy
> I see a strangeness stretch and flap a wing:
> This tower of red stone, eroded whistling ghost
> Where bush and grasses cross themselves and cower
> And juvenile pigeons play at being lost
> And the airman's initials rest one single hour. (CP, 205)

With this irruption of bloodied, broken stones, the speaker reveals that his nostalgia for innocence is a form of fear and reaffirms his faith in the Christian and vicarious nature of suffering. The symbol of the tower encloses a reference to Christ in Gethsemane[1], as the speaker takes the cup of suffering:

> What frightens you must be a ruin, and waste.
> But on this Easter Monday I will drink
> Your Costessey to the dregs, and likely think
> To find in these red stones the selfsame taste. (CP, 205)

While the tower has a redeeming function and brings a truce "to the ceaseless causeless war", Webb does not allow it to become distant from its constitutive pain. When the speaker describes how moments of peace rise up in his soul, the language recalls the irruption of the tower, and of the dead bird:

> For out of my soul one hundred times before
> Has leapt a ghostly thing, bare in its power,
> As faith, and to the ceaseless causeless war
> Brought truce, bearing itself like this old tower.
> (CP, 205)

Here we clearly see how Webb's language makes the poetry's vision and strategy one. Just as peace has a posture which, "bearing itself like this old tower", combines suffering and dignity, so too tower and faith have their similarity centred in the phrase, "bare in its power".

---

1. Cf. Luke, 22:39-44.

SECTION FIVE

IMAGINATION AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

If we locate the religious character of Webb's poetry in its imaginative structuring, this helps articulate a more reciprocal relationship between the "dogmatic" and "existential" dimensions of his work. At this point, my argument has two directions which are closely interconnected, but which, for convenience, I want to treat separately. I want, first of all, to illustrate how poems which make no obvious or explicit claim to religious meaning, which might correspond to what we often imagine as "experience" or "ordinary life", and which are certainly pre-theological in their reference, nevertheless do show the shaping influence of the model which will so determine the later, religious frame of reference. Then I want to illustrate how, even with poems which do give explicit expression to a religious tradition (the Catholic tradition), there is at work an individual imagination which selects and shapes stories and dogmas so that they are appropriated by way of the model.

Whatever the obvious differences at the level of confessional content, the interpretative grid through which Webb filters his perception of "God" has the same basic structure as that through which he filters his perception of "experience". It is important to appreciate this, otherwise we could easily misrepresent Webb's tension between wholeness and brokenness, projecting it on to his life as a tension between "God" and "experience". That is not the case for Webb: the tension constitutes both "God" and "experience". What we have is a continuum within his imagination, not a disjunction between his faith and his life.

To illustrate this side of the argument, I want simply to survey some of the poems which precede The Canticle - poems which keep fidelity with a very early confession of Webb's:

> But I have chosen the little, obscure way
> In the dim, shouting vortex; I have taken
> A fool's power in his cap and bells.[1]

"The Gunner" (CP, 57) attracts Webb's sympathy because he is so vulnerable. The poem's dramatic centre is characteristic: a man unable to erect articulate walls against some fearsome knowledge, which may yet break him into a deeper level of truth. Nor can he hold the boundaries between the world of facts and the world of dream: he lives somewhere between the remembered world of air warfare and the subconscious patterns of dreaming:

> While slipstream plucked at a wafer of glass and steel,
> Engines sliced and scooped at the air's thin wall,
> And those dim spars dislodged from the moon became
> Red thongs of tracer whipping boards aflame.

While in the dream the plane is pushing at "the air's thin wall", in the poem the dream is pushing at reality's thin wall, threatening to dislodge the familiar sense of identity and place - just as the still hut in which the gunner sleeps and dreams is "Uneasily strapped to the reckless wheel of his will". As the poem progresses, he becomes more and more a victim, whose position of helplessness leaves him open to the powerful intervention of images he has himself dreamed. It becomes difficult to say which is the primary reality - objective and subjective states are intermingled, just as the mechanics of flying become those of dreaming. This confronts the usual power base of knowledge, because the poem finally suggests that the language of dream may reach more deeply into the real than the language of articulate discourse. Moreover, the world which speaks through this dream is described as "deaf and blind" - once more a mendicant is

---

1. "Cap and Bells", CP, p. 4.

pressing at the walls of rational control; once more an unexpected revelation is anticipated - this time from forgotten, instinctual forces:

> The world spoke through its dream, being deaf and blind,
> Its words were those of the dream, yet you might find
> Forgotten genius, control, alive in this deep
> Instinctive resistance to the perils of sleep.

While sleep is a conventional, even tired metaphor for death, Webb gives it back some danger by suggesting that death has a better memory than life, and a greater truth. It is a truth, though, which, like the gunner's real/dreamed voice, appears in patches, "driving electric fires/ Through the panel of sleep, the black plugs, trailing wires".

With "Dawn Wind on the Islands" (CP, 57) Webb clearly indicates that he will not use faith to tidy up the pieces of life, the bombers shot down during the war:

> Here, where they died, oblivion will burn
> The moth-winged bomber's glass and gristle; weirs
> Of time will burst, burying them; the sun
> Casually mock a cross of stars.

Yet the poem enacts the drama of faith as it often expresses itself in Webb's poetry: the fact of death so that "the dead will be the dead,/ Twirled in a yellow eddy, frail and dull"; the merging of positive and negative forces - "only life and death" - so that one does not have power without the other; and out of this the question as to whether the dawn wind signals some release.

Webb refuses the opportunity to make dawn an image of transition, and sees it instead within a pattern of decay, where firm and well-defined spaces break:

> The needle of dawn has drugged them, life and death,
> Stiff and archaic, mouldering into one,
> Voiceless, having no mission and no path,
> Lolling under a heavy head-dress. When
> The puppet sun jerks up, there will be no

Convergences: the dead will be the dead,
Twirled in a yellow eddy, frail and dull.

The first stanza then concludes with an image which more explicitly anticipates Webb's whole strategy of drawing beauty out of ugliness (though it also increases beauty's ambiguity with "glittering"):

These hands of mine that might be stone and snow,
Half bone, half silent fallen dust, will shed
Decay, and flower with the first glittering gull.

The final stanza works between the world of familiar fact and the world of "other meaning". There is an insistence on focusing the factual and immediate - underlined by the repetition and isolation of "this". Yet the enjambement threatens to suspend that insistence, and suggests some other interpretation trying to rise through the world of fact. Webb never asserts what this might be - except negatively, when he says he cannot know if it is life. His assertion may not be confident, but his imagination is sure: the image he gives is of something predatory, but weak, something "shaking the bay" yet "labouring to rise":

The sun will rise, and with its landward swing
The dead will be the dead, surrendered up
To a dark annexation. Life will hang
Red lights of warning on the crumbling ship.
There will be only life and death. The slow
Roll of the east, the passport of the day
Blazing release, while still this moment lies
Over the island, this. I cannot know
If it is life that wakes, shaking the bay,
Hungry, and circling, and labouring to rise.

The arrangement of the lines creates a marvellous effect - in fact, it enacts the phrase, "labouring to rise". The stanza begins with confidence - "The sun will rise" - swings quickly to a tersely stated, evidently factual, insistent statement - "The dead will be the dead" - then suspends both with the placement of "surrendered up". This suspense is continued with "Life will hang", "while this moment lies", and "I cannot know". However, each time the suspended line moves on, it shows less of the factual tone and takes on more and more the

"slow/ Roll of the east". The stasis of death gives way to an atmosphere which, if ambivalent, is dynamic. This is clear once we see how terms such as "crumbling", "Blazing", "shaking", "circling", "labouring", which are alive with movement, gather force even as the speaker says he cannot know their meaning.

As in "Dawn Wind on the Islands", there is also in "For My Grandfather" (CP, 48) a determination to stay with the facts, to contemplate, not an eschatological possibility, but "The bones ambiguous with life and death". R.F. Brissenden has noted that there is a sense that "everything in the situation is working towards some final resolution, some climactic event" and sees this occurring when the shells "lift/ Fragile and holy faces to the sky".[1] What strikes me about this moment is the relationship which so often attends climactic moments in Webb's poetry, where the climax is itself a fragile vision rescued from the more complicated texture of the poem, a small moment coming out from large dissolution. And the image which invites the moment of epiphany:

> And to those years dusk comes but as a rift
> In the flesh of sunlight, closed by memory.

This image of the wound then associates deeply with the way Webb words the shipwreck. The wind is somewhat ragged: "the gust/ Piecemeal upon a widening quietness fails". The dead grandfather is enclosed in his beloved sea by images which stress their common decay: "against the bony mast/ Work in like skin the frayed and slackened sails". Their common decay encourages Webb to establish their fellowship, just as the speaker is finally one with the grandfather in weakness:

> My years and yours are scrawled upon this air
> Rapped by the gavel of my living breath:

---

1. R. F. Brissenden, "Frank Webb's Country: The Landscape of a Mind", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 47.

> Rather than time upon my wrist I wear
> The dial, the four quarters, of your death.

Webb's treatment of some large, even legendary characters from Australian history takes a characteristic direction. The power of such characters as Morgan, Lawson, Boyd and Leichhardt is very much located in states of weakness. If they acquire a kind of heroic stature, it is not even because they endure through failure. Rather it is, in Webb's more closely paradoxical view, that in failure they embody a surprising truth. Some critics have briefly touched on this. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, for instance, finds in Webb's version of Leichhardt "paradoxes about the relation between his ridiculous aspect and his courageous aspect". [1.] He also makes this point when distinguishing between Webb's Leichhardt and other versions of the heroic:

> But against Slessor's Cook and Fitzgerald's Tasman, Webb has fixed on a most ambiguous, even a grotesque figure. He is by no means seeking a conventional hero, let alone a successful one. As the title suggests, he is seizing on a figure who thrust himself into the limelight and taking a good look at this figure. We are shown Leichhardt in all his incompetence and indecision, and there is an attempt to show dramatically how these weaknesses are interwoven with the explorer's idealism. [2.]

Vivian Smith points out that Webb's heroes are doomed figures, for whom truth does not gather to power, but rather dissipates and fragments. [3.] At one point Michael Griffith seems to argue that Webb sees the heroic in a movement towards personal actualisation, a movement which has its model in Christ as the perfect human figure. [4.] However, at another point he is concerned to argue that Webb is not in search of gods or heroes, and seems to imply that it is not

---

1. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Some Aspects of Early Webb", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 54.
2. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Order and Turbulence", Melbourne or the Bush, p 117.
3. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p 412.
4. Michael Griffith, "Francis Webb - The Poet as Hero", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 62-72.

integration so much as disintegration which matters, since Webb wants to divest figures like Leichhardt of their mythology and to find the stained and vulnerable mortal. [1.]

I would go further. It is precisely this structuring which actively anticipates Webb's more explicitly religious poetry: the attraction to characters found in weakness; then the attempt to show how that weakness is closely linked to an unconventional, but immediate, dignity. Further, the attempt can never become complacent, for it must suffer the way perception and language "follow charts of guesswork". [2.] It is helpful, then, to take a closer look at the imaginative variations Webb works with the figures of Lawson, Morgan, Boyd and Leichhardt.

When "Henry Lawson" (CP, 59) was published (1950)[3.], it was still very common to view Lawson as the Poet of the Bush and the Apostle of Mateship. Webb is not attracted to this aspect of the "Lawson legend". His imagination sympathises with the later Lawson, whose writing powers had failed him and who read his verse for drinks of beer - "The pub's fool". Nor does he create a tragic contrast between the earlier and later Lawson. Rather, he stays with the image of a man who is mocked until, through the agency of one of Lawson's own creations, "Macquarie's Mate", he unites the image of indignity with one of fellowship.

---

1. Michael Griffith, "Francis Webb's challenge to mid-century Mythmaking: The case of Ludwig Leichhardt", Australian Literary Studies, 10, 1982, 448-458.
2. "Author's Prologue", A Drum For Ben Boyd, CP, 21.
3. Bulletin, 13 December 1950, p. 18, Cf. "Francis Webb (1925-1973): Bibliography", Compiled by the Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature, University of Queensland, Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 88.

The poem opens with the fact of death: "Death had you: quiet, shrill, it was all the same." The matter-of-fact tone emphasises isolation and callousness as death comes for one neglected and forgotten. By way of contrast, the rest of the first stanza takes up the lives of "others", its tone, rhythm and diction underlining their (perhaps uncaring) serenity:

> But for others a Sunday came
> With its leisurely blue and white,
> Twelve-footers rakish in a freshening wind,
> An old man's moody pipefuls, and a boy's mind.

Webb then brings Lawson back from the dead and again places him before this audience of "others". Although overly opaque, the poem can be seen as an incipient drama. At centre-stage, Lawson, himself absolutely absent, is played by the image of his final days. The poem questions whether this is "the truth". Once again, the drama has an absence as its centre, and is concerned with the relation between factual and imaginative modes of knowledge, as with the relation between "truth" and those partial perspectives on truth which, if taken too absolutely, can imprison the very truth they indicate. Nor is there any inclination to let the drama romanticise Lawson: the setting is determined by the image of alcohol, and highlights "sodden conjecture spread/ Over back fences" and "sour vapour on shambling footpaths and bays".

The image is still in control as the texture of Lawson's last years is brilliantly conveyed:

> Dawn's broom in the gutter; like a label the sneer
> With every doled-out beer
> And landlord's mercy; the alloy
> Rusting each sense when from a ferry's box
> Of roped-in glitter swam night, and those faces empty and lax.

It is an image, though, which supports an uncompromisingly factual perspective and denies Lawson any consolation. Images of night, rust

and dissipation determine that he will have no fellowship with sunshine, silver and singleness. Nor will he himself redeem his state through "water and words".

At the last moment, though, Webb allows the imagination a new and redemptive direction. From the pubs where Lawson spent his last days, Webb makes a transition to Stiffner's Shanty, in Lawson's story, "Macquarie's Mate". There Awful Example is defending the honour of his mate, Macquarie, who is presumed dead. He volunteers to fight Macquarie's detractors, and is rescued from his own valour by the arrival of his mate (not dead after all). Lawson ends his story with the "resurrected" Macquarie defeating his detractors and sending the loudest mouth off thus:

> Barcoo thought he heard his horse again, and went out in a hurry. Perhaps he thought that the horse would get impatient and break loose if he left it any longer, for he jumped into the saddle and rode off.[1]

Webb, however, ends his borrowing earlier than this: with the advance of the stranger who will be revealed as the one thought to be dead. This ending could be interpreted as a variation on the theme of immortal art. However, it seems to me that the parallel with the Emmaus story is inescapable, especially since "Someone" will appear again in Eyre All Alone. Webb's strategy, then, does more than affirm that Lawson's imagination has power over the fact of death. It believes that here where the actual man is mocked and most in need of fellowship, imagination has power to summon a Lawson about to be identified with Christ.

> Back to the grave with this, then - but remember, wait:
> The pub's fool, Macquarie's Mate,
> Can hear them mocking his buried thought and stress,

---

1. A Camp-Fire Yarn, ed., L Cronin, (Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984) p. 352.

Rises, becomes his dead friend - having nothing more -
And will fight to a standstill. Someone watches at the door.

Typically, Webb holds Lawson and his story at the threshold - a stance which itself actively anticipates the later one, where "fact" and "faith" are closely held in tension.

With "Morgan's Country" (CP, 46) Webb displaces the facts into an identification of Morgan and his landscape. Even the central dramatic fact - Morgan's death - is absent, and so shapes a hole in the poem, but a hole which strengthens the metaphoric process. The terrible facts of Morgan's life are also displaced. When Webb wants to communicate his basic sense of Morgan - a man knowing he will be killed, having no other response but to kill - he employs language which is almost apocalyptic to summon a demonic figure, then transfers attention to a very simple description of a blowfly:

Ashes drift on the dead-sea shadow of his plate.
Why should he heed them? What to do but kill
When his angel howls, when the sounds reverberate

In the last grey pipe of his brain? At the window sill
A blowfly strums on two strings of air:
Ambush and slaughter tingle against the lull.

This is very effective, and it illustrates two important aspects of Webb's imagination: how it derives power from relating the large to the small; how it informs a moral sensibility which sympathises with the victim (at the risk, here, of ignoring the issue of culpability).

As the facts of Morgan's life are also displaced on to the landscape, Morgan becomes more and more a victim. The poem derives its energy from the way various perspectives - police, wolf, Morgan - are fused into the one force of landscape, "Stunted and grey, hunted and murderous". It is a landscape in which characters are more fated than free, irresistibly drawn to the unnamed centre of violence. At the

same time, as if to counteract that movement into oppressive power, there is another movement in which the landscape is mediated through images which stress debilitation and which call for sympathy. This is particularly so at the point where Webb most fuses Morgan with his landscape and where he implies his death:

> But the Cave, his mother, is close beside his chair,
> Here sunless face scribbled with cobwebs, bones
> Rattling in her throat when she speaks. And there
>
> The stone Look-out, his towering father, leans
> Like a splinter from the seamed palm of the plain.
> Their counsel of thunder arms him. A threat of rain.
>
> Seven: and a blaze fiercer than the sun.
> The wind struggles in the arms of the starved tree,
> The temple breaks on a threadbare mat of glass.
>
> Eight: even under the sun's trajectory
> This country looks grey, hunted and murderous.

It is a landscape signifying death, sympathising with Morgan, though the final line places its woundedness in tension with its irresistible and ambiguous force.

This is not a religious poem, except in the limited sense that it expresses a spiritual sense of landscape and, through that, implies the metaphysical question of necessity and freedom. All the same, I would suggest a reading which says that the poem does contain indications of a religious imagination which, as it were, "leans/ Like a splinter from the seamed palm of the plain". In that image, as in the one of the wind struggling "in the arms of the starved tree", we can see Webb trying to open up a dialogue between his Australian story and his Christian one. This might begin to clarify, "The temple breaks on a threadbare mat of glass." Is it a conflation of two images: the window breaking as shots are fired, the veil of the Temple being torn as Christ dies? If so, it is still contained within one of Webb's favourite structures: the powerful force is broken by the

fragile one. The dialogue does not really begin and the final couplet shows the landscape resist the sun's influence and retain a religious sense which is savagely, not redemptively, sacrificial.

The manner in which imaginative structures anticipate religious ones can be seen even more clearly in the two major poems, A Drum For Ben Boyd and Leichhardt in Theatre. Each poem responds to a disappearance: the disappearance makes a gaping hole in the known world, a hole which at once defeats and glorifies truth and language, just as it combines finite perspectives with infinite sense.

While the poems do not identify their own empty centres as the saving wound of Christ, they do argue that disintegration is the way to deeper truth. Each of the "heroes" is glorified not when he actively achieves his ambition, but when, humbled, he realises with Voss that this is the reason and the way: "So saints acquire sanctity who are only bones."[1]. Leichhardt guesses at this when, describing Australia as "a land where man becomes a myth", he describes the journey into myth as a painful incorporation into a larger reality where beauty and terror are crossed:

> This is a land where man becomes a myth;
> Naked, his feet tread embers for the truth:
> Desert will claim him, mountain, precipice,
> (Larger than life's their terror, lovelier
> Than forms of mere life their forms of peril); (CP, 36-37)

With Leichhardt in Theatre this vision is sustained by the way Webb uses the historical, narrative substratum to stress desolation, and confirms this through symbolism. "The First Expedition", which was actually successful, is used to dramatise the death of Gilbert and the illusory nature of Leichhardt's achievement. Webb's description of

---

1. Patrick White, Voss, p 414. I would interpret "So" as having a modal as well as a causal sense.

the night Gilbert was killed as "Endless assaults of blackness/ Repulsed by sallies of firelight" is preceded by a prophetic image of wound and sacrifice:

> But rain held off. The tightened atmospheres
> Hacked to the verge of sunset a deep ravine,
> And three galahs in unfaltering arrowhead
> Dipped in towards its lips, hurtled far down,
> Dots on the flowing, sacrificial red. (CP, 39)

When Leichhardt, after enjoying the "witching falseness" of the sea, returns to fame, it is a place where "narcotic murmurs connote bronze", where "a seeming trivial thing" which held the "clue" was missed amid the self-importance. Webb, with more than a touch of irony, directs his central metaphor of performance at the hollowness of Leichhardt's role and begs his audience to pity and applaud:

> But this leading-man
> We shall not see again. For God's sake grant him
> Applause, and a long sleep
> With myths for lackeys. In a sense he died,
> Making no other journey. (CP, 41)

If Leichhardt has made the myth become a man (himself), then "The Second Expedition" unveils his pretensions. The "Doctor" is ludicrous: being kicked by mules and making speeches as if his words might have cosmetic power over his decaying ambitions. This moment plays out in the narrative what is already contained within the performances of the servant girl and the victim-clown. The girl, seeing Leichhardt only as "The funny old leader of the pantomime", offends her respectable audience: as much by the fact that she draws attention to the pantomime quality of what they want to think the "real story", as by her own comic, irreverent version of the great man:

> He mounts like Quixote on a spavined old nag
> That could kick the slogan from a sugar bag.
> He mayn't know north from south, but he's clever
> At playing with windmills in the Never-Never.
> Off! With a cooee and a ribald song,
> Near stirrup short, off stirrup long. (CP, 37)

When the "clown besmeared with flour and ketchup" comes "Lolloping forth from the wings" and berates the disapproving audience, he does not merely confirm the girl's comic role. He performs his own - but it is a darker one, in which he tells his audience they cannot conquer laughter since it is part of the senseless character of life, then dares them to destroy it by imitating it:

> There's no violence
> Can silence laughter. Well, then, laugh with the thing!
> Turn on it in ugly mimic carnival,
> Guffaw and shout and stamp until your voice
> Cuts off its air, splinters its blinking eyes,
> Till its head rolls off to a corner, and its powers
> Settle like chains tossed down -
> But no, friends. This is Leichhardt, known as the Doctor.
> (CP, 38)

Once the clown has announced the "ugly mimic carnival", it may not itself be easily repressed. Under guise of acknowledging how the audience feels alienated from such a comic treatment of their hero, the clown has, with the last line, mischievously linked their respectable and formal attitudes with the respectable and formal version of "the Doctor", and so the journey of Leichhardt becomes a pantomime which either reflects or rejects their perceptions of him. "The Second Expedition" presents them with their hero, previously cast in bronze, caught thieving sugar and making among his half-starved men yet another speech in which he "extols the dignified doom of sugar/ Replacing energies that leadership/ Must dissipate". (CP, 42) This is a parodic image of sacrifice which serves to confront the egocentric attitudes of Leichhardt (and of those who made him into a statue).

In "The Room" Leichhardt has to surrender his self-serving symbols for "a gaunt symbol, to be shuddered from". He seems to understand that the "source" for which he is searching is somehow one with death. In that he seems not only to have found the source of the clown's dark laughter, but also to have returned to the poem's opening. There, as

orchestra and audience prepare themselves for the performance, as stage and landscape imagery blur into one, a wandering spotlight catches the figure of Sturt who "stands blazing in his own white world". Sturt's is preeminently an inner world: "Light has rapped at his skull, flooded into his heart . . ." As people question him about the "inland sea", Sturt replies (inasmuch as his silence is mediated by the speaker) in a way which reads the inland sea as a metaphorical state reached by way of the desert's stinging light:

> The inland sea. Yes! There were sea-length waves and surge,
> Sand's arched and massive velocities topped with a foam of glitter;
> And where sun grazed salt-glazed rock and the light's discharge
> Circled its fabulous rings of tremor, there was water.
> Here is the centre of their island. Shall he tell them of Poole, of death? (CP, 35)

Webb is also establishing an ironic relationship between Sturt and Leichhardt: Sturt failed to cross the continent from South to North (1844-46), while Leichhardt, at the same time (1844-45), succeeded. It is the failure who dominates the poem's opening, and as it continues Leichhardt is more and more configured to him. As he paces "The Room", Leichhardt is taken into a more domestic version of Sturt's imagery of light (and the more domestic is also the more agonising):

> The neat montage
> Of flawless lamplight gathers in his movements;
> Exact, predictable as waves, his thoughts
> Shatter themselves between the bedsteads's knuckles.
> Therefore we bring the doctor to this room. (CP, 43)

As rumours circulate about his leadership, Leichhardt loses his glorified self-image. He

> Peers long into the glass and sees himself
> As for the first time, stained and vulnerable,
> Branded with whispers. Steeply he rebels,
> Curses Mann, Perry, and the merciless rain:
> Till something laughs behind him, and he breaks.
> (CP, 43)

Here the victim-clown has laughed. Webb has also, with the pause at

the end of the first line and in the middle of the second, sounded the tension between self-knowledge and suffering. Thinking of the dead Gilbert, Leichhardt, again echoing Sturt, wonders if he has found "the source", then finds a question staring from the dust, a question whose answer "traces/ Legends of fright upon his brain". He must confront his own fear (of death, and of humiliation) as "the heart/ Crumbles beneath its golden arrogance". Here the land he had tried to conquer as fact begins as metaphor to rule and scourge his inner world:

> Desert with bleached eyes, mountain with the hawk's
> mouth,
> Sea with her witching falseness; cordon him.
> He is taken, stripped, and bound. (CP, 44)

So broken and bound, Leichhardt yet comes out from behind the room's walls and enters "The Third Expedition".

In this final section, Webb uses the failure of Leichhardt and the absence of historical knowledge as a way of celebrating the world renewed by metaphoric and symbolic attentiveness:

> Let what is waste lie waste; yield to the pressure
> And silence of their fate. World, words, are closer.
>
> It is where sun and world blossom into words
> As a tree's lovely frenzies of bloom divide
> Winter from winter, month from month of birds:
> In such clean space the man and his shadow ride.
> See them upon the hills, life-sized and breathing,
> Where they will go, how perish - this is nothing.
> (CP, 44-45)

In these lines we hear "the long wings of chimes", the whispers of transcendence - but not in the very last lines of the poem itself. As the metaphor of the inland sea returns to claim the poem, as it takes us "Beyond the gates" and into "the surly straits" (presumably beyond death and into the source), the poem throws back, at the last, a very troubling image of wreckage:

> All that is life comes here. Beyond the gates
> Only storm, drowned things, rock in the surly straits.
> (CP, 45)

A Drum For Ben Boyd ends with a more reconciliatory tone, with "a moment's peace over the whole island". Yet it is much less concerned with suggesting that this particular man of power may have found, in suffering, another and more paradoxical heroic mode. Webb is not interested in the "facts" about Boyd's character, just as he is not really interested in his achievements. He is interested in the process of reporting - and, specifically, the mirror-action which ensures that the more the poem's characters try to fill up the hole left by Boyd, the more powerful it becomes, reflecting the gap within themselves, as well as the gap between their own finite perspectives and the infinite sense in which they participate.

In many ways the poem dramatises the beginnings of a shift from subjective and self-confident interpretations to ones which are intersubjective and humble. Each of the characters, having used imagination at the service of his own ego, finds that the absence of Boyd will not conform to the illusions of his subjectivity, but becomes an image of his own fear. Each begins to wonder, along with the "roving reporter":

> what is imagination
> But oneself flying back at unsuspected angles? (CP, 19)

While the reporter may himself see this as a strategic apology for his own failure to find "first-hand information", it also signifies the hermeneutical problem which provides the poem's centre. This problem is examined as the characters give their versions of Boyd, then find themselves exposed, not by the history of Boyd's achievements, but by the symbol of his absence. Jan Strindberg, having forsaken Norway and the epic, is shaken by the way Boyd's "Wanderer" glides into his peaceful world and carries with it, into his "backwater of life", the breaking and brave figures of his past. Boyd's presence made him

explore the centre of his own truth:

> I have chosen bread for dreams, the hearth-place for action,
> Safety for courage, shutters and a candle for stars,
> Handed over my youth for an old man's ironic caution.
> (CP, 22)

With Boyd gone, he returns, troubled, to the safe life "polishing rowlocks". Although the journalist who reported Boyd's arrival does not so directly acknowledge his "gap" - he is of the pettily jealous kind who blame successful people for their own failures - he does at least envisage its result: himself "rotting slowly between editions". (CP, 23) Sir Oswald Brierly is afraid to "venture out beyond the shoreline" of knowledge and art, and Boyd's daring reminds him of this. (CP, 23-25) The whaler, homesick for the sea, seems to hate Boyd as much because he owns the land as for his arrogance, and he too ends his story by facing his own inadequacy: "Then there's one thing left: to get drunk and frighten a policeman." (CP, 25) For the Papuan shepherd Boyd represents an alienation which, though not based in self-deception, is all the more painful: the debilitating gap between himself and his traditional life:

> Out in these bare places a poison wrings
> Power from my arms; each new night spits ice,
> And I am forgetting the songs and careless fishing
> The old fighting and the old peace. (CP, 26)

The pragmatic politician likes "the suggestions of power and tradition" which attend Boyd, though he is slightly worried that Boyd may break the rules of bureaucracy, move too quickly and impede the "necessary documentations". Yet, should there be any hint that Boyd's official acceptability is at variance with his personal morality, the politician can always "retreat a little/ Behind formality". (CP, 27) The pioneer, wanting to be remembered on earth, is offended because he sees Boyd taking fame that he should have. (CP, 27-28) Claiming to have found Boyd's skull and hoping thus to end the "score of yarns", the Captain of the "Oberon" finds instead that the skull has power to

shatter the world of facts:

> Holding it is like splintering a mirror
> And finding a thousand faces round your boots. (CP, 30)

If the roving reporter is to be believed, John Webster is an old captain "Cast up and abandoned on a high stool in the city". By his own admission, his "eyesight trembles badly" - yet, with such an unsteady perspective, he gets to the core of Boyd's disappearance: "His blurred shape grappled with the outskirts of the unknown." (CP, 31) He, of all the witnesses, seems sure that Boyd, who did not like to be tied down, would have liked his final appearance "as a shadow at the distant end/ Of a tunnel of sunlight". (CP, 31) If there is about Webster's version the mood of one who, like Boyd, does not like being tied down to the city, does not see or remember things as clearly as he did, this may not mean that he is as self-deceiving as the others, but that there is an instinctive fellowship of suffering and perception operating in his account:

> Here, when my thoughts seek his last desperate day,
> All's torn and arrested, starting from a blank matrix:
> A dark upflung arm hangs suspended, glistening,
> A thrown spear, whistling in its arc like a comet,
> Bristles with knots of flame and points and violence;
> An eyeball glares like a sovereign by candlelight;
> Or a fired canoe eddies, and its prow snaps upward
> Like the jaws of a transfixed shark. (CP, 31)

In one sense these are possibilities, not facts. Webster cannot remember the facts - but he can see the pattern of transfixion, and this transforms the (absent) facts into the symbol. He sees Boyd, as Leichhardt, "Cross to the field pitched beyond world and words."

When, in "Author's Prologue", which is itself set beside the roving reporter's lament for lost facts, Webb says of his characters that they "mangled a shadow", he is identifying with them, but seeing the shadow more positively:

---

1. "The Third Expedition", Leichhardt in Theatre, CP, p. 44.

I follow charts of guesswork, shape a cloud
Formless, unplotted, rotten with endless change
And the sky's blue mockery plummeting through its heart.

Yet truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps. (CP, 21)

The intersubjective truth of Boyd is gathered through symbols featuring fragmentation. The "Author's Prologue" is dominated by images of debilitation and woundedness. Beauty is a tortured shape. Dreams may easily be driven onto Time and have their backs broken. The dawn light is crazy and wandering. The wind's pulse is uncertain. "Stray drama comes lurching home like a late drunkard." This is the symbolic perspective through which Webb presents Boyd:

Through the cock-crow scuffle and tremor Ben Boyd
comes striding;
This is his world now - one thought's a drum for
Ben Boyd.
This is his life: the churned-up light and the dust,
A tattered scrap of life in the cubicles
Of memory with moths of forgetfulness,
Now and then out for an airing in the tangent flash
Of an old man's yarn, some yellow newsprint unearthed,
Or the dregs of a reminiscence at Twofold Bay.

You and I, surgeons with scathing knives of perspective,
May watch the Present, the second dissolution
Piercing his fibres, draining his face of feature,
And his groping, luminous eye fading, drying out.
(CP, 20)

So that, even before God came stumbling into Webb's poetry, the model which was to receive and shape his presence, was already outlined and waiting. In Webb's case the model encourages an appreciation of weakness and suffering which powerfully reverberates with a crucified God, so that there is a profound sympathy and continuity between pre-religious and religious poetry. It is, however, a sympathy which prevents complacency: even as this God comes in, the God who provides comfortable coherence is detained at the door. He cannot survive the tension between "faith" and "fact" which is to come. Nor can he be seen by the "groping, luminous eye" which Webb appreciates in Boyd. In short, the only God who can enter is the one who is stumbling.

SECTION SIX

IMAGINATION AND RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Webb's imagination is shaped by and shapes his Catholicism. His imagination holds a conversation between the symbols and stories of his religious tradition and those of his more individual and immediate experience (a conversation in which each of the partners is equal, and by which each is enlarged). At the heart of this conversation, centring its reverberations, is a moment when "life" and "Christ" are together imaged as a word of suffering:

> Let a ship be taken by the ice, squeezed in the scrawny
> Fingers of the frozen element, clasped, and racked, and
> splintered,
> Driven like a living nail into the heaving bloodless
> Face of the cold and clenched there: yet will come back
> A Word or a Name. [1.]

From the Christian story, Webb's imagination receives the figure of a crucified Christ, but it takes that figure (more sympathetically than it takes the figure of a triumphant Christ) because it knows how "Old Mrs Mac and lumbago wait for the Cross". From St Paul, Webb receives the notion that the Cross represents divine foolishness, wiser than human wisdom [2.], but this is actively received and recreated because of Harry, whose imbecility frightens the sure walls of learning. In St Luke, he finds the Christ of Emmaus, but if it is this Christ who is moving towards Eyre at the end of Eyre All Alone, it must be recognised that Eyre, along with Boyd and Leichhardt, is moving towards him. If the relationship between imagination and religious tradition is not seen as reciprocal (as it is in the best poems), then religious imagination will be seen as having only a reproductive function and a theologically circumscribed authority.

---

1. "Cartier at St Malo", A View of Montreal, CP, 62.
2. Cf. I Corinthians, 1:17-25.

Webb's use of his dogmatic and devotional context is clearly being shaped by his central metaphor. "Poet" (CP, 152) takes the gospel story of the adulterous woman whom the Pharisees bring before Christ to see if he will obey the Law of Moses and agree to have her stoned. Christ says: "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." [1]. While Webb obviously captures the gospel's shift from an objectivist and legalistic worldview to a more intersubjective and compassionate one, he is also making his own imaginative variations. Whereas Christ says to the woman, "Go and sin no more", and so calls her into a process of conversion, Webb identifies this process within his poet, who is forgiven his betrayal of the desert's language and images. Similarly, the moment when Christ writes on the ground is given a poetic, more than a moral, reference. What the poet recovers is an open, reconciliatory image of his own work, his "marriage" of heaven and earth - and this is mediated precisely through the dialogue opened between the first image of the desert's horizon and the second, which contains elements of suffering (Webb sees the woman more as victim than sinner), compassion and fellowship, and which releases the intermediary camels-words:

> Breast upon knees,
> The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky
> at midday
> Bent earthward. From the two together a train of
> camels.

With "A Death At Winson Green" (CP, 153), Webb's faith in resurrection, embodied in the image of sunrise, does not displace suffering but is itself placed within the poem's wounded frame: the fact of the man dying. The same structure operates in "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262). Here too (whatever Webb's own conscious devotion), Webb's imagination shifts away from the conventional,

---

1. Cf. John, 8:3-11.

devotional emphasis on the moral courage and glorious triumph of the virgin-martyr and towards his own emphasis: the little girl who has been obscenely violated by a knife and who is frightened, struggling with faith, and dying. As Webb presents her faith, it is very fragile indeed. Faith, in "The Tower" (CP, 204), belongs with a sense of ruin and waste and, though reconciliatory, is "bare in its power". This image of faith also incorporates an allusion to Christ, in Gethsemane, accepting the cup of suffering. Moreover, this image emerges through a fissure between innocence and experience (which is very much a matter of suffering) and grows out of an earlier "mad process" of imagery centred in "the dead gutted bird/ Lolloping in the wind". It is as if the poem enacts the way in which the imagination heals itself from its own wound.

At the end of "Pneumo-encephalograph" (CP, 223-224), Webb compares an oxygen bubble, searching out a brain tumour, to the Holy Spirit, moving through pain and inspiring its "amalgam with gold". This simile occurs suddenly at the end of a poem which has been determined to focus on the brute fact of suffering. Is Webb imposing the comparison, choosing the "will of God" over the "will of the poem"? I would prefer to say that the comparison constitutes a barely caught moment of faith and, in that way, further exemplifies the religious mode of Webb's poetry.

At first, the writer, seated at a desk where weak light and lame hours attend his craft, does not see himself as providing meaning. He merely rejects suffering:

> May my every bone and vessel confess the power
> To loathe suffering in you
> As in myself, that arcane simmering brew. (CP, 223)

This simply expressed wish follows the confused, disconnected experience of the opening, where Ward Two's pain is sketched in swift, awesome fragments. Yet this first stanza does not entirely deny meaning to this suffering. There are, as it were, "bubbles" in the text which carry the feeble chance of hope. These can be identified (although they also need to be returned to the text, so as not to weaken its sense of suffering's absurdity and horror). There are hints that suffering might have a creative outcome: when nerve-fluxions are described as "flints coupling for the spark" and suffering is called an "arcane simmering brew". While "Passion and peace trussed together, impotent" primarily refers to the neutralised condition of the patients, it can also entertain a Christian shade of meaning. In the passion of Christ, suffering and redemption (peace) are tied together (on the cross) and are impotent: the helplessness of God (corresponding to the Pauline notion of the foolishness of God). Apart from the religious resonance in "confess the power" (confirmed, gently, by its end-of-line position), there is the fellowship of "To loathe suffering in you/ As in myself", where Webb blurs the object/observer distinction and evokes a compassionate intersubjectivity which softens the isolation implied by suffering.

These, however, are slender resonances. Those who would participate in Webbean art are not permitted to overemphasise such consoling possibilities. They have, with simplicity, to enter the colloquial, unclothed real:

> Only come to this cabin of art:
> Crack hardy, take off clothes, and play your part.
>
> (CP, 223)

"Only come" is balanced between commanding submission and inviting surrender and simplicity. At the literal level, there is something disturbing about the way the individual is subsumed into the larger drama of the pneumo-encephalograph, while, at the metaphorical level, that action may represent a surrender to the Holy Spirit, and be consoling. Here the tension between the world of suffering and the world of the Holy Spirit is taut.

The poet approaches pain as a reverent petitioner:

> Let me ask, while you are still,
> What in you marshalled this improbable will:
> Instruments supple as the flute,
> Vigilant eyes, mouths that are almost mute,
> X-rays scintillant as a flower,
> Tossed in a corner the plumes of falsehood, power?
> (CP, 224)

By what power has the patient "marshalled this improbable will" and gathered about him the medical "cabin of art" - especially since he is so utterly and existentially honest and helpless with "the plumes of falsehood, power" cast off? If the metaphor holds, then Webb's answer implies that poetry's "improbable will" is gathered by the same reality, which is very simply expressed: "Only your suffering." Does Webb then deny his own poem by the lines which follow and conclude the poem, making the hidden comparison with the Holy Spirit quite explicit?

> Only your suffering.
> Of pain's amalgam with gold let some man sing
> While, pale and fluent and rare
> As the Holy Spirit, travels the bubble of air. (CP, 224)

While the Holy Spirit is a very uncertain presence in the early parts of the poem, this sudden reference is not an imposition. It is too much in keeping with the general mode of Webb's religious imagination.

It does not destroy the tension - in fact, it heightens it, by making the Holy Spirit's mode of presence so brief and frail. The final emphasis is, after all, on "the bubble of air".

Even that very bright poem, "The Bells of St Peter Mancroft" (CP, 139) has traces of Webb's commitment to suffering as the way to joy. With its exuberant rhythm and mood, it certainly makes "its laughing golden sound". Yet the bells are, from the first, a force which opposes "the clockwork grief". By breaking the routine dimensions of existence, their sound creates a revelatory fissure in consciousness. Their tongues, though slender, speak of the very centre itself: "A frisson of gold at the centre/ Of prayer, bright core of life." Webb then likens their sound ringing out to a spring flower opening, but this is framed within a question, "Who knew . . .?", which suggests again his concern for recognising the sacred as surprise. Similarly, his townspeople are lifted out of their certitudes (even their cynicisms) and left less powerful:

> Townspeople, who wear
> Shrewd colours, and know the move,
> Now blunder and wander, I swear,
> In a transport of love.

The story of St Francis has rich possibilities and Webb selects those which make The Canticle (CP, 69-84) a

> New sun, round symbol
> Blown to us,
> Wind-ferried, humble,
> Mountainous.

Webb uses character perspectives to dramatise a hermeneutic of the holy - and this technique allows him to centre the meaning of sanctity in holes, to make a dramatic counterpart to the stigmata, which focuses his own image of Francis. Since each character utters himself as a process of confronting and reconciling his own wound, Webb does not emphasise the simple joy often associated with Francis, the sense

of a man in easy, delightful communion with a neighbourly universe.

Nor does The Canticle explore the relationship between Francis and Clare. She speaks only at the end, and then to utter a bare, almost impersonal faith in resurrection. The kind of power she has is not easily located in the struggle with egocentric power which so preoccupies the poem's male characters. The kind of peace she embodies is too remote (and Webb is too unsure of the female presence) to touch the immediate pain. Even where Webb appropriates the Franciscan theme of poverty, it is not so as to celebrate Francis's freedom: it is to represent the barrier within Bernadone.

The Franciscan ideal of poverty moves out from a gospel text celebrating the beauty and richness of the world and calling for trust in Providence (rather than in self or wealth).[1] When, through Bernadone's speech, Webb dramatises Francis's poverty, the gospel text which emerges is the one which calls the rich young man to renounce his wealth, records his refusal, and warns that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven".[2] This hard-edged text suits Webb's purpose: it cuts into the wall of wealth which keeps Bernadone from the inner freedom where "A continent is unbound". It is, however, very different from the saint's romance with "Lady Poverty". With such selections and stresses, Webb's poem, while it presents the largely absent Francis as a figure of both pain and joy, does shift the balance towards pain. A hymn which praises the gifts of God and inhabits a very happy world ("Canticle of the Sun"), which is so lyrical in mode and feeling, can only function as fragments in

1. Cf. Matthew, 6:25-34, Luke, 12:22-31.
2. Cf. Matthew, 19:16-26, Luke, 18:18-23.

The Canticle, with its dramatic and narrative modes, its scoured and visionary quality.

Another part of the Franciscan story is that Francis's mission - to renew the Catholic Church's witness to gospel poverty - was mediated through a dream-image of a ruined church. In The Canticle Webb reworks this by having the charitable churchgoers overlook the leper's ruin-revelation. In "The Stations" (CP, 94) a makeshift church becomes a cathedral because it is a place of humble fellowship, while a "Derelict Church" (CP, 220) provides more peace than does the cathedral - indeed, peace "loiters" in the derelict church, an activity which the cathedral might consider lacking in respect.

While it provided the inscription for Webb's own tomb - "Sunset hails a rising" - the faith expressed in "The Stations" (CP, 94) is more beleagured than this theological extract might suggest. The poem confronts the everyday, exterior world with a few frail people who, inside a room, are praying "The Stations of the Cross", thereby witnessing their hope in the Resurrection:

> The eve of the Resurrection is in this room
> And playing round it the stormlights of knock-off time.

If the threatened faithful seem to have the advantage - a deeper truth than the university's "impressive inch/ Of a cynical education" - this is because Webb has so conditioned us to believe that it is suffering which engenders a superior, if less articulate, wisdom. A few lines before the poem's close he uses an image which links suffering to Christ's redemptive sacrifice: "the spearhead of gall/ Touches the tongue of new life".

In describing the world of "knock-off time", Webb attempts to mime its

confusion and disorientation, using a bus-ride as a means of sweeping together various impressions of the world which (somewhat ominously) surrounds the church/room. In my view he does not succeed and the confusion contributes neither to an understanding of, nor an enjoyment of the poem.

The poem is one of those moments in Webb's work where "the multi-layers of meaning in his language often remain solvable puzzles rather than providing imaginative resolutions or illuminations".[1] The early stanzas remain confused: they enact a tortured climb up a hill of private associations with no promise of new light. It is possible, however, to obtain some picture of this surrounding world, which appears to be indifferently, if not unkindly, disposed towards the world of faith. Its suburbs contain "a taut partisan murmur", which conjures images of gossip, betrayal, quarrel, quietly intense conversations, whispered loyalties, situations which are explosive and barely contained. Discarded newspapers, having only a "fluke of glamour" now that they are useless (so dependent on time), are "ablush". Their condition derives obviously from the blurring of red ink, but what does it symbolise: shame, embarrassment, haste, heat, high blood pressure? This world has an embrace which is only ambiguously affectionate: "the moody Glebe, in a clinch/ With her ancient fog-trained hoodlum sea". Webb refers to university education as "cynical", momentarily displaying an Australian Catholic suspicion that university learning was "secular" and subversive of faith.[2] He follows this with a satirical reference to trendiness: "The young/ Glebe's ambit is headdress, necktie, figure of speech." It is, I

---

1. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p. 413.
2. Cf. Edmund Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 12.

think, possible to say that from this there emerges a general impression or atmosphere: a community constituted by confusion and disorientation, whose spaces are quietly explosive and, if not antagonistic, certainly agnostic. It is the busy, successful world - this, in Webb's view, disadvantages it before the other community of neighbourly down-and-outs who, as much from need as from any developed faith, participate in "The Stations of the Cross". Like them, the church-symbol emerges from the text as something of a survivor:

> And all for a song
> Conveying to us one church
> Out of unsurveyed darkness, hoarse with a history.

This might be Webb's sense of the Church militant, (it is hardly the Church triumphant) but it is soon qualified when the poem gives attention to a humble figure and, significantly, itself advances in power and clarity:

> Old Mrs Mac and lumbago wait for the Cross
> In this threadbare room that's a college by day;
> and the hope
> And handwork of love has raised a cathedral round us.
> A door swings, a new wind . . . the old, known path is
> steep.

These lines privilege the Church of the anawim, the "little ones" of God. The path (of Calvary, promising the new freedom of the Holy Spirit) is described so that emphasis rests on its sacred agony. Mrs Mac's lumbago, pain personalised, sits beside her as a fellow believer and their togetherness directs them towards Christ's suffering. Togetherness in suffering becomes a sign of participation in Christ's redemptive activity:

> Yes, here are our neighbours, quietly marching, less
> Sun-benefice and cloth of crimes. They will redeem
> Themselves, redeem me. But the wood is cruel to the back.

Once again, the notion of redemption is not allowed an open-ended ascent, but is brought back to focus on actual pain. The "threadbare room" becomes a sacred place because it houses these frail and

suffered gestures of hope and fellowship: these make it a "cathedral", a central place of worship.

Webb creates another such cathedral in "Derelict Church" (CP, 220):

> Enter this crippled church
> To pray with a near-pride:
> Cases are piled in the transept and the porch
> Yet peace loiters here as not in cathedrals
> While with advertisement and trivia
> Man is besieging Heaven for his trade.

There is an almost hidden reference here to Christ attacking the buyers and sellers in the Temple, and this also suggests Webb's preference for the marginalised church over the more powerful, institutional and comfortable one. The poem prepares for this in the opening stanza, where pained and vulnerable figures are given a revelatory capacity:

> When earth and flint rear themselves into certain shapes
> There is prayer from the fiery centre of the earth:
> That grey dancer the belfry vaulting as the Host,
> Arches as mouths importunate.
> Dun smoking flames come leisurely home to roost,
> The lost mind slews to an enigmatic path
> Joining hands again, the errant spirit leaps
> Into fire of joy at this grimy Fishergate.

What makes this imagery so consistent and convincing is that Webb is examining the relationship between joy and pain. In another echo of Isaiah, the desert breaks into prayer,[1] while the arched and importunate mouth of a bell produces song (and can only produce song because it is arched). These are centred in the image of the Host, the primary symbol of redemptive suffering and love. Then Webb introduces an image or compressed narrative of the prodigal returning home and discovering, out of the "enigmatic path", a greater joy.

---

1. Cf. Isaiah, 35:1-7.

Webb is also establishing here a tensive relationship between absence and presence. The Host, the eucharistic bread, would not actually be kept in a derelict church. Where the Host is least to be found, Webb is making it still the measure of reality, the "realer than the Real". Webb's context therefore stresses that sense of divine dereliction already implicit in the eucharist. Indeed, in this poem there is a feeling that Webb would not expect to find the Host so really in the cathedral. This is consistent with the way his use of biblical material has been determined by his preferred hermeneutic: that the tiny, weak and pitiable will teach our groping eyes. The derelict church is more powerful than the cathedral because it is in fellowship with images which combine a tortured shape reaching up into an unexpected eloquence, the arch both of agony and praise.

This is strongly emphasised in Webb's use, at the end, of the traditional metaphor of the Church as a barque. While it usually speaks of salvation (from the flood of chaos and sin), it becomes in Webb's imagination a "gaping wreck":

> Ghosts of bells chatter as from the sea
> Out of memory slides home this gaping wreck
> Still seaworthy, hallowed, and functional.

His language returns to earth: "functional" seems so much weaker than "hallowed", but that is just the point. In Webb's interpreted world, it is necessary to return to the little word; "hallowed" is dangerous, since it could easily apply to the cathedral, which is not the place of sacred dereliction. Webb's linguistic preference for an understated word symbolises his religio-imaginative preference for the tiny and weak.

Even Mary, Mother of the Church, is not represented through her blue and white iconography. While Webb certainly represents the

eschatological figure from traditional Catholic devotion - the Mother of God, immaculately conceived, ever virgin, assumed into heaven, mediating grace - he is also shifting emphasis, making Mary something of a fellow pilgrim whose faith embodies "a tenderness coupling/ White heat with goldenness".[1] This is all the more remarkable since Webb's poetry has few female figures, and most of them are in danger of becoming sentimental because they are often invested with too much of a nourishing and consoling function.

In "Our Lady's Birthday", (CP, 200) Webb acknowledges the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which states that Mary was conceived free from Original Sin, but he is concerned to stress that she is not thereby freed from suffering:

> For the Immaculate as for Original Sin
> It is pain to begin:
> From womb of grace to pedantic midwife earth,
> Sharp oxygen-needles plotting in her two old hands; . . .
>
> So these the hours of your birth
> Transcribe a primitive sacred agony.

Interestingly, this meditation seems to have been prompted by the sound of a small child crying, and it is there, in the frail sound, that Webb places Mary, identifying her more as fellow pilgrim than heavenly queen: "But you are the child crying, small rapture and paroxysm/ In the lewd snake-bodied wind." While this hints at a sexual anxiety, similar to that found in "Lament for St Maria Goretti", it also recalls Genesis, where God says to the serpent:

> I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.[2]

---

1. This changing emphasis, which reanimates the tension between eschatological and historical images of Mary, reflects the changing emphasis of Vatican II. Cf., II Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), Ch. 8.
2. Genesis, 3:15.

In Catholic culture this was traditionally read as a prophetic reference to Mary and Christ. It encouraged the image of Mary as the Second Eve. This image, which encourages suffering and redemption to converge, is the one which interests Webb as he next acknowledges Mary as co-redeemer: "And you are an arch hurled across the wicked chasm." However, this is an image which seems more willed than felt. The poem's best moment remains in the first stanza, when pain and glory are tenderly coupled in this description of sympathetic landscape:

> And a tenderness wherein Calvary is begun
> And sunset foreboded, a tenderness coupling
> White heat with goldenness; and the seven
> Rainbow sorrows; and the urchin sea
> Clambering about; and the haystack library,
> Academic decorous morocco and vellum
> Bound, stalled in the heavy light upon a clam.

The halo-like sunset presides over a text which weaves together a number of traditional Marian references. There are the seven sorrows of Mary combined with the seven colours of the rainbow - the rainbow, of course, representing God's covenant with Noah and his descendants: sorrow and redemption are once more unified. Mary is also referred to as the "Star of the Sea". In a hymn which was still very popular in the early sixties, Mary was addressed:

> Hail, Queen of Heaven, the ocean Star,
> Guide of the wand'rer here below,
> Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care,
> Save us from peril and from woe,
> Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea,
> Pray for the wand'rer, pray for me.[1].

If we read Webb's line backwards, the star-shape is coded into the sea-urchin. Reading it forward, the "urchin sea" suggests very much a child "Thrown on life's surge" and claiming Mary's motherly care. I would wager that what next happens is that Webb's "prospecting

---

1. The text is taken from the standard booklet for what is called "The Novena To Our Lady of Perpetual Succour" (published by the Redemptorist Fathers, Mayfield), p. 16. In most parishes at the time, this Novena was a weekly occurrence.

nervous eye", sighting haystacks, thinks of bookshelves and all the learning they contain, remembers how their knowledge stalls before the foolishness of the Cross, how Mary is called "Seat of Wisdom", how Thomas Aquinas said that all he had written was but "straw" (and all of these associative possibilities were readily available within his Catholic context). From such a process we might arrive at the final image - where the metaphor actually reverses its direction, so that wisdom is measured more by "haystack" than by "library". In this way the moment appropriates Marian symbolism by way of the small and vulnerable. Later in the poem, when his language becomes not only more private in its associations, but also less tensive, Webb loses the power of this moment where sorrow and rainbow together constitute the figure of Mary. If much of the poem is abstract and arthritic, the first stanza shows Webb performing a profound variation on a very popular Marian hymn, which stands at the base of the entire poem:

> Mary Immaculate, star of the morning,
> Chosen before the creation began.
> Chosen to be, for thy bridal adorning
> Woe to the serpent and rescue to man.
> Bend from thy throne at the voice of our crying,
> Bend to this earth, which thy footsteps have trod,
> Stretch out thine arms to us, living and dying,
> Mary Immaculate, Mother of God.[1]

Webb (who lost his own mother when he was two years old)[2] clearly derives his image of Mary from this devotional context. She is a great mother, who understands his sorrows, comforts him and guarantees peace. When Webb tempers this with some sense of her own suffering, he keeps the image tensive and lively. When he does not, he does not avoid a sentimental brand of transcendence.

---

1. This hymn is also found in the "Novena To Our Lady of Perpetual Succour" booklet, p. 30.
2. Cf. Rosemary Dobson, "Francis Webb", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, p. 5.

In "Canobolas" (CP, 197) Webb sees Mary as a powerful, heavenly mother. It is an unconvincing poem - largely because its thickly-woven veil of references obscures a more personal wish to escape suffering and return to the maternal breast. A.D. Hope provides a reading which is better than the poem.[1] The poem, he says, was written while Webb was in the Orange Mental Hospital, desperately using religious faith as a way of keeping some focus in his chaotic life. The title refers to an extinct volcano in the district, one of whose peaks Webb sees as a breast of the earth-mother, then metamorphosed into a breast of the Mother of God. In the first stanza the sun, setting behind the mountain, is seen as the mouth of a fish. The fish, in the early Church, was a symbol for Christ and, as the stanza ends, it is Christ who "puts on flesh". Then Mary is identified with the mountain. She is also named mother of Athens, Troy, Orange, and Christ. While Orange may "croon in a summer's joy", the other three must struggle and suffer in history and she, sorrowing mother, "may not pluck/ Destiny, nightfall from them". In a strange moment of metaphoric confusion, she herself then becomes an object in the hands of an ambiguous universe:

> And all this houseless firmament, by strange luck,
> Is sunset playing with dice and nipple and toy.

On one side of her are the killers of Christ rolling their dice; on the other, the summer child of Orange, innocent and playful. Who has the nipple? A.D. Hope says that this line "unites the child Christ with his mouth at the breast and the dying God with the Roman soldiers casting dice for his clothes".[2] It is not quite as clear as that: the sunset, at first identified with Christ, must here also become

---

1. A.D. Hope, "Talking to God", Poetry Australia, 56, 1975, 32-34.
2. Hope, p. 34

the Roman soldiers since they are the proper subjects of "playing with dice".

However, Mary's motherly duties are clearly defined: to provide the nipple, and thereby nourish the innocent and comfort the sorrowful. Mary is then taken up into heavenly language:

> Because, rising above earth, she takes station
> Upon eternity, between her two veined hands
> Weaves dateless things from all the yellow strands
> Of metronome, glances, memories, and commotion.
> Pure hypostasis - all the inconsequent ocean
> Of fading colours, all the grey towns and lands
> And faces flock to her, rasping demands,
> And drink, and settle and sink in her devotion.
>
> If only we learn to pause and let her rise
> Not steeply but as a gentle concave, all,
> Towns, lands, faces, must nuzzle her tender swell
> And learn from her the true Form and be wise.

Webb is here working very closely within traditional Catholicism and somewhat away from his preferred model: setting eternity "above earth", and invoking Thomistic concepts of hypostasis and form to represent an enduring, reliable pinnacle of truth. Whereas in "The Stations" life itself is a "ruthless curve", Mary now offers a "gentle concave".

Finally, Webb focuses on the actual mountain, where a television aerial acts as a warning to low-flying aircraft. A.D. Hope argues:

> There emerges a poem which is coherent and a magnificent hymn of praise from something that at first sight looks a difficult and disconnected set of images and random associations.[1]

Even so, he goes on to say that the interpreter does need more clues than are given, and that difficulty arises from Webb's associative manner: "The associations may not only be private; they may be quite

---

1. Hope, p. 34.

momentary and ephemeral."[1] Despite Hope's clarifications, the image of Mary presented here is somewhat petrified. It is also somewhat passive: though a sure, solid and doctrinal presence, she has to wait until colours, towns, lands and faces flock to her and find in her some satisfaction for their needs. Webb has made her so much a consolatory alternative to suffering that he has distanced her.

Even more remarkable and individual is Webb's treatment of the priest tortured by Communists. "The Brain-washers" (CP, 147-150) works with a martyr-figure who did, at the time, exert considerable power within the Catholic imagination. Yet Webb's treatment breaks with convention. Not only does he avoid any polemic againt Communism, but he also shifts attention from the priest's spiritual strength to his personal disintegration. It is when he is broken that the priest hears the voice of God - and the poem implies that this is the real God, that the voice he heard when he was strong was the illusion.

Webb's narrative structure is simple. The priest, confronted by large and oppressive forces, resists and resists, then breaks. He then becomes a mouthpiece for the Communists, declaring that the Eucharist is a money-making superstition, confessing the Catholic Church's corruption, exploitation of the poor, and sexual hypocrisy. It is at this point, where the priest has lost all claim to be the typical Cold War Catholic Hero, that Webb's sense of heroism begins to emerge.

The poem takes its drama from the conflict between spiritual and physical forms of power. The priest begins with great spiritual

---

1. Hope, p. 34. (Indeed they may: for each galah "flaunting his ruddish ceremonial sash" may be dressed with the red sash worn to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. That does not, however, add to the coherence.)

power. He resists well because he is so closely associated with a sure and strong God - almost a mountain-God, whose heights he has attained. Then Webb begins to undermine the priest's power, using the metaphor to do so. Having first warned us that the priest "may very likely have fought his fight a little too hard", Webb points at the fundamental flaw in his spiritual power: its denial of weakness:

> This taller man
> Had climbed mountains in his time, was fond of the bodily temple.
>
> When loudspeakers repeating a handful of words began,
> And murmur and whisper wriggled in between,
> He knew the greed of crevasse and placed a ban
>
> Upon personal downward thought. Only the evergreen
> Pasture and young slopes of the Sacrament
> Mounted daily to a white summit, unseen and seen.
>
> So for months he was infuriatingly content,
> Blessing the fellow who brought his mouldy bread;
> Till at last the personal threaded that white ascent
>
> And not quite Gethsemane satisfied the Lord.

The ambiguity of "threaded" - connecting/disconnecting - is a typical Webbean moment. The priest's mistake is simply that he relies on strength to achieve his sanctity and victory. In this he, like his enemies, employs power as a mode. What he finally learns is the "bitter search for peace", where the way almost contradicts the goal.

Broken, he begins to say words which come from outside (there are no more coming from within), so that he may be left to the vast silence within himself. This is done not out of fear: "he had no fear then, for the world had ended/ Without fire or bang". It is done simply that he can be left with his interior emptiness:

> It is the frightened and conscious resistance that tires,
> Though no one might venture to call it right or wrong.
> When he repeated the loudspeaker's words - after years,
>
> Centuries of bloom and murmur - silence came along.
> It must be from God. He spoke often, feeling this,
> And the words were the price of silence, worth anything.

Webb is suggesting that the priest is not deluded, that the silence, and the defeat it embodies, may be from God, and more really from God than any victory achieved over the oppressors. He does not allow his priest even the private victory of the spirit - he loses his self, his conscious ego. Yet, in a parody of his more usual pastoral role, he is left vacantly feeding the multitude:

> He simply mumbled the same words on and on -
> A charity to the excited hungry faces.

Webb is here taking traditional notions of interior silence and loving service to a most unexpected point of meaning,

> For the words meant nothing save only silence. A vision
> Of man, perhaps, in his bitter search for peace.
> Be angry; but notice almost an elation.
>
> In those rolling and rolling, uncontradicted eyes.

This is a very disturbing close: we are not told he has definitely found peace, only that the search requires some bitterness. We are not told there is "elation", but something like, yet unlike, it. We are left looking at the priest's eyes, the ambiguity within the suffering, within the peace.

This ending - open-ended, and challenging the usual notion of a Catholic hero - is very different from the ending Vincent Buckley gives his poem about Mindszenty, "In Time Of The Hungarian Martyrdom".

Buckley stresses that Mindszenty, though "spiritually wounded by the Hungarian Communists", is "a symbol of that spiritual strength and authority of which he is a foremost modern defender".[1] Webb opens a crevasse within the spiritual strength itself.

---

1. Vincent Buckley, Masters in Israel, p. 50.

While Buckley is arguing that martyrdom is vicarious, Webb is fascinated with the extremes of the individual's desolation. He will deny his martyr even spiritual consolation - "Nor could the All-Knowing soothe his waking grief" - whereas Buckley will include reference to John of the Cross, making suffering a deep act of love - "Their neck is wounded with His gentle hand".[1] Buckley's attention is given, as he says himself, to "the nature of the Church and . . . her sacred duty to suffer, as well as to rejoice, on behalf of humanity."[2] Webb does not speak so easily on humanity's behalf - as with "A Leper", it is "almost a man speaking". For Webb's Catholicism submits its coherence to the image of crucifixion:

> Canaries silent as spiders, caged in laws,
> Shuffle and teeter, begging a First Cause
> That they may tear It open with their claws
> And have It hanging in pain from solid wall.[3]

---

1. Cf. "Upon a gloomy night", Poems of St John of the Cross, trans., Roy Campbell, Collins, 1979, pp. 10-13.
2. Masters in Israel, p. 50.
3. "A Man", Ward Two, CP, p. 229.

SECTION SEVEN

SUFFERING, ART, AND SANCTITY

At the shaping heart of Francis Webb's image of the poet lies his belief that both suffering and metaphor may break and renew meaning. From the centre of tongue-tied pain, Webb's poet sings "Of pain's amalgam with gold".[1] Within this redemptive image of poetry, other qualities are included and encouraged - particularly those of compassionate realism, vision, and prophecy. The poet will be compassionately, but rigorously realistic if he is to "confess the power/ To loathe suffering in you/ As in myself . . ."[2] The poet will be visionary if he is to see the fire of suffering transformed, at "the centre of fierce art",[3] into the tongue of the Holy Spirit. The poet will be prophetic if he is to confront conventional and comfortable wisdom, the "Troy" of well-walled minds, with "The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light".[4]

Even so, the poet's mission is not ennobling before it is humiliating. Not only must he pass through personal suffering as "his feet tread embers for the truth"[5], but he must continually suffer language.

While, from one point of view, Webb seems to ascribe to words an almost sacramental power to redescribe reality so that it is "filled with the Word unwritten",[6] he also, rather forcefully, imagines them as the leper's rags, signals of his "graceless utterance".[7] He has a sense of the symbolising power of language, but is concerned that

---

1. "Pneumo-encephalograph", Ward Two, CP, p. 223.
2. "Pneumo-encephalograph", CP, p. 223.
3. "Melville At Woods Hole", CP, p. 51.
4. "Harry", Ward Two, CP, p. 224.
5. Leichhardt in Theatre, CP, p. 36.
6. "Harry", Ward Two, CP, p. 224.
7. "A Leper", The Canticle, CP, p. 70.

language approach us through modes of humility - for there is another power in words which Webb deeply distrusts: their power to become walls. Webb's "Poet" (CP, 152) refuses the pharisaic temptation to construct a high, secure wall of words to contain reality (and reality, for Webb, is being constituted in the desert-space between the broken fact and the redemptive symbol). He refuses the "thick grey loam" with which literalism and legalism are fashioned and keeps to the "so tender voyaging line of truth".[1].

The line of truth and humility follows the "suffering" within metaphoric language: the tension between "is" and "is not" as words, like the camels of "Poet", approach and withdraw from the horizon of meaning. While the poet's words may indeed "redeem" the world, they do so if their mode is "eucharistic", if their saving power and communion is made present in their broken pieces. This sense of poetry as the suffering in language expresses itself in a variety of similar structures. Sometimes a tiny word or image, disregarded, is "sown" in the text, allowed to grow unobtrusively until its humility comes to signify a hidden glory. Sometimes a simple, frail word, image, line or stanza can seem to rise out of complex, tortured language - just as there is often strain between familiar, colloquial resonances and those which sound "Huge symbols featuring strangeness".[2]. Sometimes the suffering is centred in a simple verb, such as "come", which seems caught between commanding and describing action. Often, Webb uses gaps in speech and perspective to dramatise his sense that, if poetry is a metaphorical language, it will say at once: "Fullness, shadow."[3].

---

1. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", Around Costessey, CP, p. 207.
2. "Author's Prologue", A Drum For Ben Boyd, CP, p. 19.
3. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", Around Costessey, CP, p. 206.

If Webb's sense of metaphor and suffering makes his language humble, this does not mean that it becomes quiet and submissive. Rather, his language is remarkable for its open-ended and iconoclastic character. In the final section, I will consider how this creates its own conflicts with the language which dominates Webb's Catholic theological context. For the moment, though, let me remark that Webb's sense of religious language as open-ended, relative, and iconoclastic, distances him from the dominant language of his theological culture and inclines him towards what Sallie McFague describes as "metaphorical theology". McFague, among others, argues that religious interpretation and language are primarily metaphorical. Referring to Paul Ricoeur, she speaks of how metaphor expresses and constitutes a tension "between a literal or conventional interpretation which self-destructs, and an extended, new interpretation which is recognised as plausible or possible". [1]. This may well describe the metaphoric visions and processes in Webb's image of poetry. It also describes, in a sufficiently open manner, the religious and Christian character of that image - once we realise that for Webb's poetry "religious and Christian" is a description which refers, not so much to dogmatic content, as to a way of being and a mode of utterance. Behind Webb's vision of the poet, analogous to his way of metaphor, is the way of the servant Christ who, before his disciples recognise him in broken bread, tells how it was ordained "that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory". [2].

When, in A Drum For Ben Boyd, Webb dramatises Sir Oswald Brierly's view of Boyd, he shows Brierly to be an unadventurous artist. Boyd

---

1. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, p. 39. Referring to Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, p. 50.
2. Cf. Luke, 24-26.

represents something Brierly can no longer find in himself: an attraction to the breaking edge of greatness. Brierly says,

> I always think of him
> As something past purpose, insensate, battering cliffs
> With a forehead fruitless and obstinate as the surf;
> And yet the air for miles around any cliff
> Is charged with countless poems (mostly unwritten).
> Something draws you to a cliff - you see yourself
> Enlarged, and sometimes you hate the surf
> As sometimes I hated Boyd, you feel ominous currents
> Dragging you away from humanity.
>
> But, passing on,
> You do not quickly forget such magnitudes. (CP, 24)

The pathetic implication in Brierly's testimony is that, by so preferring safety, he committed himself to a mediocre art. Unwilling to undergo diminishment, he can give no picture of Boyd - nor even of himself: "True to myself, I grew colourless, left no self-portrait." In a moment touched with regret and self-recognition, he admits he has not painted Boyd because he refuses the risk of exploration which Boyd represents:

> No hope, no pity
> Keeps me away from the canvas, but there's something missing,
> I paint from memory mostly, build a landscape
> Crowded with whaling-ships, but all at anchor,
> And rarely venture out beyond the shoreline.
> Something in my brain is atrophied, fallen away,
> And this, I suppose you could say, is Boyd or something about him. (CP, 24-25)

Brierly reappears (A Drum For Ben Boyd, 10) when his dreams "of a studio,/ The governor's portrait, grave magisterial duties" are contrasted with Boyd's "cities/ Bleeding the hardy pastures with new wounds". (CP, 26) (There is at once in this reference to wounds a criticism of rampant progressivism and a belief in suffering as the way to greatness.) While Boyd does build his town, Webb is not really interested in his success. Rather, he is fascinated by his later failure (given almost mythic proportions) and concludes:

> Yet all the poetry of a tower's ascent
> Leaps out most powerfully in its rocking and fall.
> (CP, 27)

Brierly's withdrawal from the cliff is here recalled and judged by Webb's characteristic conviction that the breaking process is somehow integral to the wording process. This is the conviction expressed in the "Author's Prologue", where breaking light, baffling music, jagged thoughts summon "Huge symbols featuring strangeness". Within these symbols, which shake the known world loose, the author may sometimes "clasp some shape/ Tortured into beauty". (CP, 20)

"Melville At Woods Hole" (CP, 51-53) speaks "from the centre of fierce art" and hastens us "Towards the white, flying vision of terror and love". The poem opens with a storm - "a strophe" whose rhythm is opposed to that of "sheer weather". Sheer weather encourages the perception of ordered days, one succeeding another under a sun which represents the diminishing power of time. The storm, which fractures and reassembles perceptions, stokes the fire of art because it makes things such as the engine "a shimmering fable/ Of timelessness". Sheer weather encourages an illusion in the artist. In the second stanza, the artist is reminded that he cannot secure possession of a place, cannot daze the clouds with his voice, nor manage a will which is "ever outward bound". These are illusions of transcendence, which ignore those glancing truths which come from the storm - "the spinet voices of the drowned". What the storm does is break the "net of history" (that arrangement of time by which we catch ourselves) and "compel (us) back/ To the niche and sheet of the past/ Where (we) are nothing". While it breaks the "net of history", the storm itself "will take in the one cast/ These seaboard villages, this heaving thicket of sea", as it "dismantles together/ Four roadstead centuries". (The paradoxical expression, "dismantles together", focuses Webb's vision of community found through disintegration.)

In the third stanza, the storm metaphor is momentarily abandoned while Webb concentrates on "fire" - formerly associated with sun and "sheer weather", now reconciled to the storm and its art:

> With words as firebreaks, from the centre of fierce art
> You hold out your hands. But all is kindling for the blaze,
> Mossed bone or hump-backed folio. (CP, 52)

As "firebreaks" to "fierce art", words contain and control even as they release meaning, a meaning which could easily destroy their boundaries. From the fire, the suffering centre, the artist holds out his hands: a gesture of giving and/or receiving, of seeking companionship or help, of begging release. The fire is irresistible: it consumes life, represented as its most vulnerable by the "mossed bone", and art, represented by the "hump-backed folio" (itself encoding a relationship between art and suffering, even deformity).

Through one of the fissures which occurs in the confused storm-consciousness, there emerges a fragment of truth: the moment in 1812 when a Chinese sailor fell from the maintop. This is a moment which strongly attracts Webb's imagination. The man breaking through the air is analogous to the way, in art, the tender instant of truth is gained through destruction:

> In eighteen-twelve the Chinese sailor, falling
> Back from the maintop to the glittering, turning deck,
> To the white, swaying arms,
> Knew truth for a second: the night watch: the dim alarms:
> In what he had sought and loved destruction calling,
> In the cruel puzzle of the rigging, in the simple swell.
> The spin of his curious luck,
> Wordless, foreshadows your tortuous parable. (CP, 52)

This is a comparatively simple moment in the poem, rescued, as it were, from the swiftly intersecting mind and language of the storm, yet in its structure containing the art of Melville, particularly the story of Ahab who found "In what he had sought and loved destruction calling". Finally it is not the monument of "carved, grey, perfect

rock" which represents Melville's greatness as an artist, but the fellowship which Melville, Ahab, Webb and reader find in Melville's "maiming inheritance":

> Night's province dowses lighted waters. You pace
> The shaken bridge, your maiming inheritance knocks
> At our hearts, inescapable,
> Hastens us past the breakwaters, the shoal bell,
> For the devious truths of nightmare where rip-tides race
> And seasons spindle to the ice-flow. Swiftly we move,
> Hull down, under heeling trucks,
> Towards the white, flying vision of terror and love.
> (CP, 53)

As we go past the breakwaters, the watery equivalent to "firebreaks", we are returning towards the centre of fierce art, the heart of the storm with its "shimmering fable/ Of timelessness" and its "vision of terror and love".

The jongleur, after he understands the stigmata of Francis, develops a similarly paradoxical appreciation of his own song. From one point of view, The Canticle examines the relationship between suffering and art. Each of its six "central" characters comes, through suffering, to an integrated act of speech. Each begins with some anxiety about the power of his words (and this is usually linked to an anxiety about being "man"). The leper sees that his speech is as ragged and rejected as his disease and that "It is almost a man speaking". The father's confidence in his manhood and booming voice can easily be construed as poorly disguised bluster. The wolf speaks and forgets, refusing to acknowledge any truth, any language but the instinctual moment. The serf keeps both humanity and speech obedient to the "speak no evil" rule of survival. The knight, whose humanity was an exercise in physical power, is finally troubled by debilitation in language and humanity, by "this broken/ Foeman's lispings, word of what is unspoken". When each makes his second appearance, this preoccupation with humanity and speech has disappeared. It is as if

each has forgotten himself. Webb's argument would seem to be that their earlier sense of suffering, associated as it is with so many kinds of alienation, encourages an isolated humanity and false speech. Their later sense of suffering implies that they have achieved a human status which is honestly bare and representative, and that this provides them with a simpler fellowship in words. Language and art become more integrated as they become more positively suffered and suffering.

This argument is more clearly seen in "The Jongleur" (CP, 73-75). The jongleur first addresses the city, the common language, foretelling its noontime enjoyment of "wine and gossip with the languid sufferings/ And happy endings". He conjures the bright world of romance and fairytale, but argues that an art which denies suffering humanity is flawed: "Breathtaking profile of granite, but the chisel's art/ Fell short of blood and bone and beating heart." This, though, is the art expected of him, and he is no longer able to believe it: "the chanson wavers, cannot consume/ My defiance new and lonely as St Damian's bell". Whereas his second speech will evidence a genuine acceptance of loving death, his earlier art is expected to censor ugliness and horror:

> Living lustre goes kindly to illustrious death;
> Fabulous gold finds the orphan and the widow;
> Love, always love
> Is the body superbly immaculate - hold there, not a move -
> Requiring all courtesies, all of faith;
> War, the tallest horseman, may cast no shadow. (CP, 73-74)

If he is to have his "lodgings in place, language, or time", he must sing of a perfect world in which man - grand and righteous emperor, proud knight, humble man of the field - is the noblest creature. He also perpetuates a very stylised and dependent image of woman.

Yet this artist's suffering is more than his realisation that his work is an illusion. He sees his song as a palliative, yet still hopes that his story-telling fulfils a genuine need for something other than the facts. His cynical submission to the will of the crowd takes on another shade of meaning. In a parody of the eucharist, he becomes what they need to believe. Within the larger context of the poem, this is deflected towards an affirmation of some religious pattern in what he does, even as it highlights his cynicism:

> Again to the square. A holy day. Food and wine,
> Throat and mummery of freedom - now for stagecraft of the
> fingers,
> And the costumed syllables
> In their adequate soaring, declension. Now to resign,
> To believe in this day, resign identity and hunger.
> Let the cheers of the crowd -
> Lover, dotard, cripple, bawd -
> Work within me as a prayer,
> From my borrowed instruction instruct me. Noon session boils
> Together monument and change. O receive, receive
> What comes of your pot-stirring, soothsayer.
> Believe, believe, believe.
>
> Wide-open mouth and bunting and drum
> Endorse some momentary, tireless, militant maker.
> I sing as that maker directs. May I speak only as a man.
> (CP, 74-75)

The term, "mummery of freedom", continues his emphasis on pretence, but it also implies that these "holy day" celebrations are an image of the greater drama of freedom. When the jongleur sees himself as an obedient creation, he is calling the crowd his "maker", but he is also reminding us of the Creator and so participating in the "mummery of freedom". Similarly, when he lets the cheers and needs of the crowd "Work within (him) as a prayer", he invokes a simile which, in Webb's world of words, has a power to grow beyond the speaker's intention. Most significantly, his surrender to the crowd is represented in the rhyming of "receive" with "believe": obeying needful humanity is the paradoxical way to belief.

In his second poem, the jongleur drops his mask and speaks more directly and wholly from the heart. His speech, as well as being more integrated, is also more human and compassionate in its insight. While his brilliant image of the sun hoisting its sail and drawing "merchant images" after it suggests the transcendent end of art, he yet relates art to the present and imperfect moment:

> I tell you, word and wit are ashine no less
> Under the loose, cranky wheel of our time
> Coming, perhaps coming again. (CP, 80)

The last phrase touches the present moment with an apocalyptic possibility. There is tolerance, not cynicism, when he recalls his earlier story-telling, with its "nice perspective", and endorses "Time's gallant refusal to clear his throat/ Before the old stories, the old omissions". There is a new sense of what it means to say that death was "illustrious". This must be balanced by a hard recognition of mortality, and the way the grave will not house the power of the sword: "There are also bones. A few yards are no scabbard." Following this intimate engagement with bones, there is the jongleur's superb realisation that love which is broken is beautiful:

> Love, even love,
> Under her wrongs may be inartistic, uncouth,
> Move when she should be still, her voice in tatters,
> Hair befogged, mouthline a guttering, out of the sun.
> (CP, 81)

In "Poet" (CP, 152) Webb rejects the "thick grey loam" of pharisaic language, in which words become walls of legalism and literalism. He returns to the vision of terror and love - in this case, the stinging revelation of the desert, with its mediatory image (of the camels moving to and from the space where desert and sky merge). He confesses a Christian vision of poetry, but this is precisely centred in an image of forgiveness.

The poem soon establishes its choice between the "desert country" and "this big town" of the "masters". The desert provides an ascetical and mystical truth, and gives a language which moves on the edge of obedience and perception. At first the poet appears to appreciate a correspondence between his "words" and the desert's particular brand of scoured sanctity:

> I'm from the desert country - O, it's a holy land
> With a thousand warm humming stinging virtues.
> Masters, my words have edged their way obediently
> Through the vast heat and that mystical cold of our evenings.
> (CP, 152)

He even resists the temptation to pseudo-transcendence and will not word the frozen wonder of the stars. Instead, he finds his tongue in the image of camels. Coming out of the gap between earth and heaven, they figure at once mediation and wound:

> But came the long train of camels blowing drowsily:
> Words paced, nodding, tinkled through my spirit;
> As with the camels, I could never know nor wished to know
> Their origin or destiny, for our horizon and the sky
> Tremble together in uneasy connubial whiteness.
> So my lawless words (I speak figuratively)
> Moved the desert, as a train of camels waken
> The dozing miles made for them, retreating slowly.
> (CP, 152)

As well as introducing the matrimonial image (and, with "uneasy", anticipating the adultery which provides the poem's narrative base),[1] Webb is here obviously addressing a question of language - particularly, its uneasy capacity to "marry" heaven and earth. He seems to see the poet searching for words which will not constrict the truth, words which will not need to explain their origins or destinies, but words which will reverberate with frailty and fellowship as they "Tremble together", words which will approach and withdraw from meaning just as the camels move within the observer's shimmering perspective. Yet this desert tongue is denied even as

---

1. Cf. John, 8:2-11.

it speaks: for the poet is addressing the masters, wondering if and how he may win their approval. He cannot quite forget the desert, but he is anxious to make it acceptable for these men whose minds prefer "orderly distances". This anxiety is indicated by the apologetic parenthesis in "So my lawless words (I speak figuratively)/ Moved the desert . . ." To the pharisaic mind, figurative language is merely decorative. Accordingly, when he wants to reassure the masters that any lawless element in him is only figurative, he instinctively adopts a strategy which mirrors their values: it diminishes the stature of metaphor, even as it exalts that of law. It is only a glancing moment, yet it is a precise, concentrated dramatisation of that connection between literalism and legalism which constitutes the pharisaic word-world. In a manner which is consistent with that, the parenthesis also begins to encourage the gap between public and private meaning - a gap which widens as the poem proceeds and as the poet more and more says one thing to the masters and thinks another to himself. It also has a Webbean double-edge: while it may appear as a fawning affirmation of lawful words, it anticipates the reverse, when the "lawless words" of Christ's forgiveness will fulfil the language of the desert and return the poet to his first place of inspiration.

For the moment, though, the desert poet, impressed with the "big town", denies his original language and place. He was "never happy there". It was "the haze and quandary of (his) early manhood". It is to be dispelled. The masters are acknowledged for their order and security.

> You are the law, you are the thick grey loam
> Of orderly distances, unshakable houses.
> Dispel, then, the haze and quandary of my early manhood.
> (CP, 152)

Then there is another nervous parenthesis: "Of course I am still - how

shall I put it? - the singer." As he is being tempted to make walls from words, the poet gives a sign both vulnerable and hopeful. It is offered dramatically, in a self-deprecating, befuddled tone, which is presumably meant to make it seem less offensive to the stern and objective masters. Yet, it is the final fragment of himself that he will not deny: a slender allegiance to the fact that he is a poet, and the slightest hint that this may lead to a language other than that approved by the "unshakable houses". Although such fragmentary references to the desert and its song will eventually grow in power, this one is, for the moment, repressed, and the poet joins the pharisees in their attempt to destroy Christ, the Word, the iconoclastic metaphor of God:

> And this One you speak of as the enemy of order,
> As the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight:
> I do know that we could never exchange words
> (But the tinkle and psalm of rubbing harness sometimes
> Upon my word and image blowing drowsily . . .?)
> Vah! You are the law, my masters, the thick grey loam
> I shall go to the temple with you, take Him in the act;
> From the bed of the sick child He comes, from alleyways of the possessed,
> And with this woman He shall speak His public perverseness.
> (CP, 152)

Christ is "the enemy of order" because he embodies an unconfined perspective: "The wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight". He eludes the straight-lined view. He and the poet cannot exchange words because the poet has assumed the pharisaic attitude. However, at this very point, another fragment of desert language creates a disorderly space within the "thick grey loam" text. This gap in the speaker's well-rehearsed attitude allows the camels to reappear and, with them, a new, unrecognised connection with Christ's language begins to emerge. This is signalled in the similarity of phrasing: Christ is "the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight" and the poet sees his own "word and image blowing drowsily". In a word-world which is oppressed by the egocentric need to impose an authority which makes

distances "orderly" and houses "unshakable", two such fluid states of mind could only be brought more closely together. The poet now begins to experience an authority within himself: an authority which is an expression of integration, not an imposition.

He begins without realising it:

> The big stone in my hand will fly shrewdly, I assure you,
> As your words, in the house of God. (CP, 152)

When the comma creates a slight pause before "in the house of God", it makes a space for judgment and subverts the surface righteousness of these lines. The comparison rebounds and exposes the calculated and self-serving power-play which motivates the masters' external order: for the comparison says that, as well as stones, it is their prayers which are "shrewdly aimed". We sense that the poet has suddenly seen the shocking implication in his comparison: that the distance between the language of public order and that of prayer could be widened so far as to accommodate such a comparison between words of prayer and stones of execution.

Christ, then, confronts, not so much the woman's adultery, as the poet's: his betrayal of the desert's "uneasy connubial whiteness". Christ also redeems the poet's imagination:

> He stands confronting the woman and death in my hand.
> No words between us, I say, for You are the loneliness,
> My home, You are the broad light all about me:
> You are the train of camels within that light.
> Speak up, my masters, quickly, for death hurts my hand.
> (CP, 152-153)

This last line does more than register faltering confidence and growing guilt. It implies some identification with the crucified Christ. With a typically compassionate irony, Webb begins to transform the instrument of power and oppression into an image of redemption.

When, in the final stanza, the "first stone" is ordered thrown, it too rebounds, breaking the language of "grey loam" and freeing the poet for a word which belongs with the wind and sand.

> Cast the first stone. And the grey loam is scattered,
> And we slink out one by one. But my narrow clever desert eyes
> Peer back over my shoulder. They are strangely together,
> A grave broad light in the temple. Breast upon knees,
> The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday
> Bent earthward. From the two together a train of camels.
>
> She has given her love - but Paradise, what is his love? -
> To a hundred of us. Again she will love, may tempt me;
> But can ever this stone fly into the face of beauty
> While the wind, as his delicate burning finger,
> Gives a Word to the Sand? (CP, 153)

By editing "Let the one who is without sin . . ." from Christ's well-known words, Webb creates a fascinating change of meaning. In the gospel, "Cast the first stone" is uttered as an ironic invitation, and its object is the woman. In Webb's version, it is an urgent and prophetic command, but directed now at the wall of legalism and literalism. This is immediately taken up: "the thick grey loam is scattered". The mighty are cast down by an image of forgiveness. As the pharisaic word-walls are broken, the poet emerges more as a visionary and prophet and offers an alternative language: the unifying but open image of Christ and the woman. With characteristic irony, Webb has turned an image of adultery into one of marriage and transformed the rejected woman into a redemptive figure. This image, which acquires an explicit visionary status with "I have seen", is found at the centre - of both the temple and the desert. It also implies a prophetic judgment on how the symbol of forgiveness reverses the usual power patterns of religious language and thought: recalling Christ's "descent", the image stresses the humility of the transcendent: "I have seen the sky at midday/ Bent earthward." When this image then recovers and fulfils the earlier image of the camels,

the poet himself recovers his desert vocation. He realises that pharisaic words or "stones" can only hope to destroy the open-ended, mysterious and dynamic centre of beauty - beauty, that is, recognised through an attitude of mercy. Walls give way to horizons, where the Word is given by the wind, a traditional biblical image of the Holy Spirit, inspiring creation and moving where he wills. Still, the poem underlines the manner in which the Word is given and received: inspiration is like Christ writing on the ground, his language of forgiveness opposing that of the pharisees. Webb's description retains its tension since Christ writes with "delicate burning finger", combining fierce power ("fierce art", perhaps) with slender gentleness.

When Webb wants to commemorate the painter, Anthony Sandys[1], he at first contrasts the vitality and "eternal motion" of Sandys's work with what he sees as his own fumbling and time-bound work of words. However, within this contrast, Webb shapes between himself and Sandys the fellowship of two who are out of fashion. While Sandys has the "reverberating touch" and can communicate "Fullness, shadow", he is also disregarded: his style is "bravely out of fashion". Then, as Webb further describes his own limitations in language, he pictures himself genuflecting before a crucifix which is "daring dated". This recognition has a redemptive direction:

> Past luring, the bird . . . but if, in my side-room,
> I taste the Broads once more, and genuflect
> Before the mill and daring dated Cross,
> Swim in golds westerly and auras, pass
> Into civil distances, blues, and marshalled gloom,
> My hungry frame traps light, I stand erect. (CP, 206)

Sandys's landscape has a restorative effect on Webb - yet, to exert such power, it needs the kind of emptiness which a frame has.

---

1. "In Memoriam: Anthony Sandys, 1806-1883", CP, pp. 206-208.

Webb's image does more than suggest that the artist is a vehicle for revelation. It does more than suggest the human need for art's "reverberating touch". It creates a reverberation between the open structure of art and of the self. When Webb writes "My hungry frame", he blurs the distinction between Sandys's landscape and its observer, and mimes the intersubjective, participative character of art - though, once again, the fellowship established between art and self is one which focuses some strange relationship between states of emptiness and outline and those of light and dignity, caught by that emptiness.

This sense of art as "An outline of fullness" is then made explicit, and in a way which encourages another correspondence (with life itself as "a worn album of love and pain"):

> Fullness, shadow: again I am abashed
> Amid scuttling designs of chaos, at your mission
> To sing the posture of reality,
> Unsubtle - one did say chivalrous - as the tree.
> An outline of fullness soberly embraced
> By shadow of widest meaning is creation.
>
> Fullness, shadow: what to tell again
> But the so tender voyaging line of truth.
> Time shuffles a timid foot, will linger
> While the tired cockcrow of your lifted finger
> Opens dawn and a worn album of love and pain.
> Brown eyes and hair flow humbly from the earth. (CP, 207)

"Death", the third poem in the sequence, reinforces how Sandys, with "his eye/ For shaping a causeway between earth and heaven", transforms the Norfolk landscape into an artifice of eternity. Moreover, artistic inspiration, in which the shapes of inner and outer worlds correspond, is a process marked by the Cross:

> The mill that kissed his soul again is seen
> Bearing by day as by nightfall the tall Cross. (CP, 207)

The fourth poem, "Art", takes this up. Assuming a visionary stance, the speaker presents Sandys as a victim tortured into wisdom:

I see him in a sense as strapped to his chair,
Bloodstained with erudition, unafraid. (CP, 208)

Suffering seems inescapable. Even when the painter receives his earthly gifts, they both "embrace" and "sting" the senses. But from within this room, centre of suffering, which has its "windows wide", Sandys and speaker can look out:

And I see the Broads at sunset, skimming past:
Shadows on water, sun, and natural blue
Moving as one at supernatural speed.
To engage those Broads of the spirit is their need.
Beauty, be tongue of fire, of the Holy Ghost,
For the mill and the haggard Cross are moving too.
(CP, 208)

This stanza produces a mood of clean transcendence - except for "haggard Cross". It is not the mention of "Cross": that is a notion easily absorbed by an exalted mood. It is the way "haggard" stumblingly resists such absorption. With its connotations (of effort, exhaustion), and its hard, dragging sound, the adjective seems to bump the visual rhythmic flow of the poem/landscape. In its own way, it represents the realistic wound in what would otherwise have been an easy engagement between the "Broads at sunset" and the "Broads of the spirit".

The artistic endeavour seems even more vulnerable when Webb turns his visionary attention "downstairs" and sees the artist's materials "teased by cockroaches". This stimulates a final vision, one balanced between a sense of recovered courage and a sense of lingering menace:

And I see, downstairs and teased by cockroaches,
Cool crayon, oil, and glittering watercolour:
A courage unmans me, a ritual generous teaching
Forsaken for a spell but overreaching
Staircase and cockroach and forgetfulness,
While machines of burning mumble in the cellar. (CP, 208)

What kind of courage "unmans"? Given that it is associated with the religiously coloured "ritual generous teaching", this is possibly an

obscure reference to a notion of spiritual abandonment, where the natural self is surrendered in the graced self. Even if we were to wager this, the new courage does not so much subdue the "downstairs" powers as hold them in check. In its rhythm, tone, and meaning, the last line is disturbingly open-ended. If "Metaphor and flesh await a resurrection", it has not as yet arrived: the "tongue of fire" still reverberates with the "machines of burning".

"Harry" (CP, 224-225) can also be read as an analogue for Webb's vision of writing. The poem envisions a mongoloid's attempt to write a letter as a sacrament of the Word. While Harry's action is "painstaking" and inarticulate, it is one with a truth and wisdom which precedes creation. While his action is endangered by institutionalised forces, it critiques their "giddy alphabet". While his action is influenced by and paradoxically represents "the world of commonsense", it transcends and eventually transfigures that world with its own "retarded and infantile Light". While his action is isolated, it creates community within the ward. While his action is holy, its final direction is ambivalent: Harry directs his letter "to the House of no known address".

The opening line dramatises Harry's situation - his strained determination and uncertain ability: "It's the day for writing that letter, if one is able." Harry's writing - an isolated and sacred art - is performed despite the institutional atmosphere and the distractions provided by fellow patients. It is as if Harry is making his moment by sheer integrity - and by begging. He has to purloin paper and beg the ink and "bent institutional pen" needed for his task. All this is given religious stature when Harry is said to be weaving "his sacrament".

Webb next extends the religious direction of his language, but relates Harry's action to the ward in a way which deepens its complexity. His "Sacrifice? Propition?" carries a Catholic resonance: a commonplace in Catholic theology is that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is re-enacted in the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass. Webb is using the reference to open the possibility that Harry's act has a representative and redemptive character which participates in Christ's. The liturgical language - "vestments" and "cruets" - extends this possibility. Yet he does not allow it to develop easily. In the same stanza he is increasing the distance between Harry and "us" - and that by increasing the distance between Harry's word and usual language. Harry wears the language of the ward (itself woven with nostalgic threads from "all known worlds"), but his "innocence" is neither shaped nor complicated by its "giddy alphabet".

> His vestments our giddy yarns of the firmament,
> Women, gods, electric trains, and our remaking
> Of all known worlds - but not yet
> Has our giddy alphabet
> Perplexed his priestcraft and spilled the cruet of innocence.
> (CP, 224)

As he imagines Harry a sacred fool, Webb is surely nodding to St Paul: "Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom?"[1].

He is also indicating the poem's fundamental dynamism, which is derived from the interaction between Webb's use of high, sacramental language and Harry's own inarticulate presence and "mongol mouth". As it moves between symbolic and descriptive levels of language, the poem is enacting a mediatory and redemptive vision of poetry - like Sandys, "shaping a causeway between earth and heaven". It is also enacting a

---

1. 1 Corinthians, 1:20.

more prophetic vision of poetry, enticing the reader to experience the play between a conventionally wise assessment of Harry and its own more paradoxical and religious view, and thus to participate in the poem's drama of recognition. It is the drama of the "Suffering Servant":

> As the crowds were appalled on seeing him -
> so disfigured did he look
> that he seemed no longer human -
> so will the crowds be astonished at him,
> and kings stand speechless before him;
> for they shall see something never told
> and witness something never heard before:
> 'Who could believe what we have heard,
> and to whom has the power of Yahweh been revealed?'[1].

The poem next engages with the possibility that Harry's word, more primitive than "common-sense", may embody eternal wisdom. Harry's language has been "Shaped" by "our" memories of "the world of commonsense",

> But it is no goddess of ours guiding the fingers and
> the thumb.
> She cries: Ab aeterno ordinata sum.
> He writes to the woman, this lad who will never marry.
> One vowel and the thousand laborious serifs will come
> To this pudgy Christ, and the old shape of Mary.
> Before seasoned pelts and the thin
> Soft tactile underskin
> Of air were stretched across earth, they have sported
> and are one. (CP, 224-225)

He is one with the feminine personification of Wisdom - "no goddess of ours", but God's everlasting companion, active in creation. "Ab aeterno ordinata sum" is the cry of Wisdom:

> Yahweh created me when his purpose first unfolded,
> before the oldest of his works.
> From everlasting I was firmly set,
> from the beginning, before earth came into being.[2].

---

1. Isaiah, 51, 14-15.
2. Proverbs, 8:22, 23. This is the Jerusalem Bible translation. "From everlasting I was firmly set" translates "Ab aeterno ordinata sum". A variant translation (The New English Bible) uses "I was fashioned" instead of "I was firmly set" - which comes closer to the way Webb is here using the "Shaped" and shaping Harry to imply an active/receptive structure in inspiration. (My thanks to Fr. Jim Murphy for locating the text in Latin, and for providing alternative translations.)

In Catholic liturgy and prayer, this text was often applied to Mary, whose collaboration with the Redeemer was analogous to Wisdom's collaboration with the Creator. Webb is drawing on this when he refers to "the old shape of Mary".[1.]

Harry's imbecile wisdom, because it is original and outcast, now threatens the walled power of conventional learning:

> Was it then at this altar-stone the mind was begun?
> The image besieges our Troy. Consider the sick
> Convulsions of movement, and the featureless baldy sun
> Insensible - sparing that compulsive nervous tic.
> Before life, the fantastic succession,
> An imbecile makes his confession,
> Is filled with the Word unwritten, has almost genuflected.
> (CP, 225)

The rhyming of "succession" and "confession" locates a tension which runs throughout the entire poem, between empiricist evaluations and theological ones, between the "fantastic succession" and the Word. Here the language of "fantastic succession" creates a central focus in which Harry is empirically described: convulsions, nervous tic, and a head which is shiningly bald, but featureless and insensible. Around this Webb weaves a symbolic language: the altar and the Word. (Because it is a language of and from the weak, he gives it a cutting edge: it "besieges our Troy", our walled mind.) This language has a reverberating quality: the altar-stone remembers and makes present

---

1. Moreover, when, within a stanza centred in marital imagery, Webb depicts Mary coming to Harry-Christ, he is not about to entertain the possibility of incest. The poem is working with a tension present in the biblical imagery itself: Wisdom is at once a creative and receptive state, and is imagined as both mother and bride. Ecclesiasticus says that Wisdom "will come to meet (whoever fears the Lord) like a mother, and receive him like a virgin bride". (15:2) In Wisdom, Solomon describes and desires Wisdom as the mother of all good things (7:12) and resolves to have her as his bride (8:2). Without denying or defending the patriarchal leanings in this imagery, I would suggest that Webb is using it to picture poetry as a communion of receptive and creative conditions. The image of Mary focuses this: she must listen and speak if there is to be a Word.

again the earlier references to sacrifice and the eucharist. The "Word" recalls the references to Wisdom. So that the symbolic perspective is reverberating more deeply even as the physical description becomes more direct.

This strategy is maintained in the final stanza. We are given two heart-rending images: children screaming "at the sight/Of his mongol mouth stained with food"; Harry licking "the soiled envelope with lover's caress". Around these Webb weaves words of resurrection and transfiguration. The vision and strategy of the poem - and of the poetry - is made quite explicit: it is "because" of these images that Harry can be seen transfigured.

> Because the wise world has for ever and ever rejected
> Him and because your children would scream at the sight
> Of his mongol mouth stained with food, he has resurrected
> The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light.
> Transfigured with him we stand
> Among walls of the no-man's-land
> While he licks the soiled envelope with lover's caress
>
> Directing it to the House of no known address. (CP, 225)

Right down to the fact that the envelope is soiled, this is a portrait of a suffering servant whose writing transfigures others, especially those it confronts, those who think themselves wiser and more beautiful than he. With the final ambiguity, the servant is again denied the consolation of a literal marriage. The letter will be read by no woman. The poem, however, is there, besieging Troy, and containing perhaps a secret irony, difficult to recognise from behind the walls of the "known" world: that the (symbolic) House addressed may be more certain because not "known".

Obviously, it is not uncommon for the poet/artist to be depicted as one who suffers on behalf of humankind, one with prophetic and visionary gifts, one whose word is ignored, even one who performs a

Christ-like role. It is important, though, to hear the variations which Webb sounds within that theme. He stresses the tension within the vision: it is a vision of both terror and love. He does not allow belief to soften this: Christ writes in wind and sand. Moreover, Webb does not allow the poet an elitist mode of suffering: the poet must sit beside Mrs Mac and her lumbago, must return to ordinary fellowship. If the poet's neglected vision is finally vindicated, it is not so much because he or she sees life entire and whole, as because her or his speech is riddled with compassion. Struggling between the language of belief and that of fact, between complex symbolic utterance, physical description and simple statement, between dramatising the (often complex) subject and focusing the (often simple) object, poetry is, for Webb, the suffering of language.

PART FOUR

HOLY SPACES

Vincent Buckley

And what friends are they who, sweat-mastered
at the thunder-fanned and burning bush,
will walk more cautiously saying, Oh, that
is the God you belong to; that the woman.
Oh, that. When the bush burns to ashes
I still must touch my forehead to the ground,
because its radiance is in my body.
Gods are vulgar. So are journeys.
Ulysses sails to find a speck of blood
in the newly woven pattern; Orpheus
goes down to find mortality a blessing.
I walk beside these fires because I must,
in pain and trembling sometimes thanking God
for what they give me, the few poems
that are the holy spaces of my life.

"Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions"

PART FOUR

HOLY SPACES: VINCENT BUCKLEY

SECTION ONE:	Introduction
SECTION TWO:	The World's Flesh and Masters in Israel
SECTION THREE:	Arcady and Other Places
SECTION FOUR:	Golden Builders and Other Poems
SECTION FIVE:	Late Winter Child and The Pattern
SECTION SIX:	Conclusion

Abbreviations:

AOP — Arcady and Other Poems, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966

GB — Golden Builders and Other Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1976.

LWC — Late Winter Child, OUP, Melbourne, 1979.

MI — Masters in Israel, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961.

SP — Selected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981.

TP — The Pattern, OUP, Melbourne, 1979.

TWF — The World's Flesh, Angus & Robertson, Melbourne, 1954.

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

In considering Vincent Buckley's early poetry I seek first to establish that his religious sense is grounded in a search for relatedness. Therefore I survey poems dealing with the self's relationship to land, love and society, finding these informed by an expatriating imagination, divided between estrangement and belonging. Only then do I consider poems which celebrate his Catholicism. Two things then emerge: that his use of theological language is itself informed by his fundamental imaginative structures, and that he finds himself strangely apart from the paradisal possibility of that language, even as he is attracted to its authoritative, mysterious resonances. In this way, the abstraction and privacy which mar this early work are seen as evidence, not of the "church-clad pontification" of a writer "bound by a system of institutionalised beliefs",[1] but rather of his search for the rhythmic shape of his own voice.[2] In this context, Buckley's stress on the Incarnation is seen as something more than a theological expression of his belief in Christ's presence within history and culture. It also symbolises his poetics: his imaginative response to the radiance of facts.

In considering Arcady and Other Places and Golden Builders and Other Poems, I see the development of a more natural tongue, and see this as related, reciprocally, to a shift from theology to anthropology. While this shift in Buckley's appreciation of religion is clearly indicated in Poetry and the Sacred, it is also evident in his poetry, in the way Christian references change their function and status.

---

1. Noel Macainsh, "Six Volumes of It", Overland, 22, 1961, 52.
2. Cf. Penelope Curtis, "Vincent Buckley as Poet", Quadrant, 4, 1962, 55-65.

Whereas in "Stroke" the term, "resurrection", though not privileged, does still test the human experience with its transcendent meaning, the reference to "My Lord's grave" in "Golden Builders" is very problematic, and its possible meaning must be approached through the shifting experience of the poem. Rather than explain this solely in terms of theology and anthropology, I argue that it is as much determined by a growth in Buckley's language. His language becomes less emblematic and hierarchical; it seeks more and more to enact the mystery that makes us human.[1].

In the later poetry, theological language, now very rare, becomes an indicator of an historical and cultural phenomenon. It no longer signals Catholic belief. Buckley is now uncovering the mythic substratum of religion - and this, not as a substitute system of beliefs, but as a process whereby he enters more deeply his rhythmic sense of life. Here the spacing of his lines mimes the interreaching rhythms of sensation, perception, and language - the "idiom of sensation" - but it also enacts the mythic imagination, dwelling in and on individual things until they radiate their immediacy and their inter-connectedness. Even in this later poetry, I still see evidence of the very early tension between estrangement and belonging: in the way the self is at once separate from and close to the people and places he loves; in the way processes of sensation acquire a liminal quality which makes them strange as well as familiar.

Gradually a question emerges: to what degree is there a loss of religiousness, to what degree a gain, as Buckley continues his journey towards the source of sacralised imagination?

---

1. Cf. "Ovid Metamorphosed", Arcady and Other Places, p. 44.

SECTION TWO

THE WORLD'S FLESH AND MASTERS IN ISRAEL

It is necessary to view Buckley's early poetry of belief as an equal and interrelated part of his larger - religious - search for the right space, the genuine rhythm.[1] I will begin by reviewing poems which are concerned with land, love, society and art. These are other "places" in which Buckley looks for that sense of deep patterning by which he hopes to reconcile dividedness and achieve belonging. This approach might seem artificial. It might seem to assume that only the poetry of belief is religious. In fact it is precisely that assumption which is challenged: for poems concerned with God and poems concerned with land express, in very similar ways, the rhythm of the sacred.

Of the poems in The World's Flesh (1954) which deal with land, "Land of No Fathers" (TWF, 36-54) is clearly the most ambitious. Although the speaker begins by calling upon God and Christ, he does not really identify the land's spiritual power with these figures.

Rather, he directs:

> But where the springs
> Keep quest, move down your hand and touch
> The deepening ground beneath, where something sings
> That nerves and present blood can never reach. (TWF, 44)

This is the place of "deep blood", as Buckley describes it in the "Dedication", where he argues that union with the land may be

---

1. I am following Buckley's example here, and "using the word 'rhythm' to mean something almost like 'psychic heartbeat'." (Cf. Henry Rosenbloom, "An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 324.) Wherever the term 'rhythm' occurs in my discussion of Buckley it is used in this sense, and does not refer to patterns of stress.

achieved through connection with a rhythm or pulse expressed in poetry. (TWF, 36)

However, the poet must negotiate, within himself, the difficult distance between love and hatred. At one point he is attuned to redeeming love, when he remembers his exiled ancestors and finds: "their reflection in me, and mine in them". (TWF, 37) At another point, he is far from love, recognising that his ancestors, "good haters and true men", have grafted him as "a branch upon their fear". (TWF, 42)

Others in the poem are similarly adrift between hope and defeat. His ancestors' fierce pride conceals their fear of death, and alienates them from the earth. (TWF, 42) His father lives with "Exile before him, and behind the sea". (TWF, 41). He is also alienated by "The drawn-out venom of a country town". (TWF, 41) Since this is also somehow God's design, a further distance is established between human expectation and divine purpose.

The poem does not succeed: it lacks the focused narrative and imagery of "Stroke" (which is, in many ways, its child) and is often too abstract and assertive in its symbolism. Perhaps the reason for its failure to "connect" is the expatriating imagination implied in the final image: "His father's well a deep unanswering face". (TWF, 54) Land and father co-operate to express exile, and the suggestion of peace is unconvincing:

> She moves within us when we move, and guards us well,
> A shadow land intruding on our love:
> Land of no fathers, but of sons
> Who walk in pride, knowing that all their names
> Are those of exiles, and each pulse

> Beats with the word of exile, though it beat
> In peace. (TWF, 48-49)

"Autumn Landscape" (TWF, 3) is more successful. With the nervously intimate observation which will become a Buckley trademark, it attempts to gather mechanical and personal rhythms into the one pattern: "the flame balancing in the leaves" an old man is burning. Within this pattern it may be possible to reach the promised land, even if it is mothered by the desert:

> A flame, flames, balancing in dark leaves,
> Like water that goes straitly on stone.
> No more. No hero in the striding mist
> Of smoke, or sweetness; but the stony land
> Is burning, burning, in this chestnut tree
> You gaze on. Breast of stone. A destined land.

Despite the denial of heroic presences, we glimpse Moses gazing on his burning tree, and see in "the striding mist/ Of smoke" both the cloud and the fire which led the Israelites through their wandering. Although the movement between images is at times too rushed, this poem nevertheless derives power from the way it travels to and from the Exodus symbols, quietly enlarging its reference and encouraging Buckley to touch "Dark cells . . . beyond the bounds of breath".

In "Spring is the Running Season" (MI, 42), the speaker is again distanced from his environment, the dancing of hare and hawk, of grass and air. This dynamic and interconnected rhythm has become for him "an arrested pose"; he is ruled by "the cynical phrase". He asks that his heart be renewed within the rhythm of "the christened world",

> Till hearts we had thought so hard
> Loosen, their beat revives
> The houses where men guard
> Their cool uncentred lives.

Even so, this is more a hope than an achievement and the poem's final notes linger with the "cool uncentred lives".

This is not so surprising. In Buckley the association between life and flux is very deep:

> I was born under a continual
> Movement of trees, bred in their gathered light,
> In the high scything rhythm, the stopped flight,
> The sea-sound urging through the timber wall.
>
> ("Borrowing of Trees", MI, 20)

This poem encloses both displacing and placing energies. While the overall feel is of "continual/Movement", a sense of stillness is achieved through the listing of trees and through the pauses carefully created around "born", "bred", "stopped flight", "sea-sound", "held" and - most significantly - "slow rush". Just as the speech rhythm of this first stanza is moving off, Buckley arrests it by opening the second stanza with another stilling gesture: "And have been held." Having found displacement in the way the trees "fritter/ Their substance", are cut down and burned, Buckley again employs a pause to underline how memory holds them still in place: "A heritage, surely." Then this third stanza ends by picking up the movement and carrying it through into the fourth stanza, where, at the end, it is again held by the end-stressed, simple statement, "I was born". In the final stanza the movement steadies and the words which fix the poem are "lent", "Blent", and "wound". They also suggest some intermingling of energies which, as it were, creates the interpersonal harmony represented by "this timbered house".

> I was born
>
> Under this usury of trees: Their noise
> A lent wisdom of guardians talking together
> Blent like husband and wife in the rusty weather
> Or wound like a vine about this timbered house.

The final image focuses at once the rhythms of the poet's consciousness and those of the trees. It gives a sense of place which is secure and sacralised.

The final image also has biblical connotations of fidelity and fruitfulness [1]. which seem to stabilise as well as sanctify the person's relationship with this place. Yet the poem's surface (an effect of sibilant sounds, steadying rhythm and wise tone) conceals a darker side to that relationship. This becomes apparent if we isolate the quality associated with each tree. The laurel has a "dense glitter", the willows a "hidden taint". The elms are "random", the plum is "unremarkable", and the peppercorn "Too normal for the secretive child". The cherry dies of isolation. The pines are faintly oppressive as "their dominant slow rush/ Rides on all (his) summers". Here is a figure emerging who is frequently found in Buckley's poetry: the one who is moving to and from places and persons, and who is secretly aware that the fundamental status of his heart is one of expatriation.

Ireland, the place Buckley will later name as his "source-country" [2]., extends rather than resolves this imaginative pattern of expatriation. "Walking in Ireland" (MI, 32), he discovers:

> Everything here, strange in its very nearness,
> Perplexes me like the shape of a foreign room.
> My foot shrinks from the kindly grass,
> And my hands, like leaves dragging against the rain,
> Draw down from everything I touch
> This low landscape wrinkling in its autumn.
> The dog going with a limp tail,
> The cock with his red-rimmed drunkard's eye,
> And the mincing waterbirds, will turn
> To quiz me as I go, with book in pocket,
> Who am not of their soil - nor any soil.

As he then searches for his "fathers" in "this darkness", he finds only figures "who look forward to (his) strangeness". Resisting this sense of exile, he asserts: "Unhappy earth, you are mine as well as

---

1. Cf. Psalm 128.
2. Cf. Vincent Buckley, "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 24-29.

theirs." It is significant that he is able to make identification where he perceives unhappiness. This is how he finally states his identification with his "Irish adam", as he stands between pride and pity before the Buckley coat of arms[1]:

> And the three bulls' heads on their shield
> (Static and stupid, our queer notion of honour)
> Gaze sideways at the whirlpool of the past
> Yet somehow, still, engage my eyes.
> And I turn downward with the year,
> Becoming each of my unhappy fathers, (MI, 33)

"Sinn Fein: 1957" (MI, 13) also finds him between pride and pity, again attracted to and distanced from the Irish memory:

> Often I stood with them
> So silent, I must have seemed
> A vague and tongue-tied man,
> A withered branch of the stem.
> For I questioned what they dreamed
> Where breeze on flagpole ran,
> When, as a visitor,
> I wore the Easter Lily
> For pride or pity's sake.

This is reinforced by other distances established within the poem: that between the actual events and their remembered shape, that between communal dream and the speaker's isolated scepticism. There are also divisions traversed within the self as the private self wonders how far he is from the perceived self. Finally, the poem is ruled by the speaker's own regretful withdrawal from what might have (heroically) been:

> But the urgent voice cries on
> Like a bird from the fruitless wall:
>
> I might have obeyed it, called
> Nerves to my hands, been felled
> At the edge, at the snapped stem,
> Blindly striking with them.

In this early poetry, sexual love becomes an experience more of separateness than of union. "All Hands are Numbed" (TWF, 4) is

---

1. Buckley says that "The three bulls' heads are the presumed arms of the Buckleys." (Masters in Israel, 33)

unable to touch and calm the dividedness within sexual love, although it does little to establish that such dividedness is not merely the consequence of one puritan's "lustful anguish". By contrast, "Prothalamion For a Christian Marriage" (TWF, 12), a more genuinely public poem, does convincingly communicate the hope of love:

> and may your days resound
>
> With laughter and with chivalry,
> When springs that fed the weighted tree
>
> Have fixed their flow within your blood.

"Movement and Stillness" (MI, 48) seeks to connect the rhythms of the natural world and the rhythms of Incarnation with those of sexual love. Allowing that the woman-Christ combines, as victim and saviour, both receptive and creative functions, she represents not simply the incarnation of sexual and sacred love, but this particularly as it redeems "the night's faring":

> And yet you make them heraldic, and give sense
> To the night's faring
> Of small and alien bodies, with their intense
> Running and their quick staring.
>
> They move with the world. But you lie, feeling its weight
> And dour inflection;
> Your arms are cruciform, your body straight
> As for resurrection.

Perhaps this is why Abelard features twice in The World's Flesh. It is as if he represents some stolen union of sexual and sacred, as well as their separation. "Abelard's Song" (TWF, 14) is of love surrendered. Love is a matter of "fabulous toil" and desire, while Abelard now accepts more ordinary works and lonely mortality. Even though he begins, "Now I have made my choice,/ Forswearing love . . .", there is no sense of his having accepted an alternative love. There is only the sound of loss - he is cut off from Heloise herself, and also from the poetic harmony she represented:

Voice of the dying world,
Heart of its eagerness, you wring
Regret from me - though spoiled
That burning cheek of which the muses sing;

Even "Abelard at Troyes" (TWF, 26) cannot unify sacred and sexual love. Sexual love remains a matter of both "dying" and "eagerness", while time makes a desert of the beloved's eyes. Heloise herself is uneasily described: "Impious and exalted". Her flesh is now symbol of his crucifixion, and if there is any vision of God, it occurs when both are "Desolate of spirit".

While the Abelard poems are despondent, "Colloquy and Resolution" (MI, 40) is urgently optimistic. Once more there is an anxiety about lust: sexual love is first described as predatory, a function of "nameless anger". When this violent rhythm is then set within the sexual rhythm of the universe, it is gentled into a highly conditional hope: love might ravish death and find something akin to resurrection - "prefaces of light" - in the senses. The resolution seeks to displace the anxiety about lust with a healing innocence:

And what of what we've heard, that love
Is the scaly palm, the sweating bed?
Now in the twining arms' remove
Envision the uprising head:

When, out of the pit, from the hurt womb
That is our half-world of desire,
The child shall rise and, unconsumed,
Light with his hands the healing fire.

This is more wishful thinking than resolution. The child is other than the lovers, is above their "half-world of desire". Having not yet arrived at the world of sexual love, he does not resolve the poem's colloquy between spiritual and sensual dimensions of love. Moreover, the colloquy too simply associates violence with the sensual and tenderness with the spiritual - and is, in that sense, a variation

on Buckley's preoccupation with the relationship between love and anger.

Working from the context of a domestic argument, "To Praise A Wife" (MI, 15-19) examines "That point of anger that's the quick of love". Not only are the two people distant from each other: they are also out of tune with "the beat/ Of uninstructed blood". When their separateness is voiced, it has a fatalistic sound:

> Outside, a rustling fills the street;
> And charity goes with the descent of blinds
> As though, that light put out, the dark will stress
> That there's no refuge from our separateness.
> For, don't they say, love is the mind's
> Acceptance of her fatal inwardness,
> The fibres' intercourse and trade,
> A habit of the senses and the tongue,
> A maze where the soul halts and is afraid.

Such moments evoke Buckley's imaginative sympathy: moments of nervous excitement, when the inner world is highly charged, feels its inwardness intensely, yet looks for some tautly-objective connection with the outer world. He records objects in order to detach himself from them, make them the arrival and departure point for his awareness of his inner, nervous condition. Here, where the nervous moment is a quarrel between husband and wife, he directs us towards the objects only so that we will approach, not an appreciation of the objects, but of the shoreline between physical and psychic worlds:

> Yet we may try deception - turn our backs,
> Do all we do with a set face,
> Grieve at nothings, as old people grieve:
> At hair resistant to the brush, a dress
> Let fall rustling, a strand of silk.

At a point like this (and there are more of them in the later poetry) Buckley's concerns and strategies work together: this is a psychological description of displaced anger and a linguistic representation of that displacement. The poem, then, operates from a

number of separations: between words and feelings, as between words and silence; between the quarrelsome rhythm and the rhythm of the outside world; between intention and achievement; between controlled and spontaneous responses. There is also, throughout the poem, a distance within the speech itself, in which the speaker continually turns inward even as his words go out towards the wife. By the end of the poem the wife is no longer a partner of grace, but an appropriated object. The poem confirms the separateness of an inward-looking sensibility.

Although a less transcendent figure than the child in "Colloquy and Resolution", Brigid functions as a healing force in the early poetry. In "A Prayer for Brigid" (TWF, 16) she at first appears wearing the flesh of heaven. The poet has "seen/ God work in her". This gives way to worry: death and darkness, wind and rain surround her world; light and wisdom must be hoarded in the hope that they will heal "This wound that's torn among the very spheres". Brigid has moved from Paradise to the real world. Exiled from innocence, she is then set between virtue and vice and the speaker prays she may negotiate this journey by learning "a single heart". The final hope offered her is itself adrift between his awareness of the world (expressed with laboured obscurity), his appeal to memory, and his almost sceptical appeal to the power of words:

> Give her that living home
> Which none but she may enter. Name
> What hands will steady the dark flame
> Of passion in her soul; and may all our talk
> Restore the memory of an age of art
> When beauty had time to move his hands, and walk
> In the bright unshrouded tempest of his heart.

"Reading to My Sick Daughter" (MI, 10) negotiates a much less anxious space between the daughter's "future womb" and a barren moment in the

father's writing. The sick daughter asks her father to make a poem. The father finds himself distanced from his daughter's expectations (at the same time as he is driven to recognise more intimately his own internal spaces and how much they are filled with fear). This part of the poem succeeds well because Buckley displaces the "I" somewhat, concentrating on a spare description of the daughter. The poem is a mildly ironic recognition of how he, the exile, is expected to heal, to make "home" for his sick daughter when he himself does not feel quite at home with the world. But her eyes have an innocence which redeems his impotence, and draws him back towards hope and promise;

> And her eyes, ordering dark from the room,
> Penetrate and recover me,
> Turning warm in her future womb
> The songs that are lately dead in me.

When geographical distance comes between them, as in "To Brigid in Sussex" (MI, 34), the father is again adrift in a condition of doubt, touched with self-pity:

> And I wait too, feeling, unseasonably,
> Self-eaten, tired almost to despair.
> The wind glows here too, but tinctured by mist.
> The sky is immense, but the stone measures it
> To lives taken in self-pity or in work.
> Or am I judging merely the space between us?
>
> Paused, so, for a moment in this gap of stone,
> I reach for the live waiting that's your face,
> And grasp only eyes or hands or a flooding of colour.
> Will the space I dread carry my striving to you?
> Or shall I, after this labour of recognition,
> Find myself only a mirror polishing stone,
> Or a man's ghost staring in a silent road?

This pattern, whereby forces of alienation interact with forces of identity, persists as Buckley's poetry moves into the wider social world. "Late Tutorial" (MI, 1) constructs a very private, thinking centre who plays the part of a university teacher and is painfully aware of the expectations surrounding him. Buckley describes himself as a "short/Still youthful puppet in academic gown", contrasting his

youth with his supposed wisdom, his personal size with the large responsibilities of the academic gown, and those of his activities which are creative with those which are institutionally controlled. Public and private selves are somewhat at odds in this "Teacher of youth, and more than half a fool".

Even as it moves between outer and inner worlds, the poem blends them in the one call to return home:

> Outside, the world's late colour calls us home:
> Not to the refuge of familiar art
> Nor house of settling wood, but to the first
> Home, to the savage entry of the heart.
>
> There, where the dry lips are cooled with words
> And every hand worships the love it serves,
> Perhaps we'll find some comfort: the deep spring
> Rising, and soft renewal of the nerves
>
> In Poetry with its constant singing mouth.

Poetry, the "terrible and only means" he has to illuminate suffering, exercises a reconciling rhythm - and even as Buckley expresses this ideal, he discloses his predominant fault:

> And, yet, I give too much in rhetoric
> What should be moulded with a lifetime's care,
> What peace alone should strike, and hear vibrate
> To the secret slow contraction of the air.

With "Criminal Court" (MI, 3), there is a stronger interaction between the poet's personal plea "not to be displaced", his judgment of the criminal as one who hoped to appease "the fatal gleam/ Of eyes and limbs and alien soul", his use of autumnal imagery (somewhat abstract), and his metaphysical sense of how

> The world is somehow blunted and less strange
> In essence, as it grows more strange in action;

However, the most serious displacement is structural rather than thematic. It occurs when Buckley introduces what seems to be the poem's dramatic foundation: a child before the criminal court.

This situation is too quickly absorbed into a metaphor-mood where the Self becomes both criminal and judge. As the child is introduced, the poem falters badly since Buckley cannot hold the distance between his ironic philosophising and his altruistic emotion (which itself moves into rhetorical gesturing):

> Surely there's nothing here to wring the heart!
> Only a child who cased himself in crime
> To grow to the height of all the world,
> (And what is that but the height of any man?)
> Hoping some dark would relax the fatal gleam
> Of eyes and limbs and alien soul.
> O deepening rain, O dead protective willows,
> How should you wring the heart?

When, in "Impromptu For Francis Webb" (MI, 44-47), Buckley envisions the artistic process, he sees it as a pattern of spaces. The poet is first of all isolated from ordinary understanding, then isolated within his room. However, he has power to transcend the room's space, just as his soul's interior space reduces the world:

> Yet here in this room all things grow possible;
> The soul speaks in its harsh natural language,
> And the world shrinks to an involuted shell
>
> Carrying your passion as rumour or complaint
> Into the ear of death. (MI, 44)

It is not only death which is defied; it is also evil, for the poets see an age "without barrier or taint". (44) Their words, in fact, travel "through the heavy guard upon (their) flesh" (44) and come home to a heavenly world of resurrected, reconciled bodies. This singing world untangles the "mesh of dark and light" (44) and displaces the terror of a world yet to be glorified:

> This is our world, this is our only world,
> Which lives, and breathes, and will be glorified; (45)

While the poet is called to this "trade of prophecy" (45), he is also frightened that his words may betray him with a false sense of "home". He commits himself to a word and a Love which is walking through an open world:

> The desperate hand writes faster. The joints ally
> Themselves with suffering. The night air grows pale.
> All images of envious nature try
> Their powers on your room, and will not fail.
>
> Then, if self-refuge rises high and tense,
> Old friend, be careful: Words would become our home
> And cosset us, till one dark day we find them
> Dwindled to ash, or rigid as a tomb.
>
> Our task is this: To keep them swept and sure,
> An open courtyard where the poor may find,
>
> Always, the walking Love, Who does not rest
> In hearts which fear and hatred have defined. (46-47)

These poems do more than provide a context for Buckley's early poetry of belief. They show the structures of his religious imagination, structures which inform the doctrinal and devotional commitments evidenced in the poetry of belief. In Buckley's early poetry, his Catholic belief participates in his imagination's larger search for deep, resounding rhythms or reverberating spaces which, because they are incarnated in ordinary rhythms, provide "home" for the wandering heart and the wandering earth. These rhythms, because they energise the dimension of "depth" or "ultimacy" within ordinary experience, express the interpenetration of the supernatural world with the natural one. They connect with the metaphysical pattern of human life - at least, in Buckley's own careful description of "metaphysical":

> If I say that poetry deals with man at a metaphysical level, I am inviting misunderstanding; yet such a proposition would seem to be broadly true. Poetry deals with man at a metaphysical level - but with man's metaphysical status reflected in his actual state, localised in his actual physical surroundings, embodied in his sensuous and spiritual reactions to his world. It strikes to the meaning and not the detail of man's life. The complex of signs which we find in any really fine poem is a symbol of man's metaphysical state presented through whatever in fact is most real to him as a suffering and diurnal being. [1.]

---

1. "The Image of Man in Australian Poetry", Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian, p. 1.

Buckley here uses a model of interpenetration in order to overcome the distance usually imagined between "metaphysical" and "actual". This signals that "The Image of Man in Australian Poetry" is itself informed by Buckley's preferred imaginative structures. The essay at once argues that Australian poetry's dominant myths "have reflected a struggle for the acclimatization of the senses before the adequate placing of the spirit" [1]. and that these same myths remain somewhat truncated because they "have developed apart from any firm philosophical position and quite outside the ambit of any explicitly religious vision". [2]. In assessing early Australian poetry, Buckley does more than argue that this is written from "a humanism dominated completely by the emotional fact of exile". [3]. He argues that certain rhythms remain incomplete - unless they interweave the details of landscape and of social living, as also of universal and personal visions. It is this interweaving of influences which would establish Australia as context and "home" for the poetic spirit.[4]. Buckley praises Brennan for combining Christian and Greek traditions within "his personal yet typical struggle" and for assuming the land as "the natural repository of images to heighten and focus the passion of that struggle".[5]. When he then comes to consider his contemporaries, Buckley's terms of praise are to do with certain syntheses: of intellectual and emotional truths, of European culture and Australian fact, of the daily and the archetypal, of self-discovery and world-discovery.[6]. In poets such as Wright, McAuley, Dobson and Webb, "we find a deepening of sensibility to the point where the land is conceived and imagined in terms which are at once spiritual, moral,

---

1. Essays in Poetry, p. 2.
2. Essays in Poetry, p. 2.
3. Essays in Poetry, p. 4.
4. Essays in Poetry, pp. 4-11.
5. Essays in Poetry, p. 12.
6. Essays in Poetry, pp. 23-24.

sensory and directed to the drama of human existence".[1] It is this sense of poetry's interconnecting levels which lies behind Buckley's critique of "vitalism" and "nationalism" in Australian literature: vitalism, he argues, breaks the connections between sensual and spiritual experience, between intellectual and emotional truth; nationalism divorces the local from the universal.[2] Working behind this argument is a vision of poetry which is implicitly incarnational.[3] Early in the essay, Buckley says of poets:

> for them, attitudes to man are expressed, embodied in their dominant images, their symbols, their emotional relations, their tone and rhythm, in all that enables them to wed ideas to poetic form.[4]

Just as it is important, when reading this essay, to respect Buckley's balance of "metaphysical" and "actual", so it is important to respect his stress on Incarnation when we encounter his early belief that Christ centres the rhythms of life and poetry. In his theology of this period, Buckley argues that the choice is not between Christ and the world: that is a pseudo-choice resulting from "an oversimplified spirituality tilting nicely towards Manichaeism".[5] The choice is between meaning and non-meaning, and it "has for its terms, its alternatives, the very strands of our own beings".[6]

The Christian is continually presented with the choice of commitment to ordinary circumstances "in such a way as to enhance the meaning of one's own life, and at the same time declare oneself for God in the struggle against evil".[7] With Adam's choice, humankind "ceased to

---

1. Essays in Poetry, p. 23.
2. Essays in Poetry, pp. 14-17.
3. Buckley's Poetry and Morality (1959) argues that literature and Christianity have an incarnational mode in common.
4. Essays in Poetry, p.3.
5. "The World Awaiting Redemption", The Incarnation in the University, p. 38.
6. The Incarnation in the University, p. 35.
7. The Incarnation in the University, p. 34.

be part of a supernatural world penetrating the natural at every point".[1] With Christ's choice, Christians can share in restoring "this unity of the world-in-God".[2] Here are two passages which sum up Buckley's Christology:

> Christ redeemed the whole of fallen creation by becoming part of it, and yet remaining perfect in it. He became a man, and in His own person He effected the union of the sacred and the secular, of the natural and the divine. Therefore what He teaches us is Himself, and all His teachings are contained in the fact of His Incarnation, His own fleshing.[3]

> We must all consent to have the union of the supernatural and the natural restored in us, by consenting to be agents, as Christ wills, in the restoration of the world. Christ becomes, then, both the prototype of this self-restoration, and its cause and living power in us. By the mere fact of His Incarnation, He has increased every man's transcendental desire for supernatural life, He has given us the means to satisfy it, and He has given us, in His teaching and in the tradition of the Church, an intellectual vision incorporating this desire.[4]

If this is the theology which informs the early poetry of belief, it is a theology itself informed by Buckley's dominant image of interconnecting rhythms, or what he will later call "holy spaces". Let us, then, consider those early poems where belief has a high profile.

"Tarsisius" (TWF, 9), carrying the eucharistic bread out into unsympathetic Roman streets, might well represent for Buckley the hope of centering the natural patterns of life in Christ, who is the world's flesh. With his "high heart" Tarsisius hopes that "every street might grow/ Mosaic to his love". Yet he is an alienated figure, not the least because his Christianity is hidden from his playfellows. "Alone" is the first we hear of him. Introduced as a hopeful figure (moving between bravery and fear), he is soon exiled into grim reality: "Yet, taken, was condemned to death". However,

---

1. The Incarnation in the University, p. 37.
2. The Incarnation in the University, p. 37.
3. The Incarnation in the University, p. 43.
4. The Incarnation in the University, p. 47.

the poem does not satisfy: it is difficult for the reader to bridge the distance between the basic story - barely provided in a prefatory prose note - and the abstract question which seems to guide Buckley's imagining. That question - I think - has to do with a choice between Rome and Christ. "Rome" seems to represent a false realism, an illusory opposition between material and spiritual realities. It does not see the spiritual depth in natural things: the Emperor displays his power in large, physical terms (a march and a triumphal arch). Christendom, on the other hand, is entirely present in and identified with "each small bone". The poem closes with an assertion that modern minds have drifted from the sense of mystery and with a hint that they may return to it if they look long enough at the fact "Of the small boy stretched in death". Tarsisius would then represent spiritual realism - that attitude which sees that the world's truth is only made complete in Christ[1]:

> Alone, it seemed, with his high heart,
> He walked till every street might grow
> Mosaic to his love, and each wall start
> (As nervous in his blood)
> A rose-tree, plant of Jericho,
>
> Spread on the high grey morning air. This flood
> Of a city's light will bear him, though he come
> Walking the desert stretched from nerve to nerve,
> Clenching his fear as Host and humbling Word.

In its attempt to communicate a gathering of space, and in its sense of an uneasy gap between hope and "realism", this is very similar to "Eucharist" (TWF, 30). Here Buckley has the rhythms of self, "dark mind", and "blood's cry" combine in the "Flesh" which exists when the "Flesh of the world" unites with the undying Flesh of the eucharist. There is a sense, too, in which the reception of the eucharist is seen as a return to origins, with Christ as a kind of source-country:

---

1. Cf. The Incarnation in the University, p. 41.

Prophet of my race,
Be gentle now, that I may achieve my birth
Kneeling, and bear this brightness on my face.

Yet, for all the tender power found in "this gathering of all space", the poem ends between love and dread because

the unexpected love
Is a thronging, a whispering of flames, that sight
Dare not intrude on - lest our God should move
To shatter the steeples of our hands with light.

When Buckley takes the gospel story of "The Flight into Egypt" (TWF, 21), he charges it with alienation. The landscape through which Mary, Joseph and the infant Christ travel is sympathetically foreign: it has a star which "wandered" (in contrast to the Christian star, which knew where it was going); it has a wild-dog which "shattered their little peace"; and it has "a peril of wind, and exile". There is also the danger of "the serpent's tongue", promising death to the Second Adam. Mary, the mother, finds her own heart in exile as she begins to understand the prophecy of Simeon and feels

Again, the quick sword of death,
The edgeless word of love.

She moves between hope and sorrow: for she reads events as signs of the greater, darker pattern, intuiting in them the Last Supper and the betrayal of Judas:

knowing at last
That Egypt leads to a high room
Of light, in which the intimate speech of doom,
Black as a smoking torch, shall pass him round.

What is interesting here is the stress Buckley gives to the way she knows. Revelation comes, not from above, but from within the deepest rhythms of her life:

Out of unwhispered legacies the Word,
Moving, secretes deep echoes.

She feels it all "in the stroke of every breath". Similarly, as the poem opens, the angel who, in the gospel, reveals Herod's murderous

intention, appears as the heart's own deep echo, a redeeming reflex emerging from the perverse pattern which embodies the web-like will of Herod:

> No whisper on the wind decreed it,
> Nor startled writing on the tyrant's wall,
> But Herod, moving through a thousand mouths
> The word of anger, spoke
> Prudence that range like steel, whispered the moan
> Of infants, and the grave maternal cry
> That penetrates even to the secret heart
> Like some angelic word, a still voice
> At evening: O terrified birds in your nest,
> Close wings on doubt, and rise, and come.
> The corn shimmers with darkness, and the road
> Is strong enough to bear the feet of God.

In "Before Pentecost" (MI, 21) the sense of alienation is very strong. The speaker has learned the country of his fear, and lingers there, imprisoned by disorder and nervous pain. He lives "where hell is", while about him "All things consent and die". Driven to "explore/ With (his) nerve-ends the continent of night", he finds disintegration as the continent, "far from the Blessed Sight", withers. He is exiled from love and held by shame. He is exiled from Christ. He is exiled from himself:

> And I, I cannot seem
> More than a phantom to myself.

The closing lines can only ask whether he must suffer "another year" before he hears - with his senses - "the kind accusing Voice".

Yet, the poem is not as desperate as this might suggest. This is partly because the rhyme, and the interplay of long and short lines, have a restraining effect. It is also because the title places the experience firmly within the Christian design, directing it through the shock of the crucifixion, through the closed-in fear of the upper room, towards the freedom and new birth of Pentecost. This itself works effectively because the poem does believe in patterning - and because it includes in its very dark rhythm of alienation the small

word "nails", thereby connecting the personal rhythm with the Christian one (even as it also makes a disconnection in the way "their own nails" implies something self-inflicted):

> I live where hell is,
> Peaceful only till the chill drops start
>
> That sting my limbs and heart,
> Or the great veins throughout my body beat
> And the hands crawling with heat
> Grow transfixed by their own nails.

"In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom" (MI, 50-57) uses the story of Cardinal Mindszenty, then imprisoned by the Hungarian Communists, to mount a meditation on the mystery of suffering. With its triumphant pace and solemn tone, it shows a confidence, common to Catholicism during the fifties, that the Christian power of suffering would defeat the power of Communism. Submitting to persecution, Mindszenty is yet undefeated because "the will is monument/ To a violent sanctity" (MI, 51) and because his pain is the pain of Christian history, placed within the pattern of Christ's death:

> Our pain goes farther back; it springs
> Two thousand years to light our days
> And fill them with the whisperings
>
> Of drawn immortal flesh - a soul
> And body shadowing our own.
> The branches cling, and take their toll
> Of the vine grown desolate in the sun. (MI, 56)

This pattern continues because God "Lives in His Church", gathering all things into a rhythm of prayer and offertory, and vindicating the Church's role "To suffer always among those who suffer". (MI, 55)

It is a pattern which is immanently metaphysical. The revitalising power of martyrdom is discovered in "the blood beat of our race". (MI, 51) It gathers together individual and corporate truths within a centering and depthing movement and there affirms that the Christian is the deeply human:

O blood, come deeper, come
Into our corporate heart
That is engaged in all
This lapse of the world. Our will
Seems halted at an endless wall
Of sleep or fear; but prisoned thus,
Deeper and sharper still,
Man comes to be in us.

Nothing is lost. The more
We die, the louder grows
The Bridegroom's laughter at our door
And, brighter than the honeycomb,
Springs the renewing rose
Of His imperium.

This pattern makes the martyrs' loss "A breath a form" which resonates with the speaker's own deepest rhythms till, "imagining that cross", he gains "A courtesy that is the soul's design." (MI, 54)

It is also a pattern which strains to incorporate various kinds of alienation. The will to torture and destroy is related to the human disconnection from "long-exiled Eden" - and is therefore not so much foreign to the speaker as part of what he too must resist through "a discipline/ As of the stone beneath the sculptor's hand". (MI, 51) The poem is deeply aware of this "schism in each man" (MI, 52) and hopes, rather strainedly, that "Whatever hunger drives, love can embrace." (MI, 52) This hope is itself quickly displaced by an apocalyptic vision of humankind's self-destructive possibilities, only barely contained by the invocation of Christ's pattern and by the dark questioning of God:

It seems we have come, for very justice' sake,
To a private madness burning up all men,
Some equinox of nations, when they shake
Their splendour off, and murder Christ again.
What voice from the yet-shaping stone,
What central heart, cries to atone?
God of all hearts, enlighten our desire.
Shall we ask for them any shroud but hissing fire?

The speaker also confesses a distance between himself and Mindszenty, "Across a foreign sea". (MI, 55) This distance informs the final

section of the poem. (MI, 57) Even though speaker and cardinal, Melbourne and Hungary, are said to be joined by "The bitter clear economy of love", there is a prevailing sense of the speaker apart from the action, trying to make it his, but still moving between subjective and objective states. Forces of alienation and of identification mingle when he claims to unify Hungary and Melbourne in a paschal pattern:

> Their souls
> That tremble are His amnesty for all
> The shattered conscience of the world. So I
> Keep vigil for them, where the damp wind blows
> On the hills and little alleys of this city;
> And on the doorways and the vacant streets
> The slow dew forming spreads its lucid flood
> That is the late wine of our sacrifice.

The feeling here is that the speaker is somehow expatriated from his subject, watching, willing the voices of the martyrs and the persecuted to "Make music in (his) soul". He uses John of the Cross to name the searing and saving flame of God's love[1], but moves away from this mysticism, back to the "daily shops and factories wherein/ Man occupies his darkening life", submits to linear time, with its distance between present and future moments, and so becomes, in reference to the "resurrection of the dead", one who waits.

If Buckley's early poetry of belief is not, in general, uplifting, if it is too often tempted to high sounds and mystifying images, this is not so much because his Catholicism necessarily encourages insincerity, as because his poetry is still imaginatively immature. It is still, as Penelope Curtis has argued, integrating the language of metaphor with the language of fact, the personal with the public,

---

1. Buckley's line, "Their neck is wounded with His gentle hand", is taken from John of the Cross's poem, "Upon a gloomy night". Cf., Poems of St John of the Cross, trans., Roy Cambell, Collins, 1979, pp. 10-13.

establishing a rhythmic and rhetorical space where each of the terms concentrates the other's meaning. [1] It is still, in other words, largely a poetry where thematic and structural "alienations" remain just that, and do not become "identifications" - not for the poet, nor for the reader. Accordingly, his use of belief - as also of land, love, society, and art - quite often lacks immediacy and focus, quite often converts situation too quickly and too abstractly into a self-conscious search for significance. His use of belief is also much less certain than Macainsh suggests [2]: belief is a place where Buckley finds the self divided between aspiration and achievement. While the pulpit tones may often disguise it, Buckley begins here to imagine belief in terms of a troubled distance between the personal world of faith and the public world of dogma.

---

1. Cf. Penelope Curtis, "Vincent Buckley as Poet", Quadrant, 4, 1962, 55-65.
2. Cf. Noel Macainsh, "Six Volumes of It", Overland, 22, 1961, 52.

SECTION THREE

ARCADY AND OTHER PLACES

If, in Arcady and Other Places (1966), Vincent Buckley is still searching for "signs of resurrection", he is not trying to sound the "thunder" as he did in "In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom". There is a noticeable development in the religious character of his poetry. Catholic truths contribute one kind of resonance among others (personal, political, familial, geographical) and are effective to the degree that they become an integrated element of the whole. That is, Catholic truths, if they are to be part of the whole, must be rediscovered rather than reiterated, and rediscovered within relationship:

> Of course, poetry is always in some sense a voyage of discovery; in the very process of creation, the poet discovers and strengthens ties between himself and the varied aspects of external reality; and he expresses the existence and meaning of those ties at the moment of their fullest realization.[1]

It is "fullest realization" which nominates the genuinely religious moment in Buckley's poetry.

One poem which shows how Buckley locates the Christian mysteries at once beyond and within immediate circumstances is "Good Friday and the Present Crucifixion" (AOP, 13). It also shows him uneasy with a church full of devotion.

As the poem opens, Buckley invites the reader to wonder how the first Good Friday might be still repeating its pattern. He mentions a death, a murder, and then the Good Friday ritual. The reader is left to consider how these are related to each other. When the speaker

---

1. Vincent Buckley, "Helicon as Jordan", Essays in Poetry, p. 94.

then enters a church, attention is directed towards the suspicious neighbourliness of its congregation. The people identify with each other - and, indeed, with all human history. Yet they also keep their privacy. They are incorporated into a very temporal pattern which ranges between the "faint expectancy" of youth and the "previous pain" of old age, yet includes them - as "all" - within the ancient rhythm of the ritualised mystery:

> But all with bodies in antique postures
> Before the empty tabernacle
> And the lit candles, their tributary fires.

Confronted thus with the empty tabernacle, the liturgical symbol of Christ's absence, the speaker determines to be unified with Christ's death. He will enact the "present crucifixion". He then chooses the way of the "abstract symbol", moving away from immediate (and distracting) circumstances and concentrating his imagination on Calvary. This results in a self-conscious process in which the speaker's efforts become his Calvary as he hauls up the hill of prayer and poetry towards his "abstract symbol". It is also a process in which the other people in the church almost entirely disappear. (They reappear, near the summit, in alien guise as if discomforted by Christ's/his suffering.) Christ, however, is never really a presence - unless as a shadow behind the speaker. What the speaker experiences when imaginatively united to Calvary can only be hinted at - and that in language which is a carefully arranged mixture of the sensate and the emblematic:

> Eyes held by the shadowless wood,
> Mouth held by a soundless cry,
> Ears by a rushing wind, hands
> Gripping nails to the sweat of palms
> Held fast by what they parody.
> Here is the rim of it, here's
> Body's emergence into light; and nostrils
> Smell at last the stink of crucifixion.

Yet, we are never close to this stink: it is more stated than

realised. The reason for this is implied, just as the irony is extended, when the poem makes its transition from "the stink of crucifixion" to "The smell of packed bodies":

> The smell of packed bodies. Only
> This world of flesh is scored with the full meaning.
> We go out, in our twos. The earth is pallid,
> The sun distracted with its three hours' death,
> But still in the sibilant air,
> Its mottled-with-crimson darkness, hangs
> The thong and point of rain.

While this seems to affirm mystery present in the human "world of flesh", it is not itself easy with the presence of other people. The poem has not given any sense of the communal ritual and belief which has been enacted in the church. It has been taken up with a private struggle. Now that private, somewhat aristocratic, asceticism is turned back towards "packed bodies". These, however, are quickly transformed into departing bodies - it is at the point of their leaving church that "we" is used for the first and only time. Then the speaker is concerned to show that the landscape has assumed the character of crucifixion. This returns us to the landscape symbolism of the first stanza and verifies a connection between the self and the landscape, but it also takes us away from the other people. This is not a poem in which one might expect to meet Mrs Mac and her lumbago.

"Shining Earth: A Summer Without Evil" (AOP, 39) also attempts to transform present circumstances through a combination of landscape and Christian symbolism. The speaker, having received Holy Communion, is delighting in earth's shining mystery, but then recalls horrible images of war. He tries to reconcile the horror, but offers little hope: the final feeling is very much one of alienation.

The poem opens with an abstract pattern of reconciliation, which easily incorporates the personal situation of one who delights in a

green earth. This delight moves from the abstract synaesthesia of the cypress's "heat-smell/ Like a sheen around it" to a more closely observed description of bees:

> Armed men, bees, black-gold harvesters
> Taking the ground-winds in their prime,
> Gathering sweetness, feet bent to their bodies,
> Their mouths like a slow fire along the grass,
> The fruit heated with our sweat,
> The droppings showing green buds.

This image allows the speaker to name the dark fruitfulness of earth as a manifestation of "The living God". Yet it also summons another image which threatens to displace entirely any such positive vision. Nature's fructifying warriors, the bees, are, in the third stanza, replaced by human warriors as Buckley conjures the horror of war. This is set against the earlier, sacramental vision of the shining earth. Buckley offers no solution. He simply attempts to send across the poem's distance the more positive image of the bees with "Their mouths like a slow fire along the grass":

> Although the Host still fills my throat
> I strain towards the air like a blind man,
> Sending out fears, phrases,
> Like flames across dead grass.

This final image refuses to privilege the "Host" (just as the poem has, in a sense, brought it out of the church) and places it within the destructive and reconstructive possibilities imagined in fire moving through dead grass.

In "Cherry Tree in Fog" (AOP, 43) there is a feeling of identification - with Christ, but also with immediate experience - not achieved in "Good Friday and the Present Crucifixion". The poem negotiates a movement between loss and discovery, as also between immediate (fog-bound) experience and a gospel text which invites participation in the cross of Christ. As it opens, the speaker, along with surrounding trees, is shrouded by the irresistible identity of

fog. This "loss" occurs in an old orchard and encloses even things "thick with time" and scored with certitude. The fog's rhythm even enters that of the bells, "deepening (their) first tremor" with its own voice. Walking within this, the speaker grasps a black cherrywood. As he does so, the gospel text is introduced - not with the resounding tones of the earlier poety, but, rather, as if it were itself a fragment within the fog:

> In the old orchard
> ("Whoso would lose his life shall find it")
> I find with slow hand the black cherrywood
> Deep-skinned, smooth, as though grained with runnels
> Where the long drop of water slides. And rest.

What makes this poem so effective is that Buckley does not return to the gospel text: he follows the tree and finds in its pattern how the gospel pattern and paradox are confirmed. In one sense, he loses his text only to find it again - as a mystery closer to the world of fact. This movement very effectively realises the Christian procedure outlined in the earlier essay, "The World Awaiting Redemption". There he argued that things "gain a new nobility as ideas by being used (by their Creator) as analogues of His own kingdom, His own continuing life".[1] Yet Buckley also argued that an equivalent consequence of such a sacramental vision was that things are also ennobled as facts: "we must be fully incarnated, fully localized, fully identified with the needs of a specific situation, even while we decline to have our imaginations bounded by purely local images and examples."[2] Whereas the earlier poetry is too often found ennobling things as ideas but not as facts, here Buckley does achieve his ambition:

> It feels its sap as a man feels his blood,
> Though shivering and sightless. Touched, even in chill
> And lost, we come alive, till down the bough
> The blossom springs, buoyant with fog, amazing
> Black wood to the white massy tip.

---

1. The Incarnation in the University, p. 44.
2. The Incarnation in the University, p. 47.

Here the speaker finds himself by feeling within the tree a rhythm analogous to that of his own blood. This discovery does not displace the fog: his world is still "shivering and sightless". Nor does it noisily appropriate its Christian reference: it is the proximity of "lost" and "alive" which quietly recalls the gospel text, itself a prophecy of Christ's passion and an invitation to share that mystery.[1]. Even as gospel text and immediate experience are thereby being joined, the movement encloses the communion of speaker and tree: "lost, we come alive". This is then directed to the black bough and white blossom: the "white massy tip" seems at once to surrender to the fog, yet then to concentrate and define its mistiness. If we recall the gospel text, we can read the black bough as the cross and the white blossom as the resurrection, but we cannot do so if we lose sight of the thing itself. It is in terms of the thing itself, ennobled as idea and as fact, that the religious vision is vindicated.

This kind of incarnational imagination lies behind the prayer which occurs in "Places" (AOP, 37): "O God, make me worthy of the world." The poem is dedicated to Jerry Golden, S.J., who was chaplain to the "Apostolate" group in Melbourne University, and who wrote the preface for The Incarnation in the University. There, referring to the Christian story of creation, fall and redemption, Golden is at pains to emphasise that redemption must include "the things of nature" and that "Apostles" must be "at home with the world". He continues:

> And the work of the Apostolate consists in seeing God's vision of this earth, things turning men to God, not away from Him. The Apostle is interested in conversion; but he is more interested in making it possible for all men to realize the dignity of redeemed man, his true purpose in life and the proper use of creatures.[2].

---

1. Cf. Matthew, 16:21-28.
2. The Incarnation in the University, p. 14.

In this poem for Golden, Buckley sees the world disclose paradise, resurrection and recreated light. He is struck dumb by the world's own truth.

He begins, not unusually, as a walker in a landscape - though here he is at ease. Trees, houses and speaker are unified in the rhythm of the wind:

> The wind moves
> Houses and trees together, till they breathe
> As though I breathed with them, systole, diastole
> Of the built and the growing.

Yet even as he guards this (unpeopled) landscape and its imaginative potential, the speaker appears isolated:

> So I patrol. There's not a soul in sight.
> It was an older, foreign voice that cried
> "The swarm of bees enfolds the ancient hive".

He is at once affirming ancient patterns of fulfilment, yet feeling that such eloquence, to which he aspires, is far away.

The second section reassures; love gives the world a rhythm of renewal and the world gives back a sign of resurrection:

> But love is a harsh and pure honey.
> The world is brought alive with us
> So many times. One night I learned the resurrection
> In still water.

This occurs as, deeply aware of how the land "Is warm as blood", the speaker sees, in moonlit water, how things reach both upwards (back to their reality) and downwards (to their reflection):

> I lean on the bridge, looking down.
> Under the utter moon all things reach
> Their height in water; there the thin
> Unbreathing tree touches the depth of cloud
> Downward; there light vibrates in the sky.

While the notion of "the resurrection" might at first appear to be more stated than realised, it is in fact deeply but delicately enclosed within the structure of this moment: in the ascending/

descending pattern, and in the strangely heightened sense of life which so often occurs in what we call "the dead of night". Buckley's faith in the world's mystery is then communicated - but as a matter of sensate as well as symbolic awareness: "but now/ I almost smell the next year's seed."

This concern with fecundity is immediately taken up in the poem's third section:

> Bound from Mass, my blood fresh as the sea.
> In the city light there are pools, deep-groined.
> Where the gilled bodies leap down and glide;
> And the sea-smell, drifting like the sounds of sleep,
> Gives air a distance, not a shape,
> And light itself is recreated, made
> Native to all bodies. I think how once,
> Hardly thinking, in a strange church,
> A man, forgetting the common rubric, prayed
> 'O God, make me worthy of the world',
> And felt his own silence sting his tongue.

Here Buckley creates an "oceanic feeling"[1]: the sea gathers together the speaker's blood, the city light, the "gilled bodies". He also combines a note of alienation with one of identification: while the sea-smell gives the air a "distance", it recreates light such that it becomes at home with the physical world. This is all framed within the obviously sympathetic relationship between the speaker who has just been to Mass, where the sacrament of Christ's flesh is enacted, and the other man who prayed to be made worthy of the world. Even so, the experience should not be simply aligned with Buckley's theology of Incarnation. There is a sense in which the poem moves between the theology and the experience. The speaker is "Bound from Mass". Like Tarsisius, he is carrying Christ's flesh into the world; but his is still an intermediate position and one which, in relation

---

1. Buckley himself uses this description of Freud's in his interview with Elizabeth Booth, Quadrant, August, 1976, 27.

to religious authority, shifts "Mass" aside and privileges the constructing self. Similarly, the other man, discovered and displaced by silence, first forgets the "common rubric" of the church before he expresses and exposes himself with his prayer.

It is, perhaps, a small moment, but it is important and somewhat prophetic. While the speaker is obviously committed to his religious search, which is continued through a model of imaginative integration, he also betrays a distance between his way and one which more easily expresses itself through institutional allegiance. Buckley's own position within Catholicism was, at the time, characterised by an impulse to push the boundaries of institutional allegiance. In Cutting Green Hay, for instance, he reconstructs himself as a Catholic trying to escape the Church's "self-enclosing formalism". [1.] In Poetry and the Sacred, published in 1968, he approaches religion through anthropology rather than traditional theology, and observes that the modern age has seen, not a complete failure of religion, "but a shift from the transcendent to the immanent, from person to process, in specifying the sacred". [2.] Here his concern is not with "religion in poetry", but with "poetry as a religious act" [3.]. He clearly identifies his own enterprise as one of sacralising imagination and place, especially when he cites the work of Mircea Eliade:

> Yet this experience of profane space still includes values that to some extent recall the nonhomogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space. There are, for example, privileged places, qualitatively different from all others - a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth. Even for the most frankly non-religious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the 'holy places'

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 231.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 9.

> of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life. [1].

Belief is one component in his search for place - a search clearly signalled in the way relationships with people, with history, and with Christ, are explored as if they were further expressions of a more fundamental relationship and rhythm: that between self and place. This, the rhythm of self-place, is more and more the deepest rhythm: theological truths are submitted to this and only if they are incorporated do they become "holy places". This can be seen in poems already discussed, but it is particularly true of "Parents" and "Stroke", which, along with some of the "Eleven Political Poems", represent the genuine accomplishment of Arcady and Other Places.

In "Parents" (AOP, 15) Buckley visits his parents and finds they have assumed the decaying character of their place. Cut off from that place and its memories, he is doubtful whether the vine, symbolising continuity and fruitfulness, will bear:

> I nod, but the names, perils, dates mean nothing,
> And where that's true, the deepest bonds are lost.
> How will the vine bear this year? I feel
> My heart growing till my thoughts are hoarse
> And the old branches pick at the heap of leavings.

While the vine does acquire a symbolic status, there is no textual encouragement to read it as a Johannine symbol for Christ or the eucharist. In this case it is more appropriate to follow the poem's own focus, paying attention to the objective, colloquial tone, letting that indicate the shape of its emotion. This leads us to the assonance and lingering sound of "heap of leavings", where Buckley's sad kind of realism responds to a moment of departure. Knowing

---

1. Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 24 (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York, 1959). Cited, Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 74-75.

that "Facts sound like charges", the poem is determinedly realistic - the impulse to false myth-making is discredited by the way "The least important man/ Is a legend in his neighbour's living room".

It is, then, a poem which records unredeemed distance between child and parents. This is communicated as the speaker embodies the parents' conversational rhythms, only to find he no longer has a real position there, just as he can no longer locate his hopes in the rusted landscape which surrounds his family home:

> My father asks me how I stand it all,
> The work, the debts, the spite. My mother talks
>
> As though I were a famous man and yet
> Unguarded somehow, too fragile to touch.
> It's their needs, not mine, that flutter here
> In the questions and the anecdotes. I stare
> At the rust encroaching on the walnut branches
> Or the pile of litter where the biggest pine tree
> Used to stand, before my absence killed it.

This records, as well, the parents' painful distance from their son, and in a way which mimics their own brave attempt to disguise it.

The parents are finally framed in an image of their own autumnal progress - an image which complements an earlier one in which the house, surrounded by lightning, is framed in "the shining of its ghosts":

> There is so much I don't recall. They stand,
> Timid, waving to watch me go, barely
> Visible in the window's copper sheen.

Perhaps it could be argued that this sets them in a golden afterglow. I think, rather, it returns them to "the rust encroaching on the walnut branches" and loses them in the poet's overall anxiety about his own relationship to this place, a relationship weakened through fading memories.

"Stroke" (AOP, 3-9) also searches memories of people and places as a way of trying to establish connections between the son, his dying father, and the resurrection. It is the father-son relationship which acts as a point of departure and return. As he travels through its possibilities, Buckley tries to see how it encloses and discloses correspondences with other relationships: the way father and son each relate to the land, the family history, and to death. The more we explore these correspondences, the more we realise how deeply they confirm a fundamental image of distance - of dry distance which has somehow to be passed through. There is the distance between father and son. There is the distance between the discomforted observer and the hospital environment. There is the distance between the son and his family heritage, just as within that heritage there is the distance between the muscle and the bone, and between emotional and physical power in men. There is the distance, in certain sections, between the poet as detached observer and the poet as the object of that observation. There is even the distance between Buckley's more traditional forms and more experimental ones. There is the distance between the measured voice of the poem's inwardly-moving meditation and the inarticulate moments of conversation by which father and son attempt to travel the long distance between heart and tongue. There is, of course, the distance it takes to move from life to death. The fundamental dynamic of the poem is to travel those dry distances and search for the holy space of promise.

It is these images - of dry distance - which initiate the conversation between his father's dying and the metaphor of Christian passover. It is a troubled, and searching conversation, never rising to confident assertion, always tactful and tentative; but it is there, seeded in the imagery. It is not a conversation in which the Christian

metaphor has priority. Any possible correspondence between his father's passover and Christ's is itself qualitatively determined by the more immediate and personal distance between father and son - and that is deeply imbued with a sense of expatriation or exile. The poem, then, searches for various kinds of "home" and so attempts to reconcile various kinds of "expatriation". This pattern is not included in the passover metaphor: the passover metaphor is included in the pattern. It is then one way by which the poem moves between images of bondage, exile, strange land and images of deliverance, promise, and home.

The first poem immediately and powerfully establishes a sense of estrangement: the detached, observational mode of grief; the alien environment of the hospital; the displacement of dying; the strain between father and son; the corner-of-mouth conversation which says so much less than it wants and feels. The father, in a cot, is placed within an image of bondage. Through its bars, he is trying to return to the beginning of being, his first home. This encodes the journey from slavery to freedom. Of course, the father remains on the journey - his eyes only "almost find" the way (and how often in the poem people are "almost" arriving at freedom). However, the biblical image is momentarily present:

> Words like a fever bring
> The pillar of cloud, pillar of fire
> Travelling the desert of the mind and face.

While this is then somewhat displaced by the image of cars, with their chop and change movement, it is not entirely so: the line, "Night shakes the seasonable ground", sets up faint associations with the passing of the seasons, the passing of night and day, and even with the gospel's image of how the seed must first fall to the ground and die, if it is to produce life.

The second poem is a taut, rhymed rendering of the discomfort and disconnectedness often experienced in a hospital ward. Driven privacy produces its own connecting rhythm:

> So small a licit breathing-space
> Brings each inside the other's dream.

Generally, though, this poem depicts people alienated from death and the dying person. The son is even alienated from himself, becoming a role in this necessary play:

> the rule demands
> I stand there with a stiff face
> Ready, at a word or gleam,
> To conjure off the drops of sweat.

This introduces a tension between power and helplessness and leads naturally to the final image: as visitors "Skirt the precipice of love" the poem hovers not only between speech and silence, but also between the very absence and presence of love.

The third poem shows that this sense of estrangement is not confined to the father-son relationship, nor to the hospital ward. Here, where the speaker shows the dividedness of the self as subject and object, a seven year old boy finds the world incomplete. Only the darkness gives a sense of home. Otherwise his world is made of troubling images: the horse is bound, the stars are only "almost moving", the cows are "encroaching". Then the frost, like the coal of prophecy, stings his lips and he finds himself placed within this mysterious language which is at once painful and beautiful:

> The hawthorn tree
> Glimmered as though frost had turned to language
> And language into sharp massy blossoms.
> Once, I even scraped my father's hand
> And glimpsed the white underside of poplars
> That, moving, almost touched the flashing stars.

If this is a moment where father and son connect, it is also a moment where the high hope of stars meets with rough-skinned reality.

Although the poem claims "there's nothing mythical" in this memory of childhood, there is. While it does resist invoking traditional mythology, it is still constructing a more personal mythology of the displaced self. The child remains a little distanced from actions he would like to complete, whether it be wiping his runny nose, turning the pages of a book, or getting to know his father. A pattern is being established, as various distances between action and desire are interconnected, and the centre of the pattern is the helpless distance which encloses the dying father and his still-searching son. Similarly, the distance between life and death is here somewhat anticipated in the way "the dark heat of words" is set against the silent, cold father. This is further confirmed by the way the perspective shifts back from the seven year old child: he is defined through the solid presences of oak, pine and willow, sharing with them "quiet terror", knowing the almost sacred dread of the self small before the world; the older man is ruled by "spasms of sound" and finds the displacement turning inwards:

> Now, in the deeper quiet of my age,
> I feel thirty years
> Turning my blood inwards; neither trees nor stars,
> But a hush and start of traffic; spasms of sound
> Loosening tram rails, bluestone foundations,
> Manuscripts, memories: to many tasks;
> A body shrinking round its own
> Corruption, though a long way from dying.
> We suit our memories to our sufferings.

In these spasmodic moves to connect past and present self, trees and city, stars and bluestone foundations, the hand he once scraped and the one now "Climbing an aluminium bar", the poem constructs its own formal equivalent to the "Stroke". Yet the patterning process is itself exacerbating the speaker's sense of being somehow excluded from understanding and peace. Later, this feeling is given its focus when he realises that his father, in dying, "learns to teach/ Himself the mysteries I am left to trace." Here, though, it is expressed in his

anxiety about the blood (-beat) draining away into some private and very corruptible darkness, and his realisation that the wise, protective and "continual/ Movement of trees" [1] has changed to the city's ragged breathing (where so much is "Loosening"). In one sense, these are patterns which sympathise, formally and thematically, with the father's condition. Yet, in another sense, even this small comfort is pushed to the edge by the line, "We suit our memories to our sufferings." It is a line in which sufferings and memories seem at once to console and accuse each other.

In the fourth poem, Buckley searches his father's land and history for signs of resurrection. The raw material is there for a connection with the passover story, inasmuch as both are concerned with a people's history and a dream of promised land. Buckley's search, however, exposes more failure than promise. His ancestors never arrive at tenderness. The men are burnt out in the dry distances between their bodies and their thoughts. They subdue the hard land, but never feel at home in it. They value physical prowess: they want to stay with the illusory promise of youth (and are bound by their illusions) and fear the passage through the bone. They remain bound. They are bound to the land by a relationship which is combative and physical, rather than sensual and spiritual. They are bound within: the ancestors have a heat, but it is not the liberating fire of Exodus, but that fierce will which consumes the body in stubbornness and stoicism and "Considers every help a cruelty". Women barely feature in this history: they give the men property, as well as the opportunity to break hearts. The speaker's own place within this history is ambiguous. Reacting against the straight-lined hatred

---

1. "Borrowing of Trees", Masters in Israel, p. 20.

with which his ancestors crossed the land, he says he does not love straight lines. Reacting against the way they "Spoke with rancour", he says he speaks "with a measured voice". When he says that he, like them, speaks in "double meanings", he is not simply admitting common humanity; he is implying that their "double meanings" were a matter of hypocrisy, while his are a matter of paradox.

In the fifth poem, Buckley returns to the hospital ward. Wind and weather blend in "Time's passion" - which, in its burning, returns to and somewhat reconciles the image of his ancestors with "the spirit hot in their own bodies,/ Burned to ash in their own thoughts"(IV), and anticipates that of the father growing "accustomed to his own sweat". This poem also recapitulates the earlier sense of hyper-objective observation: visitors become "voyeurs of decay", and the speaker communicates a sense of noting his own impressions and responses as if they belonged to the other self, the one who is the object of divided consciousness. Even as he sees all the rhythm of dying and decay which controls his father's weakening pulse, the son asks for a pulse which is green - and evokes an image which lets father and son touch:

> Where is the green that swells against the blade
> Or sways in sap to the high boughs? To the root
> He is dry wood, and in his sideways
> Falling brings down lights. Our breath
> Mingles,
> Stirs the green air of the laurel tree.

While the references to "dry wood" and "breath" retain the theme of mortality, the overall experience has once more been placed under the symbolism of trees and the reader's perspective has been shifted, has, with the stirring air, been raised with promise - indeed, with the promise of poetry (symbolised in the laurel).

As the sixth poem opens, this green promise has turned to winter, and a deeper displacement threatens: the son is praying that his father will not lose his mind. Even this prayer is set within a "dark glow", a via negativa where God is felt to be as much absent as present. Now the reaching arm of (I) is "strapped to a bed" and the struggle "to come/ Through the bed's bars to his first home" (I) has arrived at the last world:

> On tiles or concrete path
> The old wheeling the old,
> For whom, in this last world,
> Hope is an aftermath.

Any facile attempt to connect the "last world" and "first home" is prevented by "Hope is an aftermath": this displaces hope from the historical progression and directs history back to the dying. Yet, at this point, theological imagery emerges again:

> And the damp trees extend
> Branch and thorn. We live
> As much as we believe.
> All things covet an end.

The "Branch and thorn" invite participation in Christ's cross and again approach the question: does the father's suffering share in Christ's? "We live/ As much as we believe" does more than suggest that faith creates its own world. The phrasing suggests a reciprocity between faith and experience, each encouraging the other. This, of course, is consistent with Buckley's whole method: he does not state belief; he does not impose theological formulae; he searches for the moment when the rhythms of experience and those of faith are most deeply connected and realised. This means that his use of Christian imagery is tactful. It also means that it is tensive: "All things covet an end" might suggest faith in a divine pattern, but it might equally express fatalism. Certainly, the image which then closes this poem does nothing to reduce the tension, as it shifts between including and excluding the passover:

Once, on the Kerrie road,
I drove with him through fire.
Now, in the burnt cold year,
He drains off piss and blood,

His wounded face tube-fed,
His arm strapped to a bed.

Just as the memory of driving through fire is about to encourage a confident image of passover, it is contrasted with "the burnt cold year" which recalls the father's fevered mind (I) and burning body (V), as well as the ancestors whose bodies "Burned to ash in their own thoughts"(IV). This keeps alive the possibility that "fire" may not operate as a symbol of transformation, but only as one of destruction. Similarly, "He drains off piss and blood" approaches and draws away from the image of the crucified Christ draining off blood and water. So too, "arms strapped to a bed" hints at crucifixion, but moves more to bondage. Buckley has obviously resisted the more usual consolations of faith, and here his commitment to immediate details adds poignancy to his statement that "We live/ As much as we believe."

In the final poem, father and son do at last connect:

At the merest handshake I feel his blood
Move with the ebb-tide chill. Who can revive
A body settled in its final mood?
To whom, on what tide, can we move, and live?

While the blood's ebbing tide is here accepted as the final pulse, it is also lifted into a movement of faith. "To whom, on what tide, can we move, and live?" does more than extend the image of an ebbing tide. It strongly recalls a biblical reference: "God is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist".[1] Here the language of faith moves through the language of suffering, subtly supported by half-rhymes. In a poem dominated by the blood's

---

1. Acts, 17:28.

ebbing tide, the association of "blood" with "mood" suddenly suggests that the blood's failure may itself be merely a matter of some transitory state. The final stress on "live" seems almost a positive answer to "Who can revive . . .?" Given these delicate correspondences, it may well be that the strongest sign of resurrection which the poem gives is precisely its own passing over of reference, the space it travels between Acts and "To whom, on what tide, can we move, and live?"

Now the poem's mood is more securely tender and tranquil. Even though his father is very frail, Buckley's wording of this places imminent death within a pattern which holds the father to the air - insubstantial, but also everywhere: "His pulse no stronger than the pulse of air." Once more a tree is introduced: "looming, light green, cypresses". These references together restate the promise and gentleness of:

> Our breath
> Mingles,
> Stirs the green air of the laurel tree. (V)

Still, the cypresses do not constitute a univocal presence: though evergreen, they are also often used as coffin wood and are symbolic of mourning.[1] However, they also have a biblical symbolism. The prophecy of Hosea closes as God promises lasting prosperity for his beloved and declares, "I am like a cypress evergreen, all your fruitfulness comes from me." (14:9b)

In the final verse what was once a dry distance between father and son seems to have been crossed as the father "grows more tender". Yet this tenderness is being lost even as it is found: the father is

---

1. Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary, Vol 1, p. 417.

moving beyond the world of facts which the poem has so painstakingly constructed. He is entering the "mysteries" - and the son is then once more distanced from him, is once more imagined as a self unable to arrive at some desired point of consciousness:

> Dying, he grows more tender, learns to teach
> Himself the mysteries I am left to trace.
> As I bend to say 'Till next time', I search
> For signs of resurrection in his face.

This is not simply an expression of faith; it is more the construction of a self. This self, mediated through "place" in its geographical, historical and emotional manifestations, is now explored in relation to "mysteries". Even so, these mysteries are referred back to the everyday world which the self is left to inhabit. While "Till next time" contains a transcendent implication, this possibility is opened within and contained by colloquial conversation. Similarly, the theological character of "signs of resurrection" serves to intensify, not resolve, the problem of faith. The phrase momentarily foregrounds the dimension of mystery which has been present beneath the poem, and even gives it all the status of Christian tradition. Still, it does not displace the problematic patterns which have already constituted the search - indeed, theological language is so rare in the poem that this phrase turns us back to those patterns, searching for the poem's own "signs of resurrection". Resurrection remains a possibility; the final fact is "his face". It is not so much the reference to "resurrection" which gives the poem its religious character. It is the search for signs.

Buckley's search for signs of the sacred within human patterns encompasses even the world of politics. As Buckley tells his own

political history,[1] it is one where ideological positions are continually refused in favour of the "radiant facts" of an immediate, if hopefully "shining", earth. This is a stance consistent with Buckley's Christian humanism and his theology of Incarnation, just as it is also consistent with an ongoing tension in his poetry between private and public worlds, as also between paradisal and cynical expectations.

Buckley's political self is constructed as one who moves between the idealist and the gradualist, all the time resisting temptations to ideology. In 1968 he described himself as "a socialist of democratic and therefore gradualist convictions", a non-party person disillusioned with "the present state of the Australian left" and distrustful of the "dogmatically ideological" element in political parties.[2] He went on to outline the origins of this position (and pattern): Irish-Catholic working class background, Labour sympathies, sense of the underdog, and distrust of the processes of power. This encouraged him to see politics within the context of "a hope of some total salvation for the world" and provided "a stance by which (he) defined (him) self"[3] - that is, it related political realities to religious and personal ones. These elements continue in the story which he tells. Despite sympathies with the revisionist tendencies in Marxism, Buckley distrusted the Communist Party because of its puritanical tone, its superficial evaluation of religion, and because of tyrannical elements in the exercise of Soviet power.[4] Buckley's

---

1. I am not implying reservation about his accuracy, but stressing that my interest is in the properly fictive dimension of his history, and in the imaginative congruence this has with the "Eleven Political Poems".
2. "Remembering What You Have To", Quadrant, Sept/Oct, 1968, 19.
3. "Remembering What You Have To", p. 20.
4. "Remembering What You Have To", p. 23.

relationship with the Labour Party (which he joined as soon as he was old enough) is never uncomplicated. In 1946 he refused to join the Labour Club at Melbourne University because he disapproved of some dogmatic Communist elements, of the categorising of Orwell and Koestler as Fascists, and of the Communist orthodoxy of literature. In 1949 he did join the A.L.P. Club - composed of dissident Labour members - and resisted a leadership challenge made by its right-wing (dominated by "The Movement"). In 1953 he let his A.L.P. membership lapse, in order to give time to writing and to the formation of Catholic groups "which, from a political point of view, could be regarded as left-liberal, though their raison d'etre was not political at all".[1] Whatever the a-political aspirations of such groups as the "Apostolate" and The Catholic Worker, they were inevitably part of the internal politics of the Catholic Church and Buckley still finds himself resisting ideological categories, being disappointed by self-conscious dogmatism, lack of patient reasoning, excessive attachment to tradition and authority, and even by a destructive dissociation of public and private worlds. Whether this version is accurate is not quite the point: the imaginative pattern evidenced in Buckley's construction of his own political memory is remarkably similar to that which informs "Eleven Political Poems".

In telling his political history, Buckley also confessed to a fascination with politics as a

> paradigmatic drama being played out in terms of force and counterforce, and involving at the same time moral assessment and choice, meaning something, affecting human lives. What is fascinating is the continual sense that human life, in its formalized communal aspect, is morally dramatic.[2]

---

1. "Remembering What You Have To", p. 24.
2. "Remembering What You Have To", p. 20. (Emphasis his)

"Eleven Political Poems" represent this moral drama. The poems are populated by figures who achieve and encourage very little freedom, who are shallow, glib and self-serving in their moral-political assessments, and who allow their ideological obsessions to destroy the possibility of integrated humanity. Ideological obsessions generate authoritarian behaviour, which in turn deepens the division between public and private dimensions of human life. Behind the "almost-empty eyes" of the "Fellow Traveller" (AOP, 50) can be anticipated "The high blast of a revolver shot". This tyranny is favoured by his authoritarian appeal to Conscience and to principle, fed even by his own need for anger and by mob morality:

> Give him this day his bread of indignation,
> For he is Inspector of our Consciences;
> Give him his daily signature
> To a joint letter; hear him explain,
> Oh no it's not the case itself so much,
> It's the principle;

The eyes of the "Youth Leader" (AOP, 50) are "Too glibly moved" and he acts as if he were a Roman emperor at the circus. Buckley points to the superficiality at the heart of his murderous self-aggrandisement by remarking how he combs his hair "In the Roman fashion./ A programme in a hair style." "Return of a Popular Statesman" (AOP, 52) shows an old man who is merely a shell being used as a crowd-pleasing front to disguise armoured cars and secret committees which hold the real power. This idealising exercise is itself undercut by the final line: "The pickpockets move among the crowds." They are, in one sense, appropriate: part of the scavenging force which demonstrates the political realm's lack of morality. In another sense, they are a counterforce: concerned not with the high world of principle, but with their own immediate needs. "Secret Policeman" (AOP, 53) offends Buckley's vision of politics on many scores: he identifies himself with an ideology and its authoritarian expression, sees not a

"shining" but a "hired" world to be controlled rather than celebrated, and perverts the blood-beat:

> A mire me: I fill these shining boots,
> I am soul expanded to a uniform;
> A hired world glitters at my senses,
> The smell of blood keeps my blood-stream warm.

He too is soulless, finding his way through "dead eyes".

"Revolutionary Situation" (AOP, 51) shows how such a discordant state of affairs arises from utopian impatience. In a parody of Calvary and Pentecost, people are executed in order to have "Paradise sealed with every bleeding breath". The emerging pattern of revolution - somehow moral, somehow manic - is very much a matter of "force and counterforce":

> The walls cry out with pentecostal tongues,
> Speaking a different word to every man:
> Freedom, panic; new elections, death.

The political body, performing "A dozen murders to cauterize one wound" and ignoring "the thirst/ To blend our marrow-bones in the damp ground", is ironically displaced from the immediate earth (the "shining world") even as its eagerness for a new earth assumes apocalyptic proportions: "The star grows huge; the mass trials begin." All this public and pseudo-religious energy cannot quite disguise a private deadness:

> we feel God's hand strike in
> To find the hearts as coarse and dry as stones.

This deadness is the concern of "Election Speech" (AOP, 49), where political mottoes are described as "words blown through a skull", and people are "bound by fear or gain/ To the last ranting syllable". The poem's speaker then reclaims a private space, where he recognises his alienation from such empty speech. He returns to the image of the skull:

I think of nothing; nothings fill
The image that his words inscribe,
My skull intoning from the hill.

The hope which Buckley offers is poetry: not so much as a substitute for politics, but as an activity which integrates political and public rhythms with private, moral and geographical ones, which celebrates the world rather than the Cause. It is not an easy thing; "Poetry and the Party Line" (AOP, 54) shows how poetry is itself vulnerable to ideology:

Everyone in some uniform or other,
The jack-of-no-trades made master of all,
And the air refreshed daily with
Radio speeches, folk-singers and marches,
The state has come of age: we are ready to attend
To poetry, our most respected corpse.

This corpse is highly revered: it is "embalmed with popular sentiments". Buckley argues that poetry is dead because it has been "modelled to the shape of power" - a power without counterforce, since the partyline lacks the more personal power needed to "smash the glass and touch the waxen flesh/ To life".

This leads to "No New Thing" (AOP, 55), where the political enterprise, lacking any sense of personal justice, turns to unenlightened farce. It is a programme which Buckley resists. In doing so, he makes his option for poetry coincide with his distaste for ideological and authoritarian positions and with his concern for participating in the rhythms of the "shining world":

Man, gutted and obedient man,
Who turns his coat when he is told,
Faithless to our shining world.
And hard-faced men, who beat the drum
To call me to this Cause or that,
Those heirs of someone else's tomb,
Can't see the sweeter work I'm at,
The building of the honeycomb.

That poetry might teach politics the human rhythm is the hope of "Day With Its Dry Persistence" (AOP, 56) - just as the weakness of poetry's

position is precisely the distance it has here had to take from the turbulent rhythms which dominate the earlier sections. But Buckley is arguing that such turbulence can only be controlled if there is recognition of the "restlessness" behind it: an intuition of existential exile operates in the first stanza of this poem. Then Buckley indicates how he is preferred by interweaving patterns which turn the exile towards home. All the dark distortions, all the deception and depersonalisation give way to "the bright shapes and the true names":

> Yet there are some tempos that prefer me,
> Some twigs that burst with shaking
> Blossom and dew, some lights that are constant,
> Some movements of the earth that bring me
> In constant pilgrimage to Genesis,
> To the bright shapes and the true names,
>
> O my Lord.

While there have already been references to Calvary, resurrection and Pentecost, they have been somewhat parodic, so that this final, sudden address to Christ is unexpected. It is also ambiguous. It is a moment of recognition that "the humanist hope rests ultimately in Christ as the source of growth" [1]: Christ is at the centre of the innocent world Buckley wants politics to recognise, perhaps recover. It is also a moment of regret: the disparity between Christian humanism and political experience has made Buckley as much cynical as believing. That note of regret also encloses some widening gaps: between institutionalised values and personalised ones, as also perhaps between the Christ publicly professed and the Christ privately perceived. There is a strong sense of a self drifting from institutionalised language, whether that be found in politics,

---

1. Vincent Buckley, "Poetry and the 'New Christians'", Essays in Poetry, p. 91.

religion, or even poetry. In this sense "Oh my Lord" anticipates the close of "Golden Builders": "And my Lord's grave? His grave?"

SECTION FOUR

GOLDEN BUILDERS AND OTHER POEMS

Whereas "Stroke" uses the Exodus myth in such a way that Buckley's language is still committed to his theological tradition, Golden Builders and Other Poems (1976) indicates and encourages a different sense of myth. Buckley moves away from the established and authoritative stories and metaphors of his tradition, even as he attempts to reactivate more immediately the mythic perception from which they are derived. This perception is presented as an imaginative process: very much a sense of discovering oneself within the deepest patterns of the psyche and the universe. Buckley does not advocate the construction or repetition of mythologies.[1] He believes in becoming mythic, and so arriving at the ground of religious feeling.

In "Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions" (GB, 15) Buckley declares that

> There are myths living
> even in our way of walking.

This implies that mythic perception is a deepened appreciation and expression of the rhythmic sense of life. He goes on to link myths with "matters of sheer observation". At the same time, he is deflating mythological heroes and denying their relevance as he searches with "hardening/mind" for some new meaning in his uncertain life, some antidote for his brooding, mortal mood. Arcadian aspirations are dismissed. Yet "Life is a history of absences/ and

---

1. Cf., Vincent Buckley, "National and International", Southerly, 2, 1978, 145-156, especially where he stresses that myths enliven, not through deliberate rewriting, but through "a chemical flowing along the multiple continuums of our life" (p. 154).

unexpected returns", and even as these myths are dismissed they make an unexpected return. Thus, Thermopylae may represent a predictable defeat and have no relevance, yet

> Why then
> do I think of them whenever
> I tune my muscles for the strait of death?

Buckley implies an answer, when he says the Spartans drew strength from "a revelation in their bodies", shining with oil. The thought of death exposes his own nerve-ends to such a revelation. If at the end he has found these heroes relevant, it is not because he believes in them as mythological products, but because he believes the impulse which transfigured them:

> When the bush burns to ashes
> I still must touch my forehead to the ground,
> because its radiance is in my body.
> Gods are vulgar. So are journeys.
> Ulysses sails to find a speck of blood
> in the newly woven pattern; Orpheus
> goes down to find mortality a blessing.
> I walk beside these fires because I must,
> in pain and trembling sometimes thanking God
> for what they give me, the few poems
> that are the holy spaces of my life.

This identification of poems with "holy spaces" does not, I suggest, mean that "Our religion is the poetry in which we believe." [1]. It means, rather, that poetry, as a humanity-making act, will, with its complex rhythms, reveal those human possibilities which are religious. This, at least, is the position Buckley himself takes in an interview with Henry Rosenbloom, where he says:

> It seems to me that all the greatest poetry has a quality of utterance; a quality of revelation of what's in the psyche; a quality of revelation of what's in the world that the psyche confronts; a quality of the thing made, the thing shaped. And it seems to me that it's by a stress on rhythm, that is, on complex rhythm, that these seemingly separate features of the enterprise get brought together. So that, if I had to say in a couple of words what I regarded myself as doing, it would be that I'd like to create, or bring about, or bring out, rhythmic shapes which

---

1. George Santayana, Interpretations of Religion and Poetry, p. 26.

> are both true to the world as it actually is, and true also to what I take to be an enduring aspiration of men: that is, to the paradisal possibilities of life.[1].

He goes on to say that he wants his poetry to witness to "powers and principles in life which are of overwhelming importance" and to "the possibilities in life which (he'd) call religious".[2]. He then remarks:

> My earlier poetry tended to limit the operation of these powers and principles to more standard situations: death, Christian symbols, etc. The later poetry has become a great deal less denominational; I think it's become more religious. There is a certain phoniness in the denominational stance.[3].

Interestingly, a very similar pattern emerges in another prose piece from this time, one operating in an explicitly theological context: "The Strange Personality of Christ".[4].

If it were read within an atmosphere of complacent orthodoxy, this article could quite easily be misinterpreted, inasmuch as it disputes two images of Christ which were then prevalent - man for others and political agitator - and reasserts his essential mystery. However, while he stresses Christ's strangeness and otherness, Buckley also releases him from familiar theological categories and describes him as an hierophany who "shocks us into a kind of stillness not by what we recognize as his rightness but by what we sense as his strangeness".[5]. Indeed, Buckley wonders whether the distinction between believer and non-believer has much content. Then, noting that Christ's roles have till now been determined on theological grounds, he argues

> An assigning of roles on such a basis will become ridiculous, a kind of group fantasy, in an historical era when theology, as distinct from scriptural studies for example, is probably at its

---

1. Henry Rosenbloom, "An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 324.
2. Rosenbloom, p. 325.
3. Rosenbloom, p. 325.
4. Quadrant, Sept/Oct, 1970, 11-25.
5. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 16.

> lowest point ever. In such a situation, to speak of encounters with Christ, or meetings with Christ, is very likely to engage in nothing more than a loose, pseudo-mystical construction of a personal myth which happens to appeal to certain particularly modern modes of sentimentalism. It is therefore essential that Christ be seen as he appears in the gospels.[1.]

This gospel figure is one who cannot be reduced to categories or imperatives: he is a strange and autonomous figure who invites us "to enter imaginatively into his stance in the world".[2.] Buckley's incarnational impulse is still present: as an hierophany, Christ "reveals the sacred, the beyond, in his person, in his speech, and in his acts. He opens up the world so that its depths may be seen."[3.] Yet this Christ clearly appeals more to the mythic imagination than to the traditional theological mind. Repeating his observation that "the distinction between believers and non-believers is ceasing to have any real meaning in many circles", Buckley then expresses his hope that Christ, freshly and imaginatively discovered in his strangeness, might serve as "a model of what human autonomy may look like".[4.] The article concludes with a forceful image of how conventional theology may provide Western Christianity with a language which is well-occupied, but unrelated to this Christ:

> . . . our culture may not be the prodigal son, but the son who stayed at home. If so, we will soon be wondering where and what our home is, and what Christ has to do with our occupancy of it.[5.]

There is also a point where Buckley, referring to a section from The Gospel of Thomas, declares: "it is clearly the result of an inferior imagination in the writer: an inferior sense of facts and of how they can reveal and shine."[6.] This should alert us to the fact that Buckley's growing interest in the mythic substratum of religion

---

1. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 15.
2. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 16.
3. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 19.
4. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 25.
5. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 25.
6. "The Strange Personality . . .", p. 14.

cannot be viewed solely in theological or even anthropological terms. We need to appreciate the imaginative character of this development, for it is a change influenced as much by his interest in the interactive pace of sensation, perception and language as by his theological and anthropological preoccupations. In his 1979 paper, "Ease of American Language",[1] Buckley articulates American influences he was at this time assimilating and adapting. It is appropriate here to anticipate that paper, in which he expresses his fascination with the "special naturalness" of American literary speech:

> The quality is one of perception, which is largely a matter of intimate and prolonged sensation, the sensation of noticing being used as the focus for the other, more clearly animal sensations; a matter of sensation, and of pace in its expounding (that is to say, its uncovering, its outlaying); hence of idiom, since the enterprise is to a certain degree mimetic, and will have to depend on the availability of a language which is close to the bodily particularity of things and of their common local names; hence of the rhythm which will deliver that idiom and the thinginess which it enfolds.[2]

The natural language embodies in its rhythm the other rhythms of noticing, of "pace in its expounding", and of idiom (which itself embodies the particularity of things). This registers Buckley's increasing concern with language, and also develops his abiding interest in the rhythmic sense of life. In this paper he continually finds that the natural language is achieved by its fidelity to the very process which "begins in and is defined by the idiom of sensation".[3] He describes the language of William Carlos Williams as "flatly denotatory and alive with an odd musicality; its music is a function of its dealing with fact".[4] In Faulkner he finds "a way . . . of creating emotion by paying a carefully paced attention to its origins in sensation".[5] There is, surely, a close correlation

---

1. Cf. The American Model, ed., J. Kirkby, pp. 137-159.
2. "Ease of American Language", p. 138.
3. "Ease of American Language", p. 143.
4. "Ease of American Language", p. 138.
5. "Ease of American Language", p. 142.

between this sense of the rhythmic interaction between and within sensation, perception and language and the notion of "holy spaces".

With "Youth and the Old Woman" (GB, 37-41), Buckley relies heavily on spacing to enact a rhythm of memory, its resilience as well as its raggedness. The spacing also acts as an analogue for the mythic imagination: even as it isolates each moment in its individuality, it deepens the immediacy of its presence. It is the overall sense, communicated through the "rhythmic shape" of the world as presence which then holds each moment in relation to others. That is, one effect of the spacing is to create lines which are, as it were, edges opening out. Thus, remembering her youth, the old woman recreates more than the limits of her memory; she recovers the liminal character of her sensate experience:

> and then we
> stood
> stubble-dark in the pallor
>
> if he hadn't put his
> hands on my face
>
> and the horse at dawn
> breathing and stamping touching
> the cold air with his whole body
> hair swinging like rain
> years ago
> when I was a girl (GB, 37)

If such a use of spacing helps communicate Buckley's religious awareness, it is because it imbues sensation, perception and language with a sense of wondering and of entering deeply into the single, opening moment. So the world becomes more a presence than a fact - and this presence is all the more intensely apprehended because of Buckley's isolating-intermingling of sensate experiences. A superb example of this is the opening section of "Seeing Snowline" (GB, 30):

> To draw a fingerline
> along the whole flank of this mountain

the eyes suggest
bringing the snow warmly in

wherever your hand gentles it
are crystals tiny underspace
of aquamarine
tender drinkable light
under lingering salt cold

but how does musk does any life-smell
continue under it all winter? (GB, 30)

Here we also see the paradox operating near the heart of Buckley's religious imagination: even as the "idiom of sensation" expresses the relational basis of Buckley's world, its sense of close speaking and belonging, it also makes that world strange. The "tiny underspace" is a place of intimate awareness, but it also hides the suggestion of mystery - it is a matter of mythic sensibility as well as of sheer observation. It is almost as if Buckley needs some element of foreignness in order to be so intimately aware of his reciprocated response to the rhythmic shape of experience.

This paradox is particularly apparent in "Northern Circle" (GB, 1-8), where the poet places a foreign country and his own loneliness within a language of intimate and interreaching impressions. There is a moment, in the fourth poem, when this is explicitly figured in a tension between the outwardness and inwardness of consciousness:

A handsbreath away the plateau air
is warm as a thumbprint she, outwardly
all thought inside, contact, trembling

(GB, 5)

The opening phrase of the sequence, "Set off", incorporates the speaker's journeying, isolated condition; it also signifies how that isolation, extending to patterns of language and sensation, will yet bring him strangely close to himself:

My country is all skin
and closed nerve: no grain
of earth (GB, 1)

Indeed, when he finds himself alienated from familiar smells, his sense of touch races at an almost unbearable pace:

> Phone lifts the crackle of
> your hand feels cloud grow
> out of rooftops and the lights
> sharpen the stone windows
> a mile away across the snow-river
>
> and the ice brittles in your nostrils
> the small cuts open
> on your hands the cigarette
> tears at your lip (GB, 3)

He especially misses the water-rhythm in this "watertight air" (GB, 4), where heat and humidity set the pace and where you "walk into sweat, your skin itching/ with the hardened inside of houses". (GB, 4) However, in a "Letter to Brigid" (GB, 6), he acknowledges that loneliness has a neighbourly temperament and familiar face, then identifies himself with "words links not meeting", and with disconnected impressions (impressions noted with detached objectivity in language which lacks the interreaching intensity of the "spaced" lines). Similarly, in "North-West Winter" (GB, 7) his sensate approach is deflected by "the unsensual/ electric surfaces" and the verse form withdraws, as it were, into a less expansive attitude. Immediately after this, he recalls the rhythm of wonder he practised at home and recommended to his daughters:

> Daughters . . .
> remember how I called you
> to roam the light, as I did, watch
> the runners in the sea
> lunge and whiten; and the steep cold
> climb from window-frames
> sunrise like a coastline
> rising in the wondering heat
>
> (GB, 8)

In the foreign heat of Vancouver, he has, however, shaded his eyes.

The "idiom of sensation", then, is not simply a language of belonging: it too encloses a tension between closeness and separation. This is

especially evident at the close of "Lightning and Water" (GB, 21-25) when, leaving his love, the poet holds the moment by deeply registering its sensate structure:

> You opening a gate
> in a white wall
> black latch on white-roughened stone
> your hand
> closing the trees
> behind me as I go
> into the sun speeding at corners
>
> and all down Hawthorn Road
> cicadas shrilled up and sank
> house after house
> breaking the skin of each garden
>
> speeding leaving my love
> my love-city
> in a summer like this

(GB, 25)

In the way they enact the interconnected rhythms of sensation, perception and language, and in the way they reveal the experiential and mythic substrata of religious perception, these poems could almost be a rehearsal for "Golden Builders". In this sequence, not only is "language used to move a whole rhythmic body"[1], but language is itself learning to be "locally mimetic"[2] and to receive its rhythm from the place (the city) - even as it tests that place for sacredness. When, in Poetry and the Sacred, Buckley cited Eliade's notion of sacred place - how ordinary space can, because of special associations, assume extraordinary quality "as if it were in such spots that (the person) had received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily

---

1. Vincent Buckley, "Poetry in a Pop Culture World", Quadrant, 4, 1971, 40.
2. Jim Davidson, "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 454. Here Buckley explains how, particularly in "Golden Builders", he was looking for poetry which was "locally mimetic", which discovered and developed the intimate relation between the world outside the self and the language that the self had learned.

life"[1]. - he went on to articulate what might well be the project of "Golden Builders":

> For the majority of poets of today, the creative task is to test those privileged places - and privileged persons, moments, and events as well - for sacredness: do they offer an opening towards the transcendent? Will the testing of their specific feeling, the exploring of their possible significance, open them up towards the transcendent, or will it merely return the poet to the involuted rounds of his own consciousness?[2].

Such a testing for such a sacredness cannot well proceed from a privileged position - and, certainly, Christian references do not provide a starting-point, or even ending-point, for interpreting this poem. They are extremely problematic and they must be first evaluated with reference to the poem's experience, rather than with reference to any dogmatic associations they have beyond the text. We cannot begin with any secure knowledge of what "my Lord's grave" and "Feed My Lambs" mean, however much we appreciate their scriptural origins. Any authoritative theological meaning they might suggest is subordinated to their participation within the poem's mythic process - a process whose centre is jointly composed of the self's and the place's consciousness. Whether that centre then opens out to the transcendent or closes in upon itself is a question which is not answered in theological terms.

Buckley's predominant weakness - a tendency at once to over-generalise and over-privatise - does persist in moments such as:

> Strings and tendons leap with pain
> To raise platforms on stems of hate;
> So much is done by cunning love,
> And anger is an open gate. (XXIV, GB, 78)

and:

> The tree that has a winding root
> The faces brightened with desire,

---

1. Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 74-75.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 75.

> These power wear down the stone of doubt,
> There each man builds a spine of fire
>
> And there he walks on layer thorn;
> The fire's logic has no end;
> He strives to let the dream-child run
> The cold foreground of his mind. (XVII, GB, 67)

However, such obscurity is rare - generally the poem beautifully sustains its "idiom of sensation" and its transcendent possibilities are made present within that idiom. Moreover, this weakness is almost the reverse-side of Buckley's great strength, as described by David Carter:

> a strain at the 'humanist centre' of the poetry between the impulse towards generalizable, representative metaphysical truths and the force of subjectivity, between the hermetic and the 'public', and between the felt significance and the sensuous perception at its source. One feels an extraordinary pressure, even in strongly lyrical moments, of perceptions felt almost as a physical weight on the skin and in the blood . . .[1]

This pressure not only generates the poem's spaces: it also edges those spaces towards a "live/distance" [2] and concentrates any search for the transcendent there. In this way it reinforces the poem's intention to test for sacredness within "the chop and change of the machines" and determines that such sacredness will be disclosed, if at all, within a perceptive and sensate pattern which is tensive.

This tension is named at the very beginning, where disintegration seems also to represent reintegration:

> 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. (I, GB, 46)

---

1. David Carter, "The Death of Satan and the Persistence of Romanticism", An Introduction to Australian Literature, ed., C.D. Narasimhaiah, p. 67.
2. "Youth and the Old Woman", V, Golden Builders and Other Poems, p. 41.

The sound of the machines defines the poem's "rhythmic shape": it stitches the poem somewhat as it "stitches pavements together". (IV, GB, 50) The poem, to use its own terms, is full of shredded fragments of carbon, of resonances and drifting sounds, of pieces from memory, of flashings of voice, of lights hanging open - and these are not empty spaces, but stitching-spaces which allow the possibility of coherence to be threaded into fragmentation. They are opening spaces: if coherence is established by the sequence, it is based, not in a transcendent realm, but in the liminality apprehended within the process of sensation. This is indicated in Buckley's use of synesthesia, whereby conventional categories of perception are displaced by an open-ended mode of sensation: "The colours resonate with noise." (I, GB, 46) It is enacted when, under the influence of reciprocated pressure, self and situation merge:

> 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.
>
> (I, GB, 46)

It is as if "Everything/ leans" creates a threshold out of the tension operating in this passage between disintegration and reintegration.

In VII (GB, 54) another threshold is created between rational consciousness and sleep (where the mythic sense is dreaming). This poem well illustrates the "rhythmic shape" of the entire sequence. It emerges from its opening image of a web - an image which ties it back into "the chop and change of the machines" inasmuch as it too combines emptiness and interconnectedness. One spider "climbs in a long curve floorward/ towards undizzied stillness", thus threading the image into the poet's unravelling consciousness. As he moves further into these sliding movements, the speaker wonders if the mind might disappear and

leave only "its lingering". His anxiety is that the process of disintegration might destroy all attempts at identification:

> The brain collapsing into stillness
> voices decomposing in too much space
> hills filling with slow white sound
> the computer skating on the wrong name

Sleep is a space where the mythic instinct, the "old brain", persists, "walled, thirsty, alive",[1] and then emerges, with the speaker, towards wakefulness. This almost dreaming contact with myth is not represented as a comforting worldview. In a succession of images which are at once sensate and abstract and which subtly associate the notion of difficult food with a profound sense of death, it encourages a strenuous confrontation with the deepest spaces of the self:

> In sleep you go
> back up into the old brain
> wound tightly as the old city,
> walled, thirsty, alive. Come out
> as from a seance to the choke of white bread
>
> the rubbed taste in your mouth
> bones standing up
> in the water of your face. (GB, 55)

Very faint hints at eucharist and resurrection emerge here, but are re-covered with the closing line, the refrain-like, "I hear the chop and change of the machines."

While "the chop and change of the machines" generates the analogical base and spatial rhythm of "Golden Builders", the machines themselves do not exercise a dominating power. Their influence (which seems generally destructive) is set in play with moments of natural revelation - and, indeed, the machines paradoxically encourage these moments by the displacement which they effect within the usual patterns of sensation. In XVIII (GB, 68) the poet remembers

---

1. I am taking a hint from Buckley's comment that "we dream myths" - cf., "National and International", Southerly, 2, 1978, 154.

returning home - itself a "chop and change" movement - and being caught up in "the smell of space,/ as if opening had its own tang". This memory is, however, contrasted with the present, where machines "fumble grass and earth/ in the arena-shaped waste". This the poem then associates with the defacing work of graffiti artists (and - it seems - with abortionists). In XXI (GB, 72), he expresses his dread of streets which, "swerving slowly through space", enter and direct his mind. As "the centre is displaced", he finds that the city, somewhat like hell, is masked in "sulphurous Breughel-red swirlings in air". Then, as the sound of a mouth-organ threads the chemical smoke with a sound like "grass-smoke", he concludes with a moment of vision:

> Clear city.
>
> Clear as a flute and bells. Mouth-organ music.
>
> Along the boulevard it sings; down through alleys
> shifts out like grass-smoke
> past the weak doors of Dorrit St.
> Human mouths record players
> O their monotonous cool teaches me
> to see static, hear curving space.

"Telephones, Muzak" (XXV, GB, 79) is similarly ambivalent, though here the conclusion moves the other way. It opens with a sense of "life-damage" as, on a rainy day when "water seeps into the root-voices", the speaker declares that "On the telephone everybody poses". Yet, even as he ponders his disconnected voice, he "lets/ his breathing hang on the wire" and so creates another threshold which reveals:

> In evening distances the sallow highrise
> achieves pearl-grey
> the light let into every pore the ground alive under it
> you could hear birdsongs drift like seeds in the air.

This moment does not endure: as the poem closes the speaker is "ten floors up", where distance "screams in the head" and where his senses, cut off from his body, "hover/ on splints of wire". As the street

noise rises - like muzak - he finds himself still pursued and penetrated by "the chop and change of the machines". If then, in its shifting mood and focus, the sequence holds to moments of shining sensation with an almost redemptive resilience, it nevertheless exposes the precariousness of its own endeavour, and does so with an honesty which is scrupulous, bleak, yet oddly reassuring. "Golden Builders" may return us to the centre, but its rite of passage is difficult[1].: it promises no lasting city, and often seems about to be defeated by displacement.

This becomes more evident if we consider the pressure exerted by the personalities of "Golden Builders". In one sense the poem celebrates the multi-dimensional character of Melbourne's culture as it introduces Pieter, Vasko, Milan, Vito and Marco. Yet these are people who suffer deeply because their hearts are dislocated. Although shielded from the cemetery, they are shadowed by death: Vasko, selling his tyewriter in order to live; Roman, dying in a bike accident; Milan, remembering Brazil and writing of peace in "the long sloping lines of his diary" (which substitutes for Melbourne's streets). Their deaths are cut off from their deepest personal rhythms: "All deaths flat, metallic." ("Fitzroy, Carlton", IX, GB, 57) In XX (GB, 71), one Italian, Vito, denies his origins and gives his children French names, while another, Marco, denounces Australia as "this shit of a country". When Marco then adds that he means "nothing personal" by this, his apology becomes his judgment on the country. Irony also operates in V (GB, 52) where the absence of blood-relatedness to people and place drives Pieter to murder. He becomes an inverted Peter-figure as he cries, "Have I killed you, brother,/ O Christ,

---

1. Cf., Veronica Brady, "Return to the Centre: Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders", Westerly, 2, June, 1973, pp. 68-76.

brother, have I killed you?" Yet his condition extends its own irony towards Christianity as the speaker recalls, "We have built these squares, these towers. Feed My Lambs", and then goes on to describe how, "to the background/ of soft halloo-ing Irish music", he himself argues Vietnam while the radio tells of a woman who set herself alight. The words by which Christ charged the first Peter to save the world are, by their italics, separated from this scene. Here inter-personal contact is lost, and the radio noise links in with the destructive rhythm of the sequence:

> In a million rooms
> the Seven O'Clock Early News:
> a hot, level voice
> vibrates the thin walls.
> Each radio
> listens to its neighbour
> with hot, level voice.

Even so, such displacement is not reserved for migrants: it also determines the figures of Walter, Jimmy, and Buckley's uncle and father. Walter, "ageing harmless male prostitute", is a figure forever displaced from his elegant past, as the speaker recalls an occasion when Walter

> expressed a need for
> elegance, the now almost mythical
> good manners of wartime, the gentlemanly
> "American boys".
>
> Talked on, dressing his vice up
> as a private myth,
> a dream of order, his own
> honey-days, his Grantchester.
>
> Toils of brick, long passages of sandstone. Feed My Lambs.
>
> (XIII, GB, 62)

The final phrase releases an irony which returns us to the poem's opening where Walter, one among the city's poor, is being expelled from St Francis' church - where God may at least find "the incense drifting". Jimmy, keeping a gun in the outhouse, yet "almost in tears at the thought of/ upsetting the baby", finds his eyes failing in the

city's "long blank streets" and "brick/mazes". (XXIII, GB, 77) With VIII (GB, 56) Buckley finds yet another space: that between his puritan uncle's "hot dreams" and his face, a surface of "puzzled kindness". There are also the oppositions which constitute his character: timid and hot-tempered, gentle and defeatist. His dying father, kept alive by machines, also participates in shifting spaces as "his eyes slipped dazed through the white/ of cataracts" and as he uses bravado to cover fear. This is a performance encouraged by his visitors, until one uncle does his own "chop and change" with: "'Aagh Paddy. To see you like this.'" The other visitor, a son-in-law, is terrified of inner spaces, especially those where thoughts of death reside, and is "roving back in his skull". (XII, GB, 61) These figures pressure the sequence towards an overriding mood of displacement, and towards the assessment made by Vivian Smith:

> 'Golden Builders' evokes the sense of poverty and deprivation in a great modern city, touched with moments of grace and harmony, though the sense of suffering and confusion is stronger than any sense of joy and order.[1]

Even so, when we set the personality of these "others" against the personality of the "self" who constructs and is constructed by "Golden Builders", when we estimate the pressure he exerts, then we find that the ambivalence steadies again. In "Practising Not Dying (i)" (III, GB, 48), he addresses this self as "you", thereby entering the space between the self-as-subject and the self-as-object. This also complicates the reader's response: we feel he is further detached, yet feel invited to join his self-shaping meditation. This sense of internal and external distances is itself a language of illness: he lies back in bed, feeling for his pulse and "knowing/ Anything can happen". Flicking at flies, he is sharply reminded of his mortality

---

1. Vivian Smith, "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, p. 419.

when his hand bumps on his cheekbone. His helplessness heightens his sensate responses and, as he explores the possibilities within his immediate world, he finds little that is positive:

> 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.

Although the seed is present, the bush embodies violence and displacement. Nor is "Practising Not Dying (ii)" (VI, GB, 53) very comforting. Struggling to harmonise inner and outer worlds - saying over and over that "The environment is inside me" - he yet comes to realise "the street/ Is full of false notes", whereas earlier he had felt, "The street's bright as a window." Finally he lies "in the centre/ Of rectangles, spaces of sound": spaces which contain the opening "hollow of cool air", but also the sound which, in the second stanza, overrides this positive opening:

> Yet, after all, death might come
> Like this, like a saw burring,
> Edging into the breast-bone,
> Like a damp weight on hands or ankles;

XV (GB, 64), also concerned with dying, opens with a mood of frantic privacy - and this is heightened as the speaker sees himself exposed to the abrasive pressure of surrounding objects. Even though these are then touched by love (as a woman moves through the room), his attention shifts from her, goes through the "infinite, cruciform" structure revealed as "The room/ turned aside from its walls", and then trails down into the separating strands of the deeply private and disintegrating self. However, in XIX (GB, 70) love has a more positive power. Even though a woman has here just left the room, he is able to recall her, as if his senses kept her image palpable: the

hair, the waist, the stance, and "a dancer's movement on the stone". She contains and releases the movement of her surrounding world: keeping in her "the bobble of fuchsia-red" and hearing "the still air flowing". This movement holds the poem, which ends with a rhythm of promise:

> It should be hot today
> the sun quivering
> the wind flat on the magnolia,
> every ounce of the earth rising

Is it, then, this sense of "earth rising" which resolves the sequence's question: "Shall I find here my Lord's grave?" (I, GB, 46) Certainly, Buckley locates the pattern of "rising" less in the theological figure of Christ and more in the process of mythic perception itself. That perception seems, generally, to find its shining moments more easily in the natural than the mechanical environment - as, for example, in "Blake in the Body" (XI, GB, 60). There Blake is shown leaving his city - "Half-made London/ Blotched green fields" - to find at Felpham "the watering-places" of his prophetic vision. Buckley is here incorporating Blake's own first impressions of Felpham. Blake wrote:

> I have begun to work, Felpham is a sweet place for study, because it is more Spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her Golden Gates.[1]

Such a feeling is then confirmed in the poem's own recorded hierophany:

> It was light leaping
> All through the house; the unpruned vine
> Reached to the roof-angles.
> In the long tilting stiff-grass paddocks
> With ecstasy you heard the ploughboy
> Say "the gates are open, father".
> The gates are open.
> The twinned harrows' tines shone like earthshine.

---

1. In a letter to Flaxman, 21 September 1800. Cited Jack Lindsay, William Blake, p. 136.

It would be easy to confine Buckley's sense of the sacred to such "earth rising" moments and say that these provide "Golden Builders" with a sacred thread which holds through the city's maze of impersonality, loneliness, violence, depression and deconstruction. Yet this runs the risk of opposing the sacred to the city and of equating religious feelings with peaceful ones. Then the golden builders would be doomed to failure and irony, while the sacred would lose its tensive character. Just as the sequence's city (place and people) shifts between disintegration and reintegration, so its sense of the sacred is disclosed, not simply in such isolated places of peacefulness, but within the tensive structure of its imaginative foundation. The ending of "Blake in the Body" mediates just such an awareness as Blake's later judgment is cited:

> Later, you called it
> Your three years slumber on the banks of ocean.
> Who did not sleep all night.[1]

This reminds us that Blake did not persist in seeing Felpham in heavenly terms, that he had to leave before he could build Jerusalem, just as he had to forsake its peacefulness, for him a correlative to the Peace of Amiens, in order to address himself to the renewed war. Erdman writes:

> But the move from Babylon to the City of Art, which Blake calls Golgonooza and the details of which are derived from the cathedral city of Chichester near Felpham, could be justified only if it increased the poet's power or opportunity to transform Babylon into Jerusalem. He made what he could of the coincidence of his own retreat with the general withdrawal from war; yet there was an ambivalence in the very coinage of the name Golgonooza. A Golconda of golden opportunity it might be for the artist, but for the prophet and the London radical it suggested a Golgotha of self-sacrifice in the oozy wilderness.[2]

---

1. The second line refers to "To the Public", a prefatory note to Jerusalem (David Erdman, ed., The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, p. 143) and the third to the opening lines of Jerusalem (Erdman, p. 145).
2. Blake: Prophet Against Empire, p. 384.

Further, in the apocalyptic close of Milton, it is from Felpham's Vale that Jesus goes "to enter into/ Albion's bosom, the bosom of death", thus effecting the sounding of the Four Trumpets and the Soul's return "To Resurrection & Judgment in the Vegetable Body".[1] Although Buckley does not foreground this information, his sequence does operate from its own style of Blakean ambivalence - for instance, while Felpham's open gates allow hierophany, we are also reminded that "anger is an open gate". (XXIV, GB, 78) Buckley also sees the religious character of Blake's poetry as grounded, not in its symbology, but in its "immediate vision of mystical inter-relations perceived in the world of actuality".[2] This, certainly, is in keeping with the whole endeavour of "Golden Builders" and it means that the religious quality of the sequence, if it is to be consistent with the breaking/making rhythm and with the liminalities of sensation and language, must have its own tension or threshold.

This, after all, is the point about Buckley's search for his Lord's grave: the grave focuses a tension between absence and presence which, while it participates in the overall pattern of the sequence, provides Buckley's religious search with a quite specific focus, since "Golden Builders", even as it celebrates its recovered sense of religious presence, registers also a certain loss of Christ. This has to be carefully understood: the poetry is still "incarnational", but now this is an expression more of a mythopoeic instinct than of traditional theology; it is still searching for "signs of resurrection", but now that phrase is itself inappropriate as it has too many associations with a dogmatic position. Within the sequence a difficult passage is being negotiated - a passage which can be

1. The Poetry and Prose . . ., p. 142.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 136.

described, albeit inadequately, as a shift from theological to mythic religion, or a move from Christ-as-dogma to Christ-as-hierophany. While this is a way of returning to the source of sacralised imagination, it involves loss as well as gain. Something of this can be felt in XVI and XXII, where the sequence's "rhythmic shape" centres powerfully on the more explicit dimensions of its religious search.

In XVI (GB, 65), All Saints church at first appears as a symbol of survival: while the streets about it change, it "holds fast/ like the one bluestone in a burnt field". Then it becomes more complex:

> The rear wall hollow as a shell,
> wax set against the stone grain
> incense in the pores of plaster:

If the rear wall is hollow, is it because the church is empty of real meaning, or because it suggests the empty grave of Christ? The wax would seem to press down the stone (and the resurrection?). Yet the "incense in the pores of plaster" implies some deeply ingrained need to praise. Buckley is subtly embodying here his complex assessment of a church layered with history and resonant with mythic possibilities. He next expresses its historical reality, remembering rituals of the past:

> there we made our search for Christ's
> body
> the Holy Thursday procession went
> scraping its confident rough Latin
> till it packed up like a dole queue
> down the side wall. Bodies
> that wanted song and space
> singing inside their cramp
> moved into the baroque stances,
> marble and sensual will.

This includes, within the emotional shape of the ritual, some of the historical conditions of his Catholicism: its battler mentality, as well as its puritan distrust of emotions, yet pleasure in "sensual will". It also captures the ritual itself: its sense of ceremony,

yearning song, highly decorated adoration and desire, and even the primitive mystery of "its confident rough Latin". Yet all this is ruled by the image of the empty tabernacle, for Buckley has set his memory within the "Holy Thursday procession" when, to dramatise Christ's passion, the consecrated breads are removed from the altar and secreted in the "altar of repose". By situating his "search for Christ's body" within this liturgy, Buckley has made it a search deeply associated with darkness, emptiness, and grieving faith. At the conclusion of the Holy Thursday liturgy the altar is stripped, the sanctuary left bare, the tabernacle open and empty. This poverty then generates a moment when spiritual and economic patterns merge in the one architecture:

> Arched and bluestone poverty
> it got into the skin. Remember me,
> the organ sang, and I
>
> stone, stained glass, hollows in the wood
> kneelers, remember me.

The circularity of "remember me" might seem to reduce religion to a kind of subjectivism, but the argument is deeper than this. It argues that consciousness centres and releases the interpenetration of self, stone, stained glass and wooden kneelers. Religion is located primarily in that sense of the interconnectedness of things, and only secondarily in consciousness. It is not located in an isolated or closed consciousness, but in a consciousness which is open-edged - or mythic. Even so, this is a significant shift away from the bluestone edifice which represented religion as the poem opened. This process seems to continue in the close:

> So it keeps track of you,
> unbreathing in the brick waste,
> and the kids come faithfully and lay there
> bunches of lilac, smelling of cats.

Again, this is complex. The church in one sense seems to move out of its own external structures and stay within the self's movement, so

that, in a lovely reciprocity, the ritual now remembers the self. Yet it also seems to remain a lifeless survivor "unbreathing in the brick waste", to whom faithful children offer, almost forlornly, signs of a vitality closer to earth.

With XXII (GB, 74-76), the search is now for his "Irish soul", a term which concentrates his hope of discovering that "airsmell" which connects a web of sensations as if they were the one rhythm of "the green earth". As the poem opens the machines are at rest - except for one hammer, stitching steel, with whom the watcher communes in a few dreaming lines, where the new buildings are gilded with such hope that "The world dreams at (his) eyes". This mildly utopian mood is immediately corrected: Buckley addresses the machine as "brother" and asks questions which quietly satirise the pseudo-religious potential in progressivism. Then he returns to his observation of the city and, looking east at evening, discovers an open-edged light which unifies the city. This, however, is momentary. He next records the demolition of his old school (like the church, a bluestone image), and it is here that he voices his concern to be reintegrated with his origins beneath all this disintegration:

> They crush the sides of bluestone. The great ball
> cancels the windowside. The press of towers
> crumples over the stairs. Will I find my soul here,
> my Irish soul, as in my schooldays? or, as the stripped
> air
> shows its few buildings, will the builders find
> there in the courtyard, or under the last
> cornerstone nickel silver raw iron seeds of copper
>
> or find that airsmell
> preserving in and preserving earth
> the malt glowing, a slight burn in the air,
> yeast seeping free of stone,
> and the juices running on the street
> as they carried the hops off. We used to feel it
> through every window
> seeming to enter us through the green earth.

While this voices Buckley's belief in such a sense of sacred place, it

is also a remembered experience. The poem does not itself arrive at "the green earth". Indeed, the images which follow are remarkably ambivalent. He looks south now across "lesions of air" to where, on scaffolding, a welding torch signals in "its quick soundless Morse". If he is unable to decipher its language (which, in its knitting and flashing, represents the voice of the city), it may be because he has neither departed nor arrived: he could be looking "as if from a stalled ship/ into a foreign land" or he could be looking from the promised land back at Egypt's flesh-eating constructions. Then, suddenly, out of the paradox of torment and glory, the city is found holy:

> Clear city
> you let me see flame
> touch angle-iron to iron
> run sap between them
>
> knit, anneal without torment
> or speaking these flashings your voice

Even though the "clear city" is envisioned, the testing for sacredness which "Golden Builders" undertakes does not arrive at a conclusion. This has as much to do with the honesty of the sequence as with the inescapably momentary nature of hierophanous experience. As a sacred place the church seems first a power of the past - yet its ritual remembers him, keeps track of him. As a sacred place the "Irish soul" is only just emerging as a possibility, a future-memory not yet integrated into consciousness. He is still discovering how to leave and how to arrive at these "holy spaces" within his rhythmic processes of sensation, perception and language - indeed, he is only now possessing these processes themselves. The religious character of "Golden Builders" needs to be seen as part of this difficult passage: the relationship it explores between destruction and "these flashings your voice" incorporates some departure from the church (represented very much here in historical and cultural terms), some allegiance to

its remembering ritual (its mythic substratum), some developing hope that the ground of religious experience may be recovered - and reanimated - through a journey to a source-country. These are the more obviously religious transitions which continue within the city's language for the sacred. In the final poem (XXVII, GB, 81) Buckley passes a "brief church", which is shaken by vibrations from jet-planes. While he has earlier acknowledged a church's remembering ritual, this church seems to signify displacement:

> 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.

He then travels on towards his birthplace, and the sequence concludes, as if the question comes from the space of his going: "And my Lord's grave? His grave?" In one sense we have not found the grave, the place of resurrection: the sequence is still testing whether it can be found, in a sustained way, in the city. In another sense, we have found where and how to look: through Buckley's sense of the sacralised imagination we have entered the liminal character of sensation. This is the importance of a moment early in this final poem, a moment of "three things converging", for it says that whether the sacred be disclosed in church or Irish soul, it will be disclosed through such converging:

> As the car stooped, seemed to pause
> On the crest of the macadam hill
> and the staining grass paddocks led north
> to the long blue mountains
> three things converging
> suddenly the thought of hot bread
> entered me the car
> filled with burning, driftsmell in the air
> miles away, in front of cloudcover,
> a great tuft of burnsmudge,

motionless slowly dissolving

each car rides on its shadow

SECTION FIVE

LATE WINTER CHILD AND THE PATTERN

By the time Late Winter Child and The Pattern are published (1979), Buckley has declared that he feels no allegiance towards Catholicism as an organisation.[1]. He says he would still call himself a Catholic, but distinguishes between personal faith and organisational allegiance. Even so, his position is not that of a Catholic who is disillusioned with Church bureaucracy yet consents to central dogmas. "I would say, in general, that my growth has been a growth from dogmatism, cockiness, ideology into uncertainty."[2]. Buckley is by now dissatisfied with dogmatic definitions about God, the Church, the human personality, and the soul. Such dogmatic definitions have an absolutist mode which obscures and ignores the fact that the mysteries they indicate are mysteries touched by all religions. All dogmatic definitions are inadequate before mystery.[3]. There is evidence, nonetheless, that while he may have abandoned a great deal of his Catholicism, he has maintained some belief in the sacralising character and function of poetry. Whether he is expounding a theology of Incarnation or proposing an appreciation of "hierophany", he always locates the sacred in the music of fact. It is clear that his concern for the naturalness of language, for the "idiom of sensation", is a development of that belief.

Late Winter Child creates a voice profoundly suited to the idiom of sensation, the pace of restless noticing, and the changing

---

1. Elizabeth Booth, "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27-32. Jim Davidson, "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 443-458.
2. Booth, p. 28.
3. Davidson, p. 450

relationships which surround and centre in the new life which comes, late, into Buckley's life.

The sequence subtly varies its spaces, rhythms, tonal textures, and sensate foci in order to travel the distance between surface and depth, as also between hope, desire and dread. For instance, when VII opens, it is attuned to the speaker's pulse, "thick, scratchy as wool". In this cramped five-line stanza, his senses receive "the patio-white/ wall of nothing", and he himself is passive before morning's activities. We are also confronted with feelings of fatalism, loneliness and nothingness. Then the poem makes a lighter space: two-line stanzas, with a greater number of unstressed syllables. Becoming active, the speaker turns his eye to the woman, in whose skin the morning light is not ill-tempered, but "at home". Then the wall of nothing is displaced by her scarf, blown "across the/ sulphurous air". Such shifts in rhythm occur also between poems. III, weighted down with anxiety, opens "heavy with pulse", while IV, which sets this anxiety within the promise of new life, opens with more of a "trailing" rhythm, just as it also opens out to the external world. In XVII, at times outward and sensuous in its direction, at times withdrawn and stiff, the spaces represent the woman's flowing hands, then the man's throat "often stiff with unshed vomit". Similarly, the spaces which open XV embody "a waste between us", all the things that should be said, while the closed-in shape of the final lines mimes the speaker's very private observation. Yet XXVII has no spaced lines - and there the closeness is one of shared experience and love. In this way the sequence's rhythmic character mimes the varying pulses of the situation. In one poem we can move between "a walk/ lifting and dance-like" and "the dry/ dismayed womb pausing" (V). We can also move between the parents who are eagerly waiting "for breath/

itching at the dance-like morning"(II) and:

> Sometimes I can hardly breathe
> for the smell of pregnancy (VIII)

This sense of spaces separating and closing within the language sharpens the nervous edge which characterises so many of the sequence's sensations. These have a heightened intensity: partly because they are sharp-edged fragments, partly because they are all woven together into the moment's fibre. They form "tiny knots", whether of body, wood, or flower, and link together as

> the braided brown smell
> going room to room
> settling each dull space
> in its fibrous travel. (XIX)

Buckley has learned to control the sensate quality of his verse: to achieve a "depth" dimension, he no longer needs to invoke abstract and emblematic language; he is able now to use words, create spaces, which evoke a dynamism or radiance from within his sensed world. The power is working from within the room and from within its objects when, intently observing his wife's skin, he sees

> the intent colour
> that flows towards your eyes
> under the room's pressure. (I)

The "objectifying" style, which could easily reify the woman, is a way of heightening sensation and miming an intense perception of relatedness. The world of objects resonates with the terrible intimacy of this pregnancy. Things seem never to have been so nearly apprehended, never to have been so aloof:

> each object pushes you away
> as if you were light-sensitive (IV)

The pregnant woman becomes a figure desired and dreaded as Buckley records his heightened response to her clothing, her body, the light about her. Quite often these are imaged as fluid movement: "in the curve of your elbow the nerves slid like liquid" (XI); "the heat

pooled in your limbs" (IV); "the melted light on your cheekbones" (III).

Similarly, Buckley is fascinated by the woman's smell: it draws up the smell of pregnancy, makes her body more deeply familiar, yet renews its exoticism,

> so that I smell the change in your limbs,
> in your hair-parting,
> a second lust. (VIII)

One result of the poem's intensely sensate character is that such experiences do expose the deepest vibrations of self and world - it is not only gardens which "rise level as platforms/ pressing their smell through every leaf" (II). Moment after moment vibrates both with its own individuality and with its interconnectedness. This interreaching immanence locates the sacral possibility of the situation:

> I stroke your arms
> in the red blouse I touch
> the melted light on your cheekbones
> and I lower my head a warp
> runs double
> in the grain of this table (III)

There is, in the lowering of the head, an attitude of deeply natural reverence which gives focus to the sacral quality abiding, moving in a world which has become, within the rhythm of pregnancy, expectant. With the next poem this is reaffirmed and the more positive implication of the wood grain is extended into the notion of interconnectedness:

> with each move you carry
> both our futures in your flushed breasts
> the heat pooled in your limbs
>
> nesting a life
> strong as a pin's head, ventriloquist
> who will assume
> ours and many voices (IV)

Here the spacing momentarily separates the poem's abstract dimension from its sensate. If we read the left side of the first two lines, we

have Buckley's notion of "rhythm". If we read the right, we have his sense of the ritual depth within sensation - the sensate world is a sacred vessel. In the space between he hints at holiness. In this context, it is possible to speak of Late Winter Child as a religious act of poetry: its notion of rhythm and its radiant sensation suggest the visionary capacity of the sensing world.

If the sensing world does disclose the sacred, informing the individuality of things to the point where each finds itself on the threshold of deep relatedness, then one of the primary characteristics of this world is a religious kind of ambivalence. Fundamental religious experience, we have seen, is very often associated with a limit-experience, where paradoxical feelings at once heighten and merge: feelings of finitude and infinitude, of belonging and estrangement, of desire and dread, even of despair and hope.[1] Ian Ramsey has argued that religious language has a structure analogous to this, inasmuch as it creates itself by combining familiar terms with those which are strange, which break beyond the familiar world.[2] Buckley, in the language of this poem, is achieving something similar by sounding moments until they resound with an "ultimacy" somehow both beyond and within immediate sensation:

> In your heat, my breath surrounds you.
> Twelve months the thought of lightning
> glided across
> your birthday the heat
> was heavy as water
> low cloud
> shivered with light
>
> a waste between us

---

1. For instance: M. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, pp. 24-28. L. Gilkey, Society and the Sacred, pp. 123-138. A. Greeley, Religion: A Secular Theory, p. 22. F. Streng, Understanding Religious Life, p. 75. D. Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, Ch. 5, and The Analogical Imagination, p. 202.
2. Ian Ramsey, Religious Language, pp. 11-89.

I should have told you,
then, death was your rival
that darkened my brain
with fears, plans, the thin copper
movements of a worm on the hot stone.

Instead, I listened for the
velvet sounds, moths, door-handles,
the rise of a footstep
the comb's kiss over the hair, its parting
tightened by summer my eyes carried
all day their pinpoint of blood all day
I was the object in your path
giving no echo (XV)

In its pace of language and noticing - so edgy with separateness and intimacy - this is a poem which represents much of the sequence. What it also represents, in that combination of separateness and intimacy, is the pattern of ambivalence which contributes to the religious quality of Late Winter Child.

Whereas XV uses close sensation to construct a space of separateness, IX uses images of separateness to articulate intimacy. The speaker is at first disoriented. The world is moving away with a winter wind. He is trying to think of his source-country, Ireland, but its communication is unhelpful: "shorthand/stones" and "batlike/ spits of woodmatter". The phone then sets up its own fracturing rhythm, and evokes a sense of dread - but it is dread beautifully bound to the bloodbeat shared by speaker and loved one:

I reach into your voice
with dread

though you're close to me
as the blue vein in my arm.

In XVII, separateness and intimacy move so closely together that they are barely distinguishable. As the speaker observes his wife's hand movements, they become almost alien, "simmering" and moving "almost furtively on/ every thing they touched". This strangeness conveys her union with the world of objects. He himself feels alienated, fighting

the trees "for air and pride", while her "softly bent" hands harmonise with the ground which "in its shade/ was clean and bending". This poem also shows how the ambivalences are as much a matter of sensation as of metaphysics: the double-edged quality of this perception emerges from the poem's heightened edge of sensation and breathing.

These ambivalences are introduced in the sequence's very first line, where the space within noticing, as well as the space between desire and its object, give each term a closer attention and a deeper separation: "I was seeking you". Surrounding objects then confirm the speaker's belief in deeper rhythms, yet also distance these since

> on the table darkness stirred
> the closed book

If the sequence's task is, as it were, to open that book and read the illuminative and anxious darkness, then it tells its story very much in terms of tensions: between summer and late-winter - with the child representing both (II); between the renewed tenderness of husband and wife and the husband's obscure sense of shame (XII); between the promise and the pain of the wife's wrists "gorged with child-veins" (V). Birth itself is strangely ambivalent: at the point where he remembers his child's birth, he suddenly deflects attention on to an image which conveys the darkness beyond birth:

> (so, any second, in the clear space
> by this wall, the cat will leap
> and fill the sight completely
> as a door opening
> open darkness beyond it) (XXI)

Here, where the beginning of life is connected to its ending, we are reminded of the sequence's fundamental tension: between the new life embodied in pregnancy and the ageing process experienced by the speaker. He tells how, during the previous summer, banks of lavender

watched them walking home each night, coloured her pregnancy and his silence, and suggested the promise of wheat. Then he finds that the banks of lavender have been cut.(XVI) Driving towards his wife, he finds his movement ruled by her pulse:

> You travelled
> fretting in my soul, as hour by hour
> distant as the moon
> the blood seeped in your body
> dangerously: (X)

Just as this anxiety seems reconciled (when the landscape offers him her face) the rhythm of seeping blood gives another image - of his ageing:

> In six weeks my hands
> had aged so much
> they shook brushing your hair.

This ending leaves his anxiety exposed. Other poems soften it. At one point he is frightened that, after fifteen years, he might lose his wife "distant with child", and remembers her in "strong bright light". Then he goes into the bedroom, where he finds her with "cool linen on (her) shoulders".(VI) This could be ambiguous - XIX speaks of "dead linen" - but the same line is used earlier in the poem to clothe his happy, sensuous memories of her, and linen is also explicitly associated with birth:

> You called when you were sleeping
> from that room we shared, that bed
> where I'd waited listening
> for the birth-sounds (so often
> cool as linen on your breast);

It is also important to note that anxiety and ambivalence are reconciled by way of the senses: not only does the "cool linen" appeal soothingly to the tactile imagination, but the line itself has a subdued onomatopoeic quality which converts that appeal into an aural consolation. This is true of the entire sequence: its reconciling rhythms are consonant with its sensual character. There is, then, no need to invoke a reconciling principle from a theological source.

This effect is similarly achieved in VII, where visual and aural movements associated with the image of a wind-blown scarf reconcile those embodied in "my pulse/ thick, scratchy as wool", and where this reconciliation of and from the senses holds the statement:

> I'm not afraid of age,
> love, even in you: hope, even,
>
> to watch it rise like dew
> in the oval of your girl-face

Within this context the child comes to represent consolation and promise. XXV shows how the very nuances of sensation which now incorporate the child were once a way of evading barrenness and fighting against age. This moment starkly exposes the anxiety which has formed an important counterbalance to the poem's more celebratory movement:

> Worst of all, because we expected them
> so humbly, the years of nothingness
> when, separate, more and more slowly,
> we both fought against age
> with childless poems, dance classes,
> images of cities built on journeys,
> counting as triumphs every chance
> of laughter, each fresh nuance of dress.

Here ageing does frighten the speaker. Such moments are empty. They are not "holy spaces", and the next section of XXV tells why: they lack "the shared pulse/ across gaps and continents". Without that pulse, "our skins would dry out like bark", identity would fail, and he would be left "struggling to believe one cadence/ of your voice floating with static". (XXV, n.4) The child, then, is able to put ageing in its proper place.

> Janus-child.
> One day she will give back, or jettison
> your youth, my age,
> your growing up, my waning,
> our ears ringing
> with the cold air. (XXVI)

Yet the child does not function just as an antidote for his anxiety. Rather, the child is stimulus and focus for the redeeming processes

within sensation. The child's birth has helped him perceive more deeply the rhythmic relatedness of things, and this particularly as manifested in the relationship between himself and his wife. This is the relatedness which, at the poem's close, carries the possibly sacred flame. Celebrating their intimacy, owning his ageing, the speaker finds a warmth around the cold branch which is almost pentecostal in its promise:

> age does not frighten me,
> love, even in you. At fifty
> I know when you are coming
>
> back into the room, or when,
> scarf of wind at your hair, music
>
> plays the green leaf,
> I rise at your footfall still.
>
> But never again be here with you,
> never again have soft hair
>
> never to repeat these
> chill winds that
> (when the bare branch
> is picked up on the mountain)
> still breathe around it
> as you carry it to the fire (XXVIII)

Through his doubled-edged conception of love and existence, his heightened edge of sensation, his breathing edges of language, Buckley here conveys, as he does in the sequence as a whole, an obscure but profound sense of rhythmic relatedness at the heart of the sensed world. This is not a reduction of religion to subjectivism. The pressure of the self upon the situation is too well reciprocated for that to be true. Moreover, the sensations themselves have a deeply liminal character, so that they receive and create a world of interreaching immanence, a world on the threshold of radiance.

In his later poetry, Buckley is using the deeply resonant processes of sensation to suffuse immediate shapes, textures, colours, sounds, and smells with feelings of extra significance, and also to open a way

towards the place where images of earth and sea, of local geography, of animal and human life reveal the imaginative origins of such feelings - feelings which, in this context, may be called religious. This is an enterprise Buckley has signalled in The Pattern's prefatory quotation, where various meanings of "pattern" are selected and simply put together, so that there is an emphasis on "matrix" and on "artistic design", but by way of the particular "example" or "instance". There is also some sense of origins implied in the selection of "precedent", and of religion in: "12. In Ireland, a patron saint's day; hence transf. the festivities of the day." (TP, 7)

Even the festivities of racing day offer this sense of pattern, as we find in "Autumn Races" (TP, 43). As "silk tinges everything" and the animals move "as though their feet/ rustle deep in the ground" and as humans carry "the smell of horses" in their lungs, Buckley's rhythmic sense of life becomes almost baptismal:

> man and rider
> heave with breath, lose sweat
> everywhere on the green ground

This happens too in "Origins" (SP, 13) [1], where smells mediate the sense of origins and enclose the person. The poem includes yet another portrait of an outwardly aggressive, inwardly defeated male ancestor:

> Through the two gates, with their old rusty
> tin plaques, he was cut off
> as in a highrock wilderness.
>
> He kept no line to us; he never left
> his name written; he rode, or walked,
> the brown hills like a severed body.

---

1. This is a revised version of that published in The Pattern (p. 39)

This moment is approached by way of coldly objective language, miming the cool outwardness of the person, in which a journey becomes a grocery list - and objects such as "whiskey" and "bushels of feed" are noted, but denied the sensuous presence they achieve in other poems. There is also reference to his bringing home "something to read/ for the children: not the mother: not himself". This seems mildly ironic: the children are given their stories from books (English books), rather than from the folklore, for the parents "had none of these stories, because they had been removed from the places which the stories filled and defined; and often they wanted to forget those places".[1.] What this preparatory verse does is establish that the man's condition - walking the land "like a severed body" - is a result of his denying his psychic and mythic origins. In order to heal this wound and recover "the fascination of origins"[2.], Buckley advocates an easing back into the deeper levels of remembered sensations, sensations which are characterised by inwardness - the "soft closed space" - rather than separated objectivity. The difficulty of his task is evident in the way the final verse struggles to locate objects within "smells" - some remain listed as in the first stanza; some are sensuous, with an invitatory immediacy. The final feeling is that he has, through this process, sounded the depths of sensation enough to make tenuous contact with a point of origin:

> Rustle of sacks, the straw-ends
> crushed in, the seasoned leather,
> mice, spittle, bread, dung, oats,
> whiskey, old papers, the sunsmell beating down
> into the halfdoor, from between round hills,
> till it took a mushroom or a tuberous
> density; smell of sapling in the ash.
> In these smells we were begotten.

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 12.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 13.

Buckley says that Ireland functions for him as "a source-country".[1] It is a source "in the sense that the psyche grows from and in it, and remains profoundly attuned to it".[2] This country remains home because of a genetic inheritance (which then forms the matrix for any learned inheritance):

> It's a genetic inheritance first of all which carries with it an inheritance of music, poetry, even forms of speech although not so much that; and I would say ways of looking at things, emotional structures.[3]

Whatever the scientific status of such a claim, this is clearly a development of Buckley's preferred imaginative structure: he is still concerned with the rhythms of the psyche, but now he is intent on exploring and expressing their origins. The source-country is the rhythmic space where psyche and Ireland are analogues, each of the other. (They are also strangers.) The source-country is also a religious source - but "religious" is now identified with inner facts, dimensions of feeling and structures of perception, and defined anthropologically as "our feelings of significance in life":

> Further, there is reason to think that we develop our religious feelings - our feelings of significance in life - according to what images of earth and sea (archetypes of earth and sea) dominate our psyche. Such images are cognate with our images of animal life, and, through them, with images of human life; so that, psychologically, all the living organs of the place provide one eco-system of the imagination. Whether or not gods grow from such systems of interiorised perception, certainly they seem to be expressed in them. For me, this imaginative eco-system bears a deeper resemblance to Ireland than to anywhere else.[4]

When Buckley then enumerates what a source-country gives, he retains certain religious notions: a source-country provides the foundations of religious feeling in its mythology and its sense of sacred times

---

1. "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 24. (He is careful to point out that he does not feel it as "the source-country" in the way a native would.)
2. "Imagination's Home", p. 24.
3. Elizabeth Booth, "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 30.
4. "Imagination's Home", p. 24.

and places. While these may be "separated out for purposes of 'belief'", they are also embedded in other aspects of a source-country, such as historical events which have deeply influenced the "psychic processes" of the race, "habits of perception pregnant with the language which presents them", and "an accent, a pace, a pitch, a rhythm of speech".[1.]

This notion of Ireland as a source-country might appear to be a private mythology, a substitute for Catholicism - even though Buckley says of it: "This is your living-space. There is no ego in it."[2.] For instance, Patrick Shivers, whose Irishness and Catholicism make him oppressed and invincible[3.], could well represent a new version of the heroic belief once exemplified in Tarsisius and Mindszenty. In addition, the place names, saints, and holy wells which are invoked still possess a memory and authoritative resonance akin to that of a dogmatic tradition. They become sacred sites of language in a way which recalls the earlier use of terms such as "eucharist" and "resurrection". It may well be that some such escapist elements do operate within Buckley's mythic endeavour, but to isolate them is to overlook other, more central nuances - nuances which indicate that the primary purpose of a source-country is not to provide a substitute for the religious feelings once more obviously associated with Catholicism, but rather to penetrate the "mythic substratum" of those feelings. At that level, Buckley's notion of a source-country is really a story of a return to paradise. His grandparents, denying their Irish origins, exile themselves from the source, with all its integrating rhythms, and so from the psychic origins of religious

1. "Imagination's Home", p. 25.
2. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 13.
3. "Internment", The Pattern, p. 53.

feeling. "What remained was the ache of their absence . . . One of the possible tasks for their grandchildren is to get back as much as possible, by whatever means are available." [1]. Since the source-country nevertheless remains unreachable (even as it moves through him), Buckley also continues to develop structures which have persistently characterised his imagination: a metaphysical tension between belonging and exile, with its corresponding emotional tension between separateness and intimacy. "Endlessly/ you ride before it, being watched, never touching." [2].

Although most clearly manifested in the emigration of Buckley's ancestors, the "Fall" from origins is not really a geographical condition. (Nor is it an attempt to deny Australian identity.)[3]. As "Rousings of Munster" (TP, 16) demonstrates, the source-country is lost when these Munster people deny, not the place, but the psychological significance of the place, and so abandon their mythopoeic memory. Assuming their voice, Buckley dramatises the extent of their ambition to adapt and become

> Native. Commemorated by
> no sea-chest, no
> sonsie lockets, letters
> home, avowals, promises of marriage.
> Nothing, nothing left
> of all that journeying. And,
> for the building, a small house
> caked with effort, the windows
> open for the late breeze.

Heat, in Buckley's poetry, often signifies an uneasy relationship between person and place, so there is something forlorn in his picture of these dislocated Irish waiting, late in the day, for cool rhythms. Yet Buckley makes it clear that a psychic expatriation preceded

---

1. "Imagination's Home", p. 25.
2. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 12.
3. Buckley himself makes this point - "Imagination's Home", p. 25.

the geographical one. His ancestors fail to appreciate Munster as a source, seeing it as "a hag's country", with its gaps and black shadows imaging the hag's dribbling mouth and the stretch marks of her exhausted productivity.[1] Indeed, they utter the credo of all those ultimately displaced, declaring of Munster: "It could be anywhere." "Gaeltacht" (TP, 10-15) tells the same story:

> They were from Munster, every part of Munster. But would not talk about it: "No, we're Australians now." Really, a separate kind of Irish. (TP, 14)

They banish Ireland from their speech. "From them came no cries of 'Up Tipp.' or 'Rebel Cork.'" (TP, 14) When Buckley describes them as "ploughing the snake-like roots out of the thin-grassed Australian soil" (TP, 14), he is indicating accomplishments in expatriation, not just agriculture. What remains are traces of rhythm, ruins of the imaginative eco-system: "yet they talked occasionally in tongues, in a world-defying wife-hating babble, drank Paddy . . ." (TP, 14)[2] Buckley then begins the reversal of the story: his ancestors' place of arrival becomes for him "a point of departure, not home" (TP, 14), as the son takes up the burden of exile:

> Their silence was not only lock but key, to be turned sometime in the future, their sullenness a burden to be carried secretly and placed back whence it came. (TP, 14)

Clearly this is not a choice between nations, but a choice for the imagination, that it may begin a reciprocated return to the land of origins, where religion, as well as poetry, may discover the source of "its flavour, its dimensions, its very shape and guiding concepts".[3]

---

1. "The source had been rejected as rejecting. It was like disowning the memory of a cruel mother." "Imagination's Home", p.25.
2. Buckley says of his father that while he was establishing his Australian identity, his existence retained its "Irish Mode". Cf. "Imagination's Home", p. 25. Also, Cutting Green Hay, pp. 12-15.
3. "Imagination's Home", p. 25.

"Gaeltacht" makes this quite explicit:

> The origin is not
> one place but ten thousand:
> not a particular but a general
> fish-web of fathers: something so ordinary
> you sit half-suffused with fear
> in front of it. (TP, 12)

Buckley's return to the source is not, then, simply accomplished by his living in the country: it is more a matter of discovering where the country is living in him - and where it is not. Under the influence of a sea-changing rhythm, he is able to find himself being harmonised with Dublin's music:

> Ireland as usual
>
> the soft pads of hands
> blessing, or welcoming,
> till I thought the raw seawall
> floating in rain, the sea
>
> burn, and the city,
> for all its cold
> willow colour, melt into it
> no more than a membrance
> of air between us. [1.]

Here, by way of his exact, intimate attention to sensation, to its movement made into the rhythm of the voice, Buckley produces the oceanic feeling which embodies his sense of wholeness rising from the depths, creating "colonies of electric links". [2.] He enacts his conviction that Ireland "is a source in the sense that the psyche grows from and in it, and remains profoundly attuned to it". [3.] It is in such moments of religiously-felt poetry that Buckley arrives at his "source-country". In this sense, he does not identify the source with the places mentioned in the poems, however sacred they may be. If Ireland is a place of "stones laid inside stones,/ believed in fearfully as holy wells"[4.], he does not pretend he has arrived home

---

1. "Membrane of air", The Pattern, p. 63.
2. "Membrane of air", The Pattern, P. 58
3. "Imagination's Home", p. 24.
4. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 10.

by making surface contact with the holy wells. He arrives when he recovers the mythic perception which lies beneath belief and sees how "further out, on the peninsula, the stones in their intricate circle seem almost to decorate the sun that pleasures them". [1.]

"Kilcolman" is a name resonant with the history of oppression. However, if it is to name the source, its resonances must be discovered in "the stain/ on the pavement" [2.], as well as in the recognition that the Irish

> showed themselves to be of the permanently
> subject peoples (Armenians, pygmies,
> foetuses) doomed
> never to be refugees [3.]

Buckley's "source-country" is not, then, located in any of these places, isolated in their actuality. After all, "Where spirits walk, holes tear in matter." [4.] Rather, these places function as signs for the sacralised imagination that this is holy ground - because here it is still possible to

> Concentrate on the music. It trails and swells like the grain of the land itself. Lean your elbows; your teeth hum with sound entering you.[5.]

So too, the rhythm of place is one with human and animal in this very beautiful expression of Buckley's imaginative eco-system:

> Throughout Autumn, the pigeons walked, using
> voices soft as mucous
> under moss; you'd scratch your skin
> as though scraping at lichen.
> The tree withered all night. Even
> the gravel stepped softly
> the stonewalls were
> tuned with rain, the glass
> incontinent, flowing.

---

1. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 13.
2. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 13.
3. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, pp. 14-15.
4. "Templeogue: a sound bitten", The Pattern, p. 50.
5. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 13.

You'd never think
the earth
could tire of its animals.[1.]

However, Buckley makes it clear that, even though he hopes, in Eliot's phrase, "to know the place for the first time", he does not expect that all his experiences of Ireland will afford him such feelings of paradisal significance. In the same poem, "Membrane of air", Dublin is described ambiguously as "fracturing/ and clinging as an eggshell", while he must approach this "source-country" on its own terms, whether it be "guest, foreigner, son". (TP, 59) "At Millstreet" (TP, 23) shows how, even though he touches the stones of the curing well and hears "the tree-trunks settle/ in the peat, fathoms down", he is still receiving the hospitality reserved for tourists and "creaking like leather in (his) strangeness". In this sense the Ireland poems seek not so much to dispel the feelings of foreignness found in "Sinn Fein: 1957" (MI, 13), but to search their source, and so place them in relationship with feelings of familiarity. This is well realised in a moment when, frightened of his foreignness, the poet begins to sweat, then finds in that a bond and so survives to see a sternly reassuring image:

I sweated
woodsweat
outside, the green mound
soft and vulnerable as moss
upheld its one treestump, surviving
death by water.[2.]

Obviously he will not survive if, like the Dublin pensioner, he is "afraid of thresholds,/ hoping for nostalgias".[3.] He must undergo the precise discipline of the senses, and that involves exposing the nerve-ends of the self, as well as of the world. Indeed, in this

1. "Membrane of air", The Pattern, pp. 61-62.
2. "Membrane of air", The Pattern, p. 59.
3. "Membrane of air", The Pattern, p. 58.

highly sensitive poetry they have become much the same: as he is edging towards the sensations and speech of Ireland, they are moving their edges further into him. While either may be happy to have the "forelands", neither can afford to deny the "whetted stone":

> Hence
> the need for Gaeltachts, forelands
> shouldering the common burden, where we come
> to suffer that past, that enigma,
> which will visit us
> in the night-patterns, jeering
> at our sleeplessness, while through the wrack
> of their survival the land shines
> in the distance, like a whetted stone.[1].

It would seem, then, that the Ireland poetry is not escapist, that it is rather a discipline of sensation. Its intention is not to return to the past, but to revivify the present. Ireland itself offers no easy guarantees - as "Dick Donnelly" (TP, 26) shows, with "his ears seeking forever the lost cadence and the dead syllables". Indeed, as Buckley is looking for some connection with the spirit of the place and "letting (his) mind bulb around one/ image or another", he suddenly finds himself within an image of suffering:

> Yet, miles inland, as I
> pulled the heather from the road's
> rockface, I could feel the sea
> penetrate my hand.[2].

"Discipline in Baggott Street" (TP, 55) is important here, as it tells how the masters of pub conversation fear and avoid what they might hear from stones. Buckley renders the pace and place of their conversation superbly: the visual textures of the bar, the way they "drank, quiet as madmen", the inflamed conversation on pieces selected from "a wrack of topics". Finally, one drinker speaks of discipline, and another of Original Sin. It is a moment which concentrates a

---

1. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 15.
2. "Gaeltacht", The Pattern, p. 10.

great deal of Catholic culture: discipline, will-power as the way to virtue, the power against evil; Original Sin as the somewhat comforting reminder that Irish men, at least, are only human. There is the fierceness, and then the compassion. Buckley, however, intimates that the moment has renewed force because the traditional language releases and renews the primitive religious feeling which gathers beneath their voices:

> Things to be made good
> in our throat and soul, some ancient
> metaphor or piety come to life
> in the spittle of their voices.

With their moral and doctrinal language so suddenly enlivened by its mythic substratum, the drinkers, who had "avoided speaking freely/ about freedom", hurry home - "home", that is, in its literal and comfortable sense. They leave "a blind man/ listening at the table". Presumably he is listening, not to them, but to the sacred spittle - it was spittle, after all, which Christ used to let another blind man see.[1] To sense what it is he hears, we need to return to the poem's beginning, and recognise the discipline which the too eloquent drinkers avoided:

> Inside this humpbacked bridge
> are voices, adhering to the stone
> or, at your approach, falling,
> as if they tasted
> the terror of something needing to be said.
> We passed them: no trouble.

If the blind man has heard these voices and their terrible, necessary words, it may be because he has touched the "unimaginable centre" feared in "The Blind School" (TP, 24). Certainly, if hearing is to be done on "this humpbacked bridge", then it will be painful.

---

1. Cf. Mark, 8:22-26.

Undertaking, then, the discipline of deeply-sensed language in order to return to his "imagination's home", the poet is like the gulls over Calary:

> gulls crying
> as if the sound were cutting
> into their voices

In this poem, "Write" (TP, 22), Buckley has embodied the "shivering echo of the/ saw behind that hillside", the visual landshapes which rise from "the touch of maps", the scent "at the brain's base", and the language of the blood with its "sounds cursive, flowing". This itself is a process of reconciliation, for the hand which writes of blood is "frozen to the sky". Then, even as perception accomplishes its return, his "source-country" reveals itself as untouchable:

> and when the warmth
> crept into, conserving
> the bared room, what you
> felt was your eyes returning.
>
> Remember it. Forget nothing,
> standing level with the cloud-eye. Yet
> you have not seen, not touched,
> the buds of Ireland.

Ireland invites and refuses the poet's language. It approaches him in the accent of speech, the colour of whiskey, the grains of landscape, and so many other traces of its spirit. Yet, like the poem of "Pen-Sickness" (TP, 48), it remains "stirring, just outside reach, perfect and intolerable as that heaven that loured above us in our infancy". Or perhaps this is the same "source-country", imagined no longer above, but deep within the world's flesh.

SECTION SIX

CONCLUSION

At the heart of Buckley's imaginative structuring is a desire to relate to and ultimately arrive at a "shining world": a place at once paradisal and real. Whether it be manifested in nature, love, Melbourne, or Ireland, the destination is interactively mysterious and human. In the earlier poetry, this desire was often expressed in the theological language of "Incarnation". If that language itself authorised unproductive distances between mystery and humanity and produced more obscurity than awe, this is as much a fault of language as of theology. It also shows that the desire to relate to people and places is itself touched by a recognition that people will remain separate and places foreign. Buckley's imaginative dynamic needs not to arrive: not at the undivided self, not at the entirely intimate relationship, not at the wholly familiar place. His religious imagination derives much of its liminal character from being on the journey home - it needs its own sense of being expatriate.

In the later poetry, the desire for a shining world is more often expressed in terms appropriate to notions such as "hierophany", "mythic substratum" and "imagination's home". This is reciprocated in a new freedom and power of language. To communicate the depth-dimension, the rhythmic shape, of his sensed world, Buckley no longer needs emblematic phrases and rolling rhetoric. He is now able to speak in a voice which combines precision and sensuousness, as if enacting a process of sensation which is simultaneously and recriprocally a process of observation and one of inwardness. He is able to speak spaces, whether exposed on the page or hidden in the catches of his breath, in order to achieve his own kind of body

language. This does not mean that persistent tensions, such as those between belonging and estrangement, intimacy and separation, disappear from his poetry, but that these become more inward and more integrated with the liminal character of sensation itself. Buckley's sense of the sacred is now firmly grounded in what he calls the "idiom of sensation", which is in some ways a new appreciation of that earlier mystery, "the world's flesh".

It would be easy to sum up Buckley's development as a religious poet by using his own terms: by saying that he has freed himself from the limitation and "phoniness" of the "denominational stance"[1]; that he has negotiated "a shift from the transcendent to the immanent . . . in specifying the sacred"[2]; that, while he has less religion in his poetry, his poetry is more religious.[3] This is, in large measure, the truth. However, there is also an important sense in which Buckley's poetry is less religious.

In the later poetry, the "denominational stance" disappears. It is almost possible to trace the movement: waiting with Mindszenty for the "thunder and resurrection of the dead" (MI, 57); searching his dying father's face for "signs of resurrection" (AOP, 9); asking of Melbourne, "And my Lord's grave? His grave?" (GB, 81); then making no mention at all of resurrection in "Ceol-Beag for James McAuley" (TP, 45-47) and "November 15th" (SP, 5-7). Where Catholic references do occur - as, for example, in "Purgatory" (TP, 31) and "All Easter . . ." (TP, 57) - they indicate more a memory than a belief. This

1. Cf. Henry Rosenbloom, "An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 324.
2. Cf. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
3. Cf. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 9. Also, Rosenbloom, 324.

obviously means there is less religion in the poetry. It also means that the poetry, as a religious activity, has suffered something like a loss of memory. There has been a loss of confidence in a particular tradition of theological language, and that loss may extend beyond the historical condition of that language (dominated, as it largely is, by the propositional mode) and cut Buckley off from the mythic foundations of Christian theology even as he attempts to arrive at comparable mythic foundations of Irish identity. "Stroke" amply demonstrates that a theological language and a denominational stance are not always and necessarily phony. There is something forced in Buckley's choice between theological language and mythic imagination - as if theological language deals only in dogmas, is always and necessarily institutionalised, ideological, and absolutist, and could never converse with its own mythic substratum. He must, of course, follow where his poetry will, but in doing so he has opted for a loss of theological language rather than for a possible revivification of a properly theological imagination. Certain rhythms are no longer sounded within the poetic process, no longer participate in its sacralising endeavour.

Moreover, traditional theological language does not have to be irrelevant just because Buckley's poetry more and more locates the sacred in the immanent. There persists, even in the most precisely sensate poems, a very early impulse to combine the sensate with the abstract. Buckley still combines statement with observation - as, for example, "age does not frighten me" in Late Winter Child (XXVIII). He also includes a non-denominational kind of theological language - as, for instance, when, in "November 15th", he is recording the sensate

details of his mother's burial:

> Useless, quite useless now, to turn back
> to the grave's rectangle, and pursue you,
> spirit shall I call you, or memory,
> or bird, or bright ribbon,
> with my sense of smell, blackness, anger. (SP, 6)

In other words, while there is "a shift from the transcendent to the immanent . . . in specifying the sacred", this does not entirely exclude an abstract mode of language - language, that is, which could easily accommodate theological, even denominational resonances.

Of course, I am not saying that such resonances must be included: but that, in Buckley's case, their absence does represent a loss within the religious range and rhythm of his poetry - indeed, another form of expatriation within his imagination. Nor am I implying that his poetry, as a religious act, has therefore not arrived at many moments of "fullest realization". It has. It has arrived at an extraordinary appreciation of the hierophanous character of its own sensed world, even as it has more deeply, more naturally come to embody the interreaching rhythms of sensation, perception and language. It has evoked the liminal character of sensation, and thereby owned the tensions it has always experienced: between estrangement and belonging, separateness and intimacy. In this it has also managed to celebrate at once the individuality and the interconnectedness of the self-within-the-world and the world-within-the-self.

It has also provoked questions, to do with Catholicism and religious language, which are the concern of the next and final part of this thesis.

PART FIVE

THE WILL OF THE POEM

PART FIVE

THE WILL OF THE POEM

SECTION ONE: Imagining Catholicism

SECTION TWO: Catholics Imagining: James McAuley

SECTION THREE: Catholics Imagining: Vincent Buckley

SECTION FOUR: Catholics Imagining: Francis Webb

SECTION FIVE: Gives a Word to the Sand?

SECTION ONE

IMAGINING CATHOLICISM

Since McAuley, Webb and Buckley belong to the Vatican II period of Catholicism - a period often described as one in which liberal and conservative forces struggle for power - it is tempting to classify each poet on the basis of his "liberal" or "conservative" theology and then interpret the relationship between his poetry and his Catholicism as simply a reflection of that theology. In some recent Australian Catholic writing, McAuley and Buckley are positioned to the left or right on various theological issues. (Webb does not generally call attention to himself.) Such writing, however, requires careful reading: not only can it confuse an ideological position with a religious one, but it can also disguise the degree to which its portrait of liberals and conservatives is shaped by the imaginative character of its own narrative.

In Against the Tide, B.A. Santamaria constructs his McAuley as a fellow fighter against Communism, a man who preferred principle to party politics. He remembers how, when Catholics were accused of undermining the Labo r Party, McAuley wrote:

> Is the Labo r Party to be regarded . . . as a supreme and total moral authority to which all other loyalties must bend or break? Does one have to check one's principles at the door, or is it permissible to take them into the party rooms? In particular, may Christians seek to develop the consequences of their Christian principles and persuade men to their views without being accused of tainting the pure milk of Australian Labourism with a Levantine ideology? [1].

---

1. "Sydney Morning Herald", 29/10/54. Cited, B.A. Santamaria, Against the Tide, p. 274.

As such a man of conscience, his McAuley also opposed any post-Vatican II ecumenism which entailed a "softening" of Catholic dogmas.[1] As such a man of conscience, he was (like Santamaria) betrayed - and betrayed by bishops. When the Catholic hierarchy of Sydney refused to endorse the Movement, Santamaria and McAuley saw this as a betrayal. McAuley's response was not to deny episcopal authority as such, but to resist an improper use of it, an unwarranted intrusion into the legitimate authority and autonomy of the laity. In McAuley's words, "The issue became fundamentally a question of clericalism versus the rights of laymen."[2] In Santamaria's words, McAuley disapproved of "those who insisted on clerical control of political action at the expense of lay autonomy".[3]

While Santamaria's narrative fails to acknowledge that its theme of "honour betrayed" is both interpretative structure and historical matter, it does distinguish between political and ecclesial authority in a manner which suits McAuley's own imaginative habits. This distinction is very much in danger of disappearing when Edmund Campion introduces his McAuley in Rockchoppers. He remembers a McAuley who "once said that the church he entered in 1953 had only one word over its door: SUBMIT."[4] This recollection is itself situated in Campion's contrast between an old, authoritarian Church and a renewed Church distinguished by "a hierarchy attentive to the voice of the laity and respectful of individual consciences".[5] Campion continues:

---

1. "Sydney Morning Herald", 29/10/54. Cited, Santamaria, p. 280.
2. "Sydney Morning Herald", 1/9/58. Cited, Santamaria, p. 280
3. Santamaria, p. 280.
4. Edmund Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 19. (McAuley converted to Catholicism in 1952.
5. Campion, p. 19.

> At the deepest level, we tried to live as if the church of the New Testament were a possibility: a community whose members found each other in a circle, face to face, each with a different function but with equal responsibility for the life of the community. We refused to think of the church as a pyramid in which power was concentrated at the apex and there was a trickle down to the base.[1].

While Santamaria also depicts a McAuley who would support "the rights of laymen", he does so while still using a vertical model of authority. Campion has situated McAuley within a horizontal image of authority and Church, and one could be forgiven for inferring that McAuley supported a democratic Church. McAuley's Catholicism is, however, complex. Vincent Buckley once remarked of him:

> His colour in the political spectrum . . . is very different from the colour he displays in the inter-Catholic controversies which over the past few years have so engaged and exhausted him. In them, he stands unmistakably for lay initiative as against clericalism, and for a liberal as against an integralist view of the place of Catholics in a pluralist society.[2].

Vincent Buckley is portrayed, in this recent literature, as an opponent of the Movement, a liberal who anticipated Vatican II, a discontented observer of liturgical renewal, and a patriarchal memorialist. Santamaria records:

> Throughout 1952 and 1953 a well-organized Catholic opposition to the Movement established itself, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney. It provided the atmosphere without which the eventual split in the ranks of the hierarchy would have been impossible to achieve.
>
> The Newman Societies in both universities, although, as always, representing only a small minority of Catholic graduates and undergraduates, then enjoyed an exceptionally gifted group of leaders - which included a person of such distinction as the poet Vincent Buckley - and they were almost uniformly opposed to the Movement. [3].

---

1. Campion, p. 19.
2. Vincent Buckley, "James McAuley: The Man and the Poet", Westerly, 3, 1960, 14.
3. Against the Tide, p. 156.

What then emerges is a picture, not just of political differences, but of very different models of human freedom. The Movement, in its determination to combat Communism, wants Catholic unity as its weapon and believes that national security transcends individual liberty, while the Newman Societies are concerned with "the freedom of the Catholic to hold differing viewpoints on political issues, without their Catholicism being impugned".[1] While Santamaria's Buckley might easily betray Catholicism for humanism, Campion's Buckley is "at the centre of the Prospect team" and Prospect is an "adult attempt" to face the world and to ask how Catholics might live in a pluralist society. As an expression of Christian humanism, Prospect anticipates the renewal of Vatican II:

> The journal was a harbinger of what was to flow from the Second Vatican Council, the release of tensions, the dismantling of barricades, the untroubled enjoyment of being an Australian.[2]

Yet, Michael Gilchrist enlists Buckley among those who disapprove of liturgical renewal - and this in such a way as to suggest that Buckley's position is equivalent to Gilchrist's own (that the "new church" is "kneeling before the world"). Gilchrist claims that Buckley argues "that the potential benefits of Vatican II for the Church in Australia were undermined by conditions in the contemporary world with which Catholics were required to come to terms".[3] This is so general a paraphrase of Buckley's position that it might be taken as his refusal to kneel before the world. When, however, we consult the actual reference Gilchrist gives, we find Buckley arguing that Vatican II was too late, that "Something had failed deep in the Christian spirit" and that it was a time for him "to move back from institutional definitions of reality, to take an anthropological

---

1. Against the Tide, p. 157.
2. Rockchoppers, p. 32.
3. Michael Gilchrist, Rome or the Bush, pp. 9-10.

approach, as it were, to institution and self alike".[1] Buckley returns to this argument when he suggests that, for all its doctrinal renewal, Vatican II failed to address the real problem - the desacralised imagination.[2] Buckley's models of religious experience are clearly very different from Gilchrist's, and his argument about Vatican II moves in the opposite direction to that implied by Gilchrist's use of it.

While Buckley may thus easily avoid the company of Gilchrist, he may not so easily escape the censure of Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids.[3] This book represents something of the emerging voice of women within (and without) Catholicism. Many of its contributors object to the dominance of male power in the Church and challenge the patriarchal models which are seen as authorising or, at least, allowing the oppression of women. Therese Radic finds that Cutting Green Hay reminds her of Newman Society men who protected their power within the group. She asks, "Why were our men so sexually afraid that they downed themselves at the pub out of female reach?"[4] and thus initiates an entirely new reading of Buckley's own preoccupation with (male) puritanism. Lorna Hannan also remembers differently:

> No amount of reading and reflecting about the world as remembered by Eddie Campion prepared me for Vin Buckley's Cutting Green Hay. His description of Newman Society days at Melbourne University should have been about my life too. I bought it the day it appeared in the shops and read it from cover to cover. I realized that if I accepted that things had been as Vin described, we women had not been there or had at best been offstage peeking in at a manmade world where what they were working out would be for the good of us all. I realized that Vin's story is about his life and the way he remembers things. The women who were there have no part in his story and their story has not been written.

---

1. Vincent Buckley, Cutting Green Hay, p. 256.
2. Buckley, pp. 291-293.
3. Kate Nelson and Dominica Nelson, eds., Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, Penguin, 1986.
4. Therese Radic, "Extracts from a Half-breed's diary", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 119.

> Well, it wasn't as Vin wrote it. We were there. We were part of the talk. We were in the same room. We were in the room next door. I can still see us and hear what we had to say, but what had seemed to me to be a partnership was not that to others.[1].

These texts illustrate how "liberal" and "conservative" classifications can be dangerous if they are used in a way which simply describes ideological positions and obscures imaginative structures. Indeed, they begin to indicate that Vatican II Catholicism[2], while it obviously contains conflicting ideologies, might better be interpreted as a tension between various models. I want to pursue this because I believe an emphasis on such models offers a very effective way of articulating the relationships which exist between Catholicism and the poetry I have been considering.

Edmund Campion's Rockchoppers is structured to highlight certain shaping concerns: Catholicism as a tribal experience, the role of critical independence within the Catholic Church, the need to address questions of poverty and justice. This model of the Church has its appropriate symbol in Roger Pryke, to whom the book is dedicated. For Campion, Pryke embodies (even before the Council) the values of a renewed Catholicism. Not only is he intelligently independent, but he is also committed to the theological education of the Church's members. He wants to apply theology to political realities, standing against the Vietnam War and for prison reform.[3] Appointed chaplain to the Newman Society of Sydney University in 1951, he works to overcome a traditional (and clerical) suspicion of "secular learning" and encourages University graduates to think critically about the

---

1. Lorna Hannan, "The Last Word", Sweet Mothers . . ., p. 82.
2. Vatican Council II opened in 1962 and closed in 1965. I am using the term "Vatican II Catholicism" to indicate not simply the post-conciliar era, but also those movements, in liturgy, biblical studies, and ecumenism, which prepared for the Council. This will become more apparent as the discussion continues.
3. Cf. Campion, Australian Catholics, p. 206.

Church's involvement in industrial and political issues.[1] He is a major contributor to liturgical renewal, celebrating the eucharist in a way which symbolises the Church's ecumenical and communal character.[2] Increasingly frustrated with the institutionalised Church, Pryke eventually left the official ministry. Campion does not mention this, but relies on his reader to know, thus using Pryke, subtextually, as a subversive memory. At this level, Rockchoppers is an imaginative work, which wants to vindicate the model of Church symbolised by Pryke. This is made clear in Campion's first substantial description of him:

> Roger Pryke was intelligent, gregarious, sympathetic, and open-minded. He was soon known and liked all over the university. In the Newman Society, he encouraged us to become honestly involved in the life of the university, not in order to colonize it for the church but to serve it with our talents. Some clerics seemed rather frightened of the university, as if it were a danger to the faith. Roger loved it and taught us to love it. One of his specialities was the liturgy. At weekend camps, he showed how the Mass could become a sensitive personal prayer, not just a ritualized obligation. The phrase is hackneyed now, but for me and many of my contemporaries, Catholic and non-Catholic, Roger Pryke showed Catholicism with a human face.[3]

Campion's memory provoked a violent reaction from Gary Scarrabelotti in an article entitled, "The Disintegration of Intellectual Catholicism".[4] Scarrabelotti's is not a story of renewal, but of destruction (and betrayal). Having discovered that the circulation figures of Catholic newspapers[5] entered a sharp decline in 1963, he interprets this as follows:

> The year 1963 found the Catholic Church in the midst of its Second Vatican Council. And looking back, the passage of years deepens awareness of the disaster which since then has unfolded. Rereading the decisions made and counsels offered by the

---

1. Cf. Campion, Rockchoppers, pp. 169-170.
2. Cf. Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 166, and Australian Catholics, p. 209.
3. Rockchoppers, p. 12.
4. Quadrant, November, 1982, 79-83.
5. He does not specify which newspapers were consulted, and assumes that the problem is with the reader rather than the publication.

> Church at that time one asks - suspecting, however, that one is grappling uselessly with the problem of evil - how has it been possible that collapse could have followed immediately upon the most complete and inspiring expression, in modern times, of the perennial Catholic vision?[1].

Scarrabelotti then devotes his "review" to establishing Campion's contribution to this "evil" which is destroying "the perennial Catholic vision".

Scarrabelotti attacks what he calls the gnostic, elitist and narcissistic character of Rockchoppers. He accuses Campion of lying about the promises of Vatican II, then blaming the Church for his disappointments. At the basis of his attack is a dissatisfaction precisely with the "worldliness" and historicity of Campion's text and Church. Whereas Campion implies a more historical, contextual notion of faith, Scarrabelotti reiterates the more absolute, propositional model which, while it might not exactly qualify as "perennial", dominated the post-Reformation Catholic Church: "For the Catholic, faith is a virtue by which he knows revealed things to be true."[2]. In Scarrabelotti's text the propositional mode of religious language oppresses the symbolic. He would obviously prefer an unworldly text. He castigates Campion for associating religion with political questions such as the Vietnam War, poverty, and Aboriginal rights. In his model these do not have a sure place - that is reserved for matters of "faith and morals". Questions of poverty and justice are questions which admit of different (political) answers - presumably, properly religious questions admit of only one right answer. Accordingly, a text which is relative and historical stands opposed to a text which is absolute and doctrinal.

---

1. "The Disintegration of Intellectual Catholicism", p. 79.
2. "The Disintegration . . .", p. 81.

These two texts begin to symbolise the contemporary circumstantiality of the Australian Catholic world and language. Scarrabelotti represents one response to the change occurring within Catholicism: the denial of historicity, and the reaffirmation of the propositional model of faith and the absolute character of religious language. Campion represents another response: the repossession of religious experience (coded in story and symbol) and the recognition of the cultural and historical dimensions of the Church (and of religious language itself).

Ronald Conway next entered the debate and, while opening in support of Scarrabelotti, he carries his argument with a more complex imaginative pattern.[1] He criticises Rockchoppers for its "eerie absence of numinous and transcendental concerns".[2] The Church's call to "socio-economic activities and temporal causes" is "(worthy enough when assigned its secondary status)" - secondary, that is, to transcendental concerns, to "Christ's promise of eternal life".[3] Accordingly, he argues a loss of the transcendent in the area of Catholic dogma:

> Endless heart-on-sleeve catechetical sophistry about 'social justice' thus becomes part of the daily diet of religious teaching in Catholic secondary schools, where many senior students may privately confess their scepticism about the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and even the immortality of the soul.[4]

Conway retains this transcendent model in arguing for individual freedom over "ethical determinism" and lamenting the manner in which obsessive innovators have distorted or gutted the "psychological

---

1. Ronald Conway, "Another Chopper at the Rock", Quadrant, January/February, 1983, 24-29.
2. Conway, p. 25.
3. Conway, p. 25.
4. Conway, p. 25.

power and numinous authority" of sacramental and liturgical forms.[1] Yet he also resists too literal and too authoritarian an application of it: he disagrees with Scarrabelotti's claim that Vatican II expressed the "perennial Catholic vision" and remarks, "Even in its most devoted form, faith is not knowledge; it is more a provisional link with the Creator by a creature in search of union with the divine."[2] Then he shifts to an historical and developmental model in order to challenge the importance given to "the absolute monarchical prestige of the Roman Pontiff" and to attack the excessively prescriptive and stubbornly "natural law" sexual morality, which persists "as if Kinsey, Kraft-Ebing and Freud had never lived or never written so much as a paragraph".[3]

Gerard Windsor, however, realises that Rockchoppers deals with "the cultural setting of Catholicism", not with the "traditional corpus of central Catholic doctrine".[4] While acknowledging that Campion's work calls for "argument and expansion", he demonstrates that Scarrabelotti's attack is misguided and recalls the traditional dictum, "Ecclesia semper reformanda."[5] Nevertheless, Windsor is concerned with the current "anorexic" condition of "Catholicism, as a culture", a condition which he attributes to the breakdown of a Catholic metaphysics. By this he intends to defend dogmas, not to encourage theological absolutism, but to preserve their influence

---

1. Conway, p. 25.
2. Conway, p. 26.
3. Conway, p. 27.
4. Gerard Windsor, "How Far Can You Go?", Quadrant, March, 1983, 62-65.
5. This might be translated, "The Church is always in a process of, or in need of, reformation". It is a dictum which traditionally stands in tension with the notion of the Church as a perfect society and an indefectible institution of salvation.

on imagination and thus on the metaphysical aspect of culture. Since he is concerned with the way doctrines such as "grace" operate in writers like Graham Greene, he argues a relationship between theology and culture which is more reciprocally creative than Scarrabelotti would allow. He quietly mediates between immanent and transcendent models of religious language and refuses the distinction which the other writers have made. Indeed, he appreciates the properly metaphorical character of dogmas:

> The great standby of the Catholic novelist of this century has been the doctrine of grace - from Brideshead Revisited out of Chesterton, through Greene and on into Flannery O'Connor. The classic situation has been the individual stopped in his tracks by some spiritual force, and unwillingly but perversely following a new path ahead. The whisky priest goes back into hostile territory, Julia Flyte says no to Charles Ryder, O.E. Parker has the face of the Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back. It is worth noting that Flannery O'Connor, a marginally later writer, has grace working in more mysterious ways than do Greene or Waugh. She's not bound at all by any literal reading of extra ecclesiam nulla salus. She serves as a stark example that what is required from theologians is not the extinction of doctrine but its sophistication.[1]

Of course, this clash of theological models is not confined to these selected reviews of Rockchoppers. For instance, Ted Kennedy wants a model by which the Church identifies itself with the poor and participates in the struggle for aboriginal landrights. He wants to challenge the model by which "the Catholic Church is securely planted near the local police-station, court-house, town-hall or council chambers". In his view, Australian Catholicism has emphasised "religion" at the expense of "the spiritual": whereas "religion" too easily becomes the possession of a power group "whose power reinforces the power of all the other institutional forces in society", being "spiritual" demands a capacity to "live at the very centre of the

---

1. Windsor, p. 65. Extra ecclesiam nulla salus: "Outside the Church there is no salvation".

human dilemma".[1] Kennedy, then, is arguing for an ecclesiological model which is prophetic, historical, and poor.

This model contrasts with the more conventional one used by Archbishop Edward Clancy when, quoting Pope John Paul II, he enumerates four elements of "a truly Catholic spirituality": an appreciation of the supernatural life of grace, prayerful meditation on the Scriptures, devotion to the Eucharist, proper use of the Sacrament of Penance. Here the imagination responds to what is supernatural, eternal, mystical; it is a kind of high-sacramental model of spirituality. With its preference for the supernatural, this then harmonises with the hierarchical model of authority and the propositional model of doctrine which are used as Clancy warns against too much trust in theologians and recalls

> the absolute requirement that we preserve the purity and orthodoxy of the doctrines of our faith. These doctrines have their source in Christ's own teaching, and have been given shape and confirmation by the Church's living tradition through nearly 2000 years. It is true that these doctrines are subject to varying expressions and applications with the demands of changing times, and are always open to a deeper understanding. But the substance itself of the doctrines is never subject to change. We must not, therefore, attribute more authority than is due to what we hear and read - even when the authors are theologians. Theologians have an important role to fill, and, in general, fill it very well to our great profit and advantage. However, it must never be forgotten that the Pope, and the Bishops in unity with him, are the ones ultimately responsible for teaching and safeguarding the truths revealed by God to His Church.[2]

Such a model is also applied, though more rigidly, by Michael Gilchrist, as he blames "a new class of religious professionals" for corrupting Catholicism and taking renewal much further than Vatican

---

1. Ted Kennedy, "The Church in Australia", Newsletter, National Council of Priests of Australia, June, 1984, p.1.
2. Archbishop Edward Clancy, "Pastoral Letter: Lent, 1987", Sydney, 1st February, 1987.

II intended.[1] His sternly vertical model of Church can be deduced quite easily from the way he describes his opponent, the New (not renewed, Catholic) Church:

> In essence the New Church promotes the horizontal, (a de-sacrilised (sic), man-centred, world-centred emphasis), it weakens allegiance to papal and magisterial authority in favour of "democratic" grass-roots discussion groups and finally undermines attachment to defined, revealed, permanent truths (for Catholics); instead, we have rampant pluralism, on-going revelation and the enthronement of feelings, experiences and sovereign conscience.[2]

Gilchrist broadens this argument in his Rome or the Bush. In this book (a work of hearsay history and indictment by innuendo), Gilchrist proposes his vertical model as the only true way to preserve liturgy, doctrine, morals, education, and seminaries in a way which guarantees their Catholic identity - and "identity" is an important concern in his model of religion. He employs an antagonistic distinction between sacred and secular realms and declares: "Catholicism's decline in Australia since Vatican II is best explained by the Maritain phrase, 'kneeling before the world'." [3]

Paul Collins, in Mixed Blessings, argues that Vatican II Catholicism is shifting modes: from the conserving mode to the prophetic mode. He claims that the theology of the Council was a compromise between conservative and prophetic forces, and that this compromise has caused many of the difficulties and contradictions confronting Catholics today.[4] He observes:

> Lurking just under the surface today are two mutually exclusive ideas of what the Church is and what it is all about. The

---

1. Michael Gilchrist, "New Class, New Church", Quadrant, September, 1986, 44-47. Cf. Paul Collins, Mixed Blessings, Chapter Two, for a less absolutist version of Vatican II's intentions. Collins observes: "Conflicting forces were at work within the Council and they deeply influenced the formulation of its documents, which were often the result of compromise." (p. 13)
2. Gilchrist, p. 45.
3. Gilchrist, Rome or the Bush, p. 283.
4. Paul Collins, Mixed Blessings, pp. 3-87.

> origin of this disjunction is to be found in Lumen gentium, the dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Here two views of the Church are presented which are much more mutually exclusive than the Council realised. The Church is described in chapter three of Lumen gentium essentially as a hierarchy. In the first two chapters it is described essentially as a sacramental community.[1].

While Collins himself argues that the Council "clearly opts for the communal model"[2]., he recognises that its initiatives have been traumatic for "mainstream Catholicism . . . (which) had defined itself in terms of a narrow and static orthodoxy".[3]. In describing this trauma, Collins shows the basic conflict extending to other areas of the Church's life. In ministry, for example, there is conflict between the old, hierarchical understanding and a participatory model where "all members of the Church are radically equal".[4]. Liturgy is involved with a similar tension: "In the old liturgy the emphasis was on the priest as celebrant. In the renewed liturgy the community is the primal focus of the celebration."[5]. Liberation theology is a new way of doing theology which starts with experience - "in contrast to the old way of doing theology which began with dogma or Church teaching".[6]. Whereas older priests were trained in jurisdictional and cultic models, there is now a need for "priests who work out of the pastoral leadership model".[7]. Finally, Collins applies his notion of "shifting modes" to the Church's future. The future Church will need to develop a more profound spirituality (and morality) in response to the world and its environment - and so challenge a too rigidly transcendent model of the sacred which might oppose sacred and secular realities.[8]. Furthermore, "a basic question for the Church will be

---

1. Collins, pp. 53-54.
2. Collins, p. 58.
3. Collins, p. 51.
4. Collins, p. 60.
5. Collins, p. 64.
6. Collins, p. 146.
7. Collins, pp. 192-193.
8. Collins, pp. 230-237.

the shift in focus from the centrality of the hierarchical Roman Church to an emphasis on the local community."[1].

Another of the developments which Collins envisages is that of ministry for women. He hopes that women will assume the ministry of liturgical leadership, but in such a way as to create new, less clerical models. This will then reflect Vatican II's primary model: the Church as "the People of God" in which all are equal by right of baptism.[2]. Mixed Blessings was published in 1986 - in the same year as Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, which tells how twenty women have experienced Catholicism in the post-war years.

At one level, many of the book's contributors challenge what have been dominant Catholic models for women: bride of Christ, bride of man, and Mary, Mother of God and Blessed Virgin. In this way the book challenges the Church's male, celibate power-base and begins a theologising which is experiential and relational in its emphases and assumptions. At another level, it represents a renewal of religious imagination, as it denies masculine models their established dominance within religious language and declares that these dominant models (or idols) exclude so much of women's experience.[3].

This account symbolises the complex character of Vatican II Catholicism and of the change it is still experiencing.[4]. It should indicate how Vatican II Catholicism might more usefully be

---

1. Collins, p. 237.
2. Collins, pp. 239-241.
3. I am here interpreting Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids in terms proposed by Sallie McFague in Metaphorical Theology.
4. Cf. Severino Diarich, "The Current State of Ecclesiology", Concilium, June, 1981, 92-97.

interpreted, not as conservatism versus liberalism[1], but as a paradigm shift, by which one dominant model of the church (and of theology generally) has been displaced by a plurality of models.[2]

It has been suggested that the notion of an "ideological consensus" helps describe the pre-conciliar Church, and that the particular consensus which characterised it was a "Counter-Reformation" ideology.[3] I would suggest that this ideological consensus is itself an expression of an imaginative consensus, by which one model of the Church is allowed to dominate and is interpreted less as a model and more as an ideology. This model has its classic formulation in the ecclesiology of Robert Bellarmine:

> The one and true Church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff.[4]

Such a model clearly emphasises the visible marks of identity, the hierarchical and Roman aspects of authority, and the conformity of belief (belief itself being associated very much with unity and truth). It also has little sense of its own analogical character. In the Catholic culture which existed prior to Vatican II, this model expressed and established itself through a consistent and cohesive web of emphases: the transcendent efficacy of the sacraments (which at times made them appear almost magical); the sovereign role of objective truth and reason in moral decision-making; the clarity and coherence of the moral code; the otherworldliness, permanence and

---

1. Even so, these terms can help clarify the change: cf. James P. Mackey, The Church: Its Credibility Today, pp. 141-146.
2. For instance, see Peter Hebblethwaite, The Runaway Church, pp. 228-229.
3. John Thornhill, Sign and Promise: A Theology of the Church For a Changing World, Ch. One.
4. Cited, Avery Dulles, Models of the Church, p. 14.

universality of the Latin liturgy and its elevated celebrant; the holy discipline of the marriage vows; the "will of God" mentality of the religious life; the supreme and at times infallible authority of the Pope. In Australia during the post-war years, such an image of Catholicism was widely reinforced by the growth of Catholic education and the fight for state aid, as well as by the continuing battle with that old, unifying enemy, Communism. There was a church-building boom, as well as a proliferation of devotional sodalities and intellectual societies. There was a great deal of confidence in Catholic intellectualism, whether it adopted the more incarnational mode of Melbourne's Apostolate, or encouraged the renaissance of Thomistic philosophy at Sydney's Aquinas Academy, whether it adopted the former's position within the university, or the latter's stance against it.[1] There was also an hierarchy of roles: "In roles in life, as in everything else, the hierarchy was maintained: male over female, priest, brother, husband over nun, wife and mother." [2]

Such a model of the Church (like any model) contained ambiguities. It may have provided a sense of identity, purpose, certitude, and continuity, but it could also be self-serving[3]. Its darker side was exposed by Bishop De Smedt in a speech at the Vatican Council, when he described the institution or "perfect society" model of the Church as "clericalist" (seeing the clergy as the source of all power and initiative), "juridicist" (imagining authority in simply secular models and emphasising laws and penalties), and "triumphalistic" (dramatising the Church as an army opposed to Satan and the powers

---

1. Cf. Edmund Campion, Australian Catholics, pp. 159-200; Patrick O'Farrell, The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History, pp. 354-405, and particularly pp. 406-411.
2. Anna Rutherford, "A Long Line of Maiden Aunts", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 138.
3. Cf. Thornhill, Sign and Promise, Chapter One.

of evil).[1]. Even before the Council opened, this model was being challenged by other models which derived from deeper scriptural and historical sensitivity, and which stressed spiritual and charismatic dimensions of the Church's character. John Thornhill notes those renewal movements which arose in the years prior to the Council, and encountered "institutionalised resistance" (another characteristic of an ideological consensus). He refers to the liturgical movement, the biblical movement, the lay apostolate movement, and the ecumenical movement, and notes how all were, in fact, supported by the major encyclicals of Pope Pius XII. [2].

After Vatican II, the institution or "perfect society" model of the Church is no longer able to dominate. Avery Dulles names - in a non-definitive manner - four other models which have exerted strong influence on the Catholic theological imagination: the Church as mystical communion, as sacrament, as herald of the Word, as servant. The institution model locates revealed truth in a body of doctrinal propositions, the mystical communion model locates it within a personal communion with Christ and the Spirit; the sacrament model sees the Church itself as the symbol of revelation. The herald model recovers a more Protestant emphasis on the Word of God in Scripture and wants to confront the world with the gospel, while the servant model is receptive to the inbreaking of the divine into history.[3].

By encouraging this plurality of theological models, Vatican II also helped to reaffirm the tensive character of the theological imagination itself. The pre-conciliar confidence in clear and univocal theological concepts was displaced by a renewed

---

1. Cited, Avery Dulles, Models of the Church, pp. 35-36.
2. Cf. Thornhill, Chapter One. Cf. also, Dulles, pp. 35-37.
3. Cf. Models of the Church, pp. 166-178.

appreciation of the Church as mystery and of theology as an analogical work. Models, exploring and releasing meaning (rather than explaining it), were more and more evaluated in terms of the tensions which they mediated: between human and divine, charismatic and institutional, local and universal, historical and eschatological, official and personal. This affected the way various areas of the Church's life were imagined and understood. In ecclesiology, as we have already seen, there was an attempt to articulate the relationships which might exist between institutional and spiritual realities, and between historical and eschatological ones. In Christology, a theology "from above" had to relate to a theology "from below", as more and more questions emerged about an historical and even political concept of Christ. In liturgy, a tradition of the transcendent and universal met with a demand for the immanent and local. In morality, there was a difficult task of reconciling objective norms with subjective truths, absolute truths of "natural law" with the relational truths of love, and conscience with authority. In catechetics, doctrinal modes of learning Catholic belief were complemented (and confronted) by more experiential modes. In short, the phenomenon called "Vatican II" focused and released a profound imaginative process, which cannot be reduced to liberal and conservative ideologies, nor even to horizontal and vertical images of authority. Rather it is a highly complex dynamic in which various theological models, and their many-layered implications, confirm and contradict one another.

This is why the controversy over Humanae Vitae, Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter on human life, sexuality and reproduction, became, in Australia as elsewhere, so important. This controversy is all too easily translated into a conservative versus liberal schema: those who

wanted the Pope to uphold the traditional teaching (that artificial contraception was immoral) against those who wanted the decision to be left to individual conscience (and to married laity rather than celibate clergy). Without denying that this dynamic was a major component of the crisis, I would suggest that Humanae Vitae exemplified the paradigm shift in its most concentrated form. At one end of the continuum and controversy, truth was seen as eternal, objective and "natural" (intrinsically ordered); at the other end, it was seen as existential, relational and personal. One argument appealed to the authority of office, and suggested that the encyclical was a quasi-infallible exercise of the Church's official teaching power (or magisterium). Another appealed to the authority of experience, to the right of a dissenting conscience, and stressed that revelation was also disclosed through people and history, and not contained only in the doctrinal propositions of the magisterium. One side had confidence in the clarity of theological language and the supremacy of the moral law; another side wanted to speak of "the spirit of the law", emphasise the difficult distance between moral principles and their practice, and maintain the supremacy of love. One side said that love could not exist without truth; another believed that love was the first and highest truth. One side imagined sexuality in terms of particular sexual acts; another in terms of ongoing personal relationships: the former was concerned with "a contraceptive act", the latter with "a contraceptive mentality". Nor did these variations simply line up in such a way that the former agreed with the Pope's teaching (and with his authority to proclaim it) and the latter disagreed. Some people agreed with the principles, but not with the vertical model of authority. Some disagreed with the principles and the authority, though they still imagined sexuality as

acts, not as relationships. Some agreed with the teaching and with the Pope. If, then, Humanae Vitae remains a watershed for Vatican II Catholicism, it is largely because of the way this question managed to attract to itself so many of the different theological models authorised by the Council's own theology and to focus, in such a concentrated fashion, the conflict which can exist between them.

Once we consider Catholicism as such a network of models - at times complementary, at times contradictory - we can relate the poetry of McAuley, Buckley, and Webb to its Catholic culture and belief in such a way that we not only integrate the dogmatic and experiential dimensions of their work, but also indicate the differences which exist within the one tradition. We can search for continuities and discontinuities existing between the models which express Catholicism and those which convey the poetry.

SECTION TWO

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: JAMES McAULEY

McAuley concluded his 1976 Latham Memorial Lecture:

> In the course of my own experience I have come to believe that there is no substitute for sober realism tempered and sustained by whatever faith and charity we may possess. Even this does not take one very far, for society is not a simple transparent thing: it is exceedingly complex and opaque, resistant to attempts to analyze and control its present workings or predict and control its future developments. In this world, we stand on a dimly-lighted present moment, and move forward into dark uncertainties. Precisely for this reason the past, so far as we can grasp it and assimilate it, is a great resource; there is no wisdom without tradition. It is in this sense I understand a remark by Schelling, which I translate as follows: "It is not the weak, succumbing to every new gospel, but only the strong, the spirits who hold firmly to the past, who can construct the real future."[1].

Of course, this could easily be seen as the statement of a lurking reactionary, but only by undervaluing its imaginative substructure, where the will restrains, disciplines, yet does not expel "dark uncertainties", where the past operates as symbol of a knowledge which is precisely difficult to achieve, requiring the effort (and honour) of "sober realism", and promising somewhat dimly to redeem the present and the future. If we respect such balances, characteristic of McAuley's imagination, we can appreciate the relationship between his belief and his poetry.

In "Culture and Counter-culture" McAuley commits himself to a traditional culture, distinguished by elements such as Christianity, a public morality, the constitutional system (with its principles of freedom), the tradition of science and technology, and a modified capitalist economy. Even as he articulates this commitment, he glances, like the trespasser of "Private Devotions", to either side and remarks:

---

1. James McAuley, "Culture and Counter-culture", Quadrant, September, 1976, 20.

> There are doubtless internal stresses and strains and inconsistencies in this set of cultural elements but they hang together as the civilization we have in Australia.[1]

While the defenders of "culture" admit imperfection, they tolerate reform only within "the principles and procedures of the system" and refuse the apocalyptic and utopian wiles of "counter-culture". Even so, imperfection also means that those committed to culture will sometimes have to accept "conformities to which (they) do not always wholeheartedly assent" and that they will discover within themselves "the potential for counter-cultural reaction".[2] McAuley then proceeds to interpret his own experience of counter-culture. Even if he is clearly prejudiced in favour of culture, he still maintains some degree of tension between his statement of principle and his awareness of imperfection.

McAuley's admiration for Blake as a great poet is set against his dismissal of Blake's eccentric theories, particularly the theory that "spontaneous impulses are good and holy so long as not distorted or corrupted by a moral code or an imposed authority".[3] McAuley's early anarchism is read as a misdirected attempt to ensure the principles of freedom - an attempt which ultimately leads to "a firm attachment to our constitutional system with its under-girding liberal principles as the best so far devised".[4] Similarly, anarchy is discovered, thanks to "that shy humourist (sic) Ern Malley", to be an unsound practice in poetry, even if Dame Ethel Malley "has presided over the renascence in the late 1960s of a neo-romanticist, neo-modernist, and neo-anarchist poetry which still flourishes".[5] This lecture, then,

---

1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 12.
2. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
3. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
4. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 15.
5. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 16.

works within familiar frames. It tells of the search for the rational and reasonable disciplines which guarantee freedom, the "sober realism" which allows the human will to contain imperfection, but also celebrate order in a world of principles and absolute values. Operating from a particular model of the human person, it identifies personhood in terms of a rational nature: reason has supremacy in defining the self; reason knows the objective order and informs the will of its ultimate good. This is a metaphysical model of personhood, as distinct, say, from a psychological model which might identify the person more in terms of individual integration, self-knowledge and relational capacities. Since McAuley employs such a rational, metaphysical model, he argues that the choice between culture and counter-culture "is ultimately one of rationality against irrationality". [1.]

When McAuley recounts his acceptance of "Catholic orthodoxy", this image of the human person plays a central role. It enables him to see his tradition providing for "the unique significance of each human existence", as well as for social, political, cultural and moral coherence. It informs his rejection of the "counter-culture" tradition, which, in his case, was the notion of a perennial Tradition found in the writings of Coomaraswamy and Guenon. McAuley records how he found this Tradition powerfully attractive, partly because it refused the materialism and pragmatism of Western modernity, and also because:

> Their central notion was that a "normal" society would be a symbolic and analogical system, all whose structures and activities, besides having their own reality, would exemplify in their own degree, principles that are in the first place cosmological but finally metaphysical. [2.]

---

1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
2. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 18.

If McAuley then resists this view of a perennial Tradition (and it is closer to the medievalism of which he is sometimes accused), it is because of his suspicion that it would be too ordered, because of his belief in the historical and personal character of the Christian tradition: "Western culture and Christianity are deeply immersed in the concrete, the historical, the unique significance of each human existence, not only in the secular order but also in the religious".[1]

While The End of Modernity, as we have seen, rages against an anti-metaphysical modernity and proposes the supremacy of the sacred realm, it also argues that Christianity, as distinct from gnosticism, allows the secular realm its own freedom, that "its creative, regulative inspiring action upon culture . . . is compatible with a very great flexibility and liberty of development in the secular order".[2] By defending the distinction between the sacred and the secular, McAuley hopes to free the secular so that "each part (of culture) is left to exercise initiative and self-regulation within the limits of its competence, instead of being determined in detail by analogical deduction from theological principles".[3] It is largely this tension which allows McAuley to resist too rational a model of the poetic process:

> If poetry is created "by a word conceived in the intellect" this word must nevertheless become flesh. In poetry the intellect works, so to speak, within the domains of sensation, feeling, imagination, desire, and submits in a certain measure to their laws. The intellectual act is mediated through other powers of the mind, endued with them, incarnated in them. It goes down to them in order to raise them to itself.[4]

Even when, in 1970, surveying the confusions of the post-conciliar Church, McAuley declares himself "A Friend of the Permanent

---

1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 19.
2. The End of Modernity, p. 12.
3. The End of Modernity, p. 12.
4. The End of Modernity, pp. 133-134.

Things" [1], he does not abandon the difficult relationship between freedom and authority, nor that between the limitation and the necessity of reasonable discipline. His sense of the traditional coherence of Catholicism emerges strongly, but so does his sense of human perplexities which cannot be simply contained through any authoritarian response. When he speaks of the damage caused by Paul VI's hesitation in regard to Humanae Vitae (a hesitation which, he says, encouraged the illusion that traditional moral teaching could and would be changed), it is the question of authority which concerns him:

> What interests me is the intimate damage to the structure of religious authority, and in consequence to the automatic unwavering discipline of vast numbers of people whose morale was closely dependent on religious authority.[2]

Even this is not precisely a plea for authoritarian religion (though it could too easily be used to support such a plea). As he counters the argument that Catholics should "become adult" and make their own decisions about artificial contraception, McAuley returns to his preferred mythic framework: "it sounds very well so long as you are willing to ignore the supernatural character of religion and the fallen nature of man". [3] This leads to a conclusion which anticipates "Culture and Counter-culture":

> The real foundation of conservatism is the recognition that we don't run the world, but that we are called to act responsibly in the world, as best we can among unsatisfactory and often bewildering choices.[4]

Once more chaos is resisted - by discipline, and by a metaphysics which promises an ultimate (not an immediate) order.

---

1. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", Quadrant, March-April, 1970, 40-43.
2. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42. Cf. also, "A Small Testament", p. 9. Here McAuley claims that the controversy has caused "a profound uncertainty about the binding character of the Church's 'ordinary' teaching authority.
3. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42.
4. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 43.

McAuley's position within Vatican II Catholicism emerges, then, as consistent with the imaginative pattern which we have seen working within his poetry. While he supports renewal, it is renewal within the principles of the tradition: natural law morality, religious authority and discipline, and the supremacy of the sacred and the personal. He opposed suggestions that divorce, abortion, homosexual acts and masturbation might, in principle, be moral and that "at least in North America, pre-marital intercourse was all right if it was a nice boy and you loved him".[1] He began to withdraw his support for liturgical renewal - mainly because the aesthetic demands of the new liturgy were much less rigorous than those he associated with an appreciaton of the sacred. He disapproved of the growing assumption that papal teaching was more a guideline than a norm. He maintained his opposition to Communism because its principles were fundamentally anti-religious and anti-personal. This may indeed appear to be a reactionary position to those who will not allow that his emphasis on tradition is, properly speaking, an emphasis on its conservative function, not its conformative function. He values authority, reason and "the Permanent Things" because such an emphasis accords with his metaphysical model of tradition and of the human person.

For all this, McAuley's position becomes less one of public argument and more one of withdrawn integrity and private devotion - somewhat as, in "Because", the question of social responsibility is displaced by the need to deal with personal judgment. He records:

> My own reaction has been to keep away from modern theology, to read no church newspapers or publications, to converse only with clergymen who happen to be personal friends. I believe in the

---

1. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42.

> resurrection, I believe in the mass, though most parish masses are now unpleasant experiences, I reject no article of faith, though some remain dark to me; I retain a devotion to Mary, who has been rather unceremoniously demoted and relegated to the background . . . I am not saying that my retreat to a minimal position is a good and desirable thing. It is one person's reaction in a troublous time.[1].

This is a position very much like that finally assumed by the narrator of "A Leaf of Sage", as he urges the "hidden bird" to "sing mercy and relief/ To wanderers in the darkness of the heart" (CP, 80). Even so, McAuley does not close his own account in this state of withdrawal. Rather, he closes it with an anti-triumphalist recognition that "The visible body of the Church does not at all define the invisible body of those who in all ages can and will be saved by the free operation of the Holy Spirit" [2]; with a celebration of the "great development" in genuine ecumenism and universality, and with a rather wry realisation that the ways of God evade even the best of rational and traditional categories:

> We are indeed universally brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God, and God wills the salvation of all mankind while leaving man with the dignity and peril of his free will. It is, of course, Christian belief that it is by Christ alone that the mass of mankind are saved, whatever their formal relation to the visible Church. Pagans and unbelievers may regard it as an impertinence to be enlisted as honorary Catholics. I regard it as amusing, beautiful and consoling that the real Mystical Body of Christ would, if we could view it with God's eyes, look so different from the categories we employ and the lines of division we make.[3].

Here he has managed a shift from his more usual and more public model of the Church to one which is more mystical - it is a shift comparable to that which operates in his poetry between the discursive and the lyric modes.

---

1. "A Small Testament", pp. 9-10.
2. "A Small Testament", p. 10.
3. "A Small Testament", pp. 10-11.

In describing the relationship between McAuley's Catholicism and his poetry, we need to respect a similar complexity. It would be easy to isolate the traditional ideas which his belief and art share and ground the relationship there. "A Letter to John Dryden" would provide a great deal of evidence: an opposition to relativism, positivism, Communism, divorce and abortion; a commitment to Christ as the supreme Reason and Truth; an apologetic emphasis on the rational motives for faith and the historicity of the gospels. In short, the poem would be seen to proclaim the Catholic tradition as the most powerful custodian of Western social and moral values. "Celebration of Divine Love" would confirm the traditional drama of Original Sin and Redemption, as well as the metaphysical symbolism still embodied in Catholic dogmas and liturgies. It would reinforce the Catholic commitment to natural law morality, and the belief that the natural order needs the elevating influence of divine grace. At the same time, "In the Twentieth Century" and "An Art of Poetry" would be read as arguing that Western modernity has betrayed the metaphysical tradition and abandoned the hierarchy of the sacred which alone can restore ultimate order and beauty. These poems would also disclose a preference for the vertical dimension of religious imagination - a preference which, depending on the prejudices of the reader, might be described as metaphysical, authoritarian or repressive. "At Penstock Lagoon", "Private Devotions" and "Parish Church" would then be summoned to verify McAuley's increasing disillusionment within the post-conciliar Church, his sense that the Church was betraying its own tradition, and his tendency to find in private faith whatever comfort and honour might be managed.

All this might be true, but it is seriously inadequate: it is privileging the ideological dimension of McAuley's Catholic

imagination. At the risk of some repetition, I want now to return to some of these poems and give them a slightly different focus. In particular, I want to consider how their models of authority, Christ, and church clarify the ways in which the poetry is "Catholic".

When it wants to authorise its religious position, McAuley's poetry sometimes invokes the public, objective tradition of Catholicism, and at other times withdraws and makes more tentative claims on the basis of private (often dark) experience. At all times, its structure of authority is fundamentally hierarchical, but also self-consciously limited. Where it invokes the authority of divine revelation, it is aware that this is no guarantee of human perfection. Where it asserts the primacy of human reason, it does so in order to guarantee hope, not certitude. Certainly, the overall pattern of McAuley's poetry demonstrates an increasing privatisation of religious authority: the poetry of his conversion period, arguing for natural law, universal symbolism, and the Christian moral tradition, contrasts with the later poetry where the affairs of the institutional Church provide a faint, even troublesome, background as personal faith - itself a structure of outlines - contests the authority of death. However, a similar pattern can be seen even in the discursive, Catholic pieces. Furthermore, the late lyrics are not simply replacing a dogmatic mode with an experiential one: they are still using reasoned will to construct and authorise a landscape which, if it is not always consoling, is at least corroborative.

In McAuley's discursive poems, such as "A Letter to John Dryden" and "An Art of Poetry", the ultimate structure of authority is hierarchical: reason is obedient to the created order which is itself fully authorised only in the revealed order. This establishes at once

the relationship between secular and sacred authority and the primacy of the sacred. The emphasis is on order. Order is ultimately an expression of the divine reason: whether it be the created order, where the propositions of natural law image God's perfect understanding and absolute truth-in-being, or the redeemed order, where the teachings of the Church preserve the saving truths which Christ revealed. Accordingly, the poetry, at this point, embodies a Catholicism characterised by a hierarchical model of authority, a propositional model of reason, and a dogmatic model of revelation. We can see something of this operating in "An Art of Poetry":

> Let your speech be ordered wholly
> By an intellectual love;
> Elucidate the carnal maze
> With clear light from above. (CP, 70)

While some authority is given to the secular realm - "Give every image space and air/ To grow" - the ultimate authority of any such image is that it has been informed by Christ's revelation or, at least, by the intellect's communion with the eternal order of things.

Even so, we have to be careful: this is not the only authority-structure operating in the poem. It also authorises itself from two experiences of loss. The first experience is the loss of metaphysical symbolism - and this empowers the poem by providing it with an alternative authority, an almost demonic authority it can reject in order to define its own Christian and hierarchical position:

> Since all our keys are lost or broken,
> Shall it be thought absurd
> If for an art of words I turn
> Discreetly to the Word? (CP, 70)

It also empowers the poem because it is not easily overthrown: it persists in the anxiety about "self-expressive art" and in the power struggle operating between transparency and opaqueness, pride and simplicity, as modes of mystery. The other experience of loss, which

functions as the poem's final authority, is that of spiritual abandonment, "that loss/ By which the spirit gains". In one sense this shifts the poem's basis of authority: from knowledge of the real to belief in the paradoxical, from reason to faith, from dogma to mysticism. In another sense, it reaffirms Christ's authority over the world, his ultimate and determining reality, since the reference to this positive loss establishes an ironic contrast with the opening and reinforces the negativity of "Since all our keys are lost or broken".

Similarly, "In the Twentieth Century" (CP, 198) is empowered as much by loss as by gain. It argues that the authority of modern poetry is severely undermined, that it lacks the authoritative presence and "living voice" of Christ. Yet it is less hierarchical. Its reference to Christ's resurrection is within a community of immediate and personal images (which yet preserve a biblical resonance): bread, honey, yolk, and water. Still, its preference is clear: these very natural, nourishing images represent the genuine reality of Christ, which challenges the foam-rubber processes, plastic feel and chemical waste of modern experience and language. This preference is somewhat qualified with "I don't reject our days". However, the qualification has little positive authority. Once more, experience empowers the poetry by the negative authority of loss:

> And yet we dream of song
> Like parables of joy.
> There's something deeply wrong.
>
> Like shades we must drink blood
> To find the living voice
> That flesh once understood. (CP, 198)

In this sense, the ultimate authority of concrete experience and immediate history is that it validates the myth operating behind the dogma and reason. That myth is, of course, the story of a world fallen from innocence and perfection, the story of redeeming blood.

This is the story which, in a more formal and dogmatic manner, informs and authorises "Celebration of Divine Love" (CP, 73-76). This poem involves different kinds of authority. There is the covert authority of its subtextual, personal narrative. Although this is analogous to the notion of a personal authority, it is hard to say what effect the poem's symbolism has on it - whether it integrates or intimidates it. The poem may well represent a Catholic dilemma about individual and traditional power. There is also the dogmatic authority of the great Christian symbols: the poem certainly intends to celebrate these as signs of divine love. They exercise an abstract and universal meaning, confirm "angelic hierarchies", and command the mind to contemplate the "Unmeasured measure of immensity". Yet, there is another authority, that of the "bowed darkness", where one person speaks to another of spiritual desire, pain, and promised reward. Here the model of authority is more properly charismatic, just as the model of Church is more mystical and communal than institutional. This personal mysticism itself derives power, not only from the tradition, but also from the local landscape.

While it does address the "Incarnate Word", "A Letter to John Dryden" (CP, 85-95) is not quite so incarnational in its imaginative manner. It is determinedly hierarchical as it defends reason and metaphysics. Even its appeal to Christian faith reinforces this: although faith claims an authority beyond the rational, and establishes itself in a realm "where all signs (are) reversed", its relationship to metaphysical reason is always confirmative, and never arbitrary. At

the same time, the poem does use other authorities, and these contribute a tension and complexity which are often missed. It appeals to the heart - though it does so on the assumption that the heart's "inmost tendencies . . ./ Contain the ground-plan of the Christian law" (CP, 94). And what authority is exercised by the final stanza? Its self-regarding irony comes close to deconstructing all the "angelic hierarchies", since it makes the poem's furious propositions unimportant when they are confronted with death's reticence. Finally, the Christian world which the poem proposes as an alternative to "this vacant sly/ Neurotic modern world" (CP, 85) has, in an important and somewhat subversive sense, no immediate and achieved authority. It is a

> World undistorted, world unsimplified,
> So long by me desired, so long denied, (CP, 95)

and it cannot yet overthrow the Fall.

McAuley's later lyrics seem, at first, to favour a different model of authority. They rarely appeal to dogmatic symbols. Even when they do, these occupy a more democratic position within the general community of images. Such is the case, for example, with the references to resurrection in "Private Devotions", to eucharist in "Morning Voluntary", to judgment in "Because", to Mass in "World on Sunday", to crucifixion in "At Assisi", and to Christ's redemptive mission in "Parish Church". Inasmuch as these poems "use a language of sense-impressions to render aspects of a world" [1], they become less emblematic in their mode, less universal in their claims, and they learn to respect the power of particularity. In another sense, these poems do not so much change their authority-structure as shift its exercise from traditional to personal worlds. They never really

---

1. James McAuley, A Map of Australian Verse, p. 204.

abandon their belief that, with proper discipline, "meaning comes at will".[1] It is this belief which, whether it is operating publicly or privately, is the foundation for McAuley's sense of hierarchy. Therefore, the "language of sense-impressions" is never a frankly random performance. As well as being rhymed and end-stopped, McAuley's lines operate from a principle of selective stress. These together represent principles of restraint and coherence. In short, the later poetry still prefers the authority of reasoned will and, like the honeyeater of "Autumn in Hobart" (TG, 41), it is engaged in defining a world. Even if the heart is helpless, it can still manage to say, "hold and wait".[2]

Even as negative experience seems to assume a disproportionate authority in McAuley's later poetry and to legitimise despair, it is being constructed within the old hierarchy of reasoned will:

> A cry goes out from the exhausted will:
> Nightmares and angels roam the empty field.[3]

Here, where all authority but the demonic seems to be cast down, we are reading within a controlled landscape. The "exhausted will" is, through rhyme, balanced with the expectant, perhaps contemplative, power of "The air is still". Moreover, there is a strange sense in which observer and observed wrestle for final authority in the poem. While the "I" never explicitly appears in the poem (it is objectified in "the exhausted will"), there is ego-control, all the more powerful because it so firmly objectifies the landscape. As "The world

---

1. "Book of Hours", Time Given, p. 38.
2. "Music Late At Night", Music Late at Night, p. 23.
3. "Nocturne", Music Late at Night, p. 5.

sinks out of sight", and "Nightmares and angels roam the empty field", there is a counteracting awareness that the will, however exhausted, does not go with the landscape. It remains a reasoning observer.

This effect - a kind of final reservation functioning within the intimate observation of selected detail - is fundamental to these last poems, revealing how McAuley's poetry retains its hierarchical authority. Sometimes authority is preserved at the expense of a dissociation between landscape and observer:

> Dying world and deadened sky,
> Traffic roars beyond control.
> What is left to make us try?[1].

If this seems momentarily to despair of order, it still assumes effort and discipline, so that tension is maintained between the world's confusion and the observer's will. At other times, the observer seems to follow the lead of the landscape:

> And the gentle nymph's blank eyes
> Seem to seek and see beyond
> The park, the city, and the skies.[2].

This poetry, therefore, reserves a discriminatory authority for the observer, who is called to "get it right" and "learn by looking".[3]. Although it now more generously and simply includes experiential truths, it has not abandoned its belief that authoritative truth resides, not in immediate experiences, but in ultimate ones.

Similarly, in its imagining of Christ, McAuley's poetry combines different models, though its final preference seems to be for a Christ whose Cross invites our participation in suffering and mystery - however much one might have expected his Christ to be pre-eminently

---

1. "Winter Drive", Music Late at Night, p. 8.
2. "In the Gardens", Music Late at Night, p. 10.
3. "Book of Hours", Time Given, p. 38.

"the Word, the source of unity,/ The Reason of man's reason, and its Light".[1] This latter model is important to both "A Letter to John Dryden" and "Celebration of Divine Love", but in each case it is discarded in favour of a more mystical (and, indeed, more traditional) approach to Christ.

"A Letter to John Dryden" first presents a Christ who perfects the natural order, so that "By reason men may come to find their Reason" (CP, 92). This is a Christ imagined in the terms of Thomistic metaphysics. Christ, as the Word, perfectly expresses God's creative understanding; faith in him is, therefore, the confirmation and perfection of reason. This metaphysical model in turn converses with a political Christ amenable to the philosophy of the Movement, one who guarantees a liberal hierarchy.[2]

Despite this, the poem makes its ultimate appeal to a more mystical Christ, one discovered, above reason, in the paradoxes of sacrificial love, one who evokes "ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire". This reveals a shift from a public model of Christ to a more personal one - but one which is still deeply traditional since it appropriates the via negativa tradition of Christian spirituality, which has its origins in Christ's invitation to share his cross.[3] "Celebration of Divine Love" also shifts its basis from the public language of traditional Christian symbolism to the hidden signs of Christian love. At first, Christ is the eternal source of traditional symbols, who thereby guarantees the primacy of revelation and the victory of

---

1. "A Letter to John Dryden", Collected Poems, p. 91.
2. Cf. "A Letter to John Dryden", Collected Poems, p. 92.
3. Cf. for example, Mark, 8:34.

angelic over demonic forces. Then he is the darkly apprehended figure, who offers a purifying fire and promises that all will be restored. Curiously, the ultimate hope he promises through this "hidden" fire remains tentative - "who knows what wanderer may turn . . .?" (CP, 76). In this sense, the poem corresponds to McAuley's belief that tradition guides our way as "we stand on a dimly-lighted present moment, and move forward into dark uncertainties".[1] Having established, through their Thomistic theology, that "Christ carries his credentials in his hand" (CP, 91), both these poems imagine Christ as a companion in dark uncertainty.

This tendency to associate Christ with uncertainty can be seen in the earlier poem, "Jesus" (CP, 20). While Christ can see our reality for what it is, our knowledge of him arrives at uncertainty, leaving him isolated. In "Explicit"[2], Christ is once more a figure associated with uncertainty. Indeed, McAuley and Christ seem to meet at the point where McAuley admits that he cannot communicate Christ's ways to the modern world - somewhat as Christ in "Jesus" tells people "nothing that they wished to know". While this Christ still consoles and redeems through the eucharist, he more surely draws McAuley into death, leaving him between the "cold" and the "gold", between the certainty of death and the possibility of eternal life.

This Christ is being used primarily to reinforce the discipline, not of philosophical and theological reason, but of via crucis spirituality. At this level, McAuley's Christ is both experienced

---

1. James McAuley, "Culture and Counter-culture", Quadrant, September, 1976, 20.
2. Quadrant, December, 1976, 5.

and willed. This can be seen in "Pieta" (CP, 175). McAuley's image of Christ is disclosed more in the poem's structure than in the final reference to the "Cross". The final line is so delayed that its expression of faith both risks and restrains the poem's entire experience of pain. It also makes no claim to understanding, deepening the "dark uncertainties" which define the present and future Christ, even as it provides some conventional Christian consolation. In this way, it mimics McAuley's deepest sense of Christ: "Clean wounds, but terrible".

While it remains hierarchical, McAuley's image of church is nevertheless more spiritual than institutional. In "Celebration of Divine Love", for instance, the image of church shifts along with the image of Christ: it appears as the visible expression of Christ's saving truth and sacramental activity, but never becomes a closed institution. Instead, it invites believers into a mystical communion. In "Father, Mother, Son" (CP, 181), as McAuley hopes his father, a lapsed Catholic, may be saved without benefit of institutional reconciliation, it is this invisible church which is clearly preferred to one defined exclusively by its visible marks of identity. It is in this sense that McAuley's model of church is essentially spiritual: it is the context for a personal relationship with God. This relationship still uses the formal teaching and practices of Catholicism for their coherence and discipline, but it never reduces the Church to its institutional expression.

This seems to be true even of "At Penstock Lagoon" (CP, 216-217). Part IV derives very closely from the theological debates which arose (or intensified) soon after Vatican II, and it is possible to

reconstruct the image of church which McAuley is using as he attacks certain post-conciliar trends. His church has dogmas which are permanent truths - dogmas, that is, which transcend "language-games" and which must not surrender to any demands to be "Meaningful! relevant!". His church believes in miracles and in demonic evil - and it is being betrayed by priests who explain these away. His church has no doubts about its identity, which is divinely guaranteed, and so it does not recognise the "crisis of identity" language prevalent in the sixties. Nor does his church recognise a need to be more involved with humankind and to encourage "progress" in its thinking and acting - not because these are wrong, but because words like "involvement" and "progress" focus a conventional fear (particularly influential in the post-conciliar Church) that teachings will be relativised and that the (transcendent) sacred will cease to be the Church's first concern and responsibility.

However, "At Penstock Lagoon" also demonstrates the shift with which we have become familiar. Even as it parodies movements in the post-conciliar Church and indirectly acknowleges conflicting ecclesiologies, it is withdrawing to a privately-observed landscape which faintly mediates the mystical church, the one founded from Christ's wounded side:

> How alien all that seems
> Here at the lake-edge,
> Where, surprise, a platypus
> Flips into the water.
>
> "Leave rubbish at the tip."
> Your own life needs cleaning;
> Which suddenly seems easy
> As the native thrush calls
>
> "Duke, Duke Wellington";
> And in lieu of sunrise
> A perched robin displays
> One small bright patch of red. (CP, 217)

Further, the reference to his own life in need of cleaning, so reminiscent of "It's my own judgment day that I draw near" (CP, 201), locates both the Church affairs and his private meditation within a larger frame, the drama of redemption. The "small bright patch of red" also restrains and redeems, by its crucified hope, the despairing note which concludes Part III: "There's no new way to begin." The institutional church is, therefore, framed by the meditative landscape which is, in its turn, constructed and contained by the struggle between chaos and commitment.

In "Private Devotions" (MLN, 6) the landscape is even more intensely influencing our sense of church. Here the Catholic Church is represented, not as an inspired institution, but as a moment of prayer balanced between "care" and "despair". The only symbol it provides the wanderer/trespasser is the most discomforting of Catholic symbols: the empty tabernacle, representing the moment between resurrection and death. The lines,

> Beads held in reluctant fingers
> Guide the murmur of the breath,

embody the astringent hope, the via negativa temperament and spirituality, which characterise McAuley's deepest attachment to the Catholic Church. They also illustrate the relationship between that private discipline and the public, dogmatic tradition. When this was written, Marian devotions such as the rosary were in decline, so that McAuley is here deliberately presenting himself as a Catholic who privately respects Mary's place in the hierarchy - indeed who resists what he will later term "the disturbance of the traditional heavenly constellation".[1]

---

1. James McAuley, "A Small Testament", Quadrant, December, 1976, 9.

Perhaps "Parish Church" (TG, 42) best exemplifies how McAuley finally imagines church. In the opening stanza, the stained-glass window calls the eye upward, as if to suggest the elevating power of supernatural grace. The eye is drawn to the redemptive truth of Christ, a central, transcendent truth which is visible because it is embodied in simple, transparent figures. While this coaxes and satisfies private devotion, it also celebrates the tradition of sacred art and places the ultimate meaning of the Catholic Church above and beyond the aisles and pews where its human community and history move and contemplate these "heavenly places". In the second stanza, we return to history, a troubled history in which days of promise fade into a moment of isolation. The line which closes the second stanza of "Parish Church" - "Now I'm the only one that ever comes" - is as much an indication of McAuley's own imaginative development as of his isolation with the post-conciliar Church. It is another variation on his basic model of church. It is, then, a line which brings him, in the last stanza, to his final image of church: the place where the forces of disorder - grief, sin, death - are held in order by self-discipline, prayer, and austere integrity.

These different models of authority, Christ and church do not indicate inconsistencies or contradictions - they are more like variations on a mystery. The mystery is approached through the dominant imaginative structure which informs them all: the myth of a fallen world which is continually being elevated by the reasoned will of humankind and the redemptive will of God. In the model of authority, the preference for reason's hierarchy is as much a response to and a restraint on middling, muddling humanity, as an attachment to verticalism. In the model of Christ, the Word of order is used to make the paradoxes of suffering more bearable, and there is always the sense that Christ

will be misunderstood and himself betrayed by voluntary and involuntary evil, but that he will still honour his destiny. In the model of church, the dogmatic tradition is used to support the spiritual tradition, and finally Catholicism itself becomes a victim of confusion and a companion before the darkness.

SECTION THREE

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: VINCENT BUCKLEY

Vincent Buckley's poetry has become less and less "Catholic". While the early "Eucharist" (TWF, 30) easily enters the Catholic world and calls the eucharist "this gathering of all space", and "In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom" (MI, 50-57) triumphantly declares that Christ "Lives in His Church", the later poetry refuses or ignores the language of formal belief. This could be interpreted simply as a movement from belief to scepticism. Instead, I have been suggesting that it is a development consistent with the anti-ideological stance of Buckley's imagination (itself expressive of an opposition between the institutional and the personal, as well as of a strange need to inhabit language as an expatriate) and with the poetry's growing preference for the "idiom of sensation" over the language of dogma. The process is like that coded in the image of how,

> Hardly thinking, in a strange church,
> A man, forgetting the common rubric, prayed
> "O God, make me worthy of the world",
> And felt his own silence sting his tongue.[1.]

When Buckley constructs his account of the (Catholic) period surrounding this poem, "Places" - and it is the period of Vatican Council II - he constructs himself as a Catholic trying to escape the Church's "self-enclosing formalism".[2.] In Cutting Green Hay he presents the founding of the ecumenical Catholic magazine, Prospect (1958), as involving a refusal of party-line Catholicism. "We would demonstrate the uselessness of the standard Catholic view by not applying it."[3.] He contrasts the openness and pluralism of this

---

1. "Places", Selected Poems, p. 79. Arcady and Other Places, p. 38.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 231.
3. Cutting Green Hay, p. 249.

endeavour with the wider Church's "slightly secretive, furtive" triumphalism.[1]. Referring to Vatican II itself, Buckley more definitely declares a movement away from institutional religion:

> The Vatican Council had started, full of plans for averting the organizational and psychic disasters which had already happened inside Christianity. Fine as it was in many ways, it produced too little too late. From my point of view, it was a time to wait and possess one's soul, to move back from institutional definitions of reality, to take an anthropological approach, as it were, to institution and self alike. What was the actual state of 'belief'? What did 'belief' mean? If belief was being abandoned, what in the human psyche was abandoning it? Something had failed deep in the Christian spirit, not to speak of other less formal spiritual traditions, in the way that something fails in the blood, or the womb, or the spinal column, and the failure needed to be realized in the deepest sense. Not many of my friends wanted to hear this dire message; most of them thought me wrong, and only a few wished to abandon sociology or theology in the interests of that mistress of guesswork and intuition, anthropology.[2].

This shift towards an anthropological appreciation of religion can be clearly discerned in Poetry and the Sacred (1968). Here Buckley is looking for a way of discussing poetry which, though not devotional, does evidence a religious impulse, and even for a way of broadening his approach to Christian poets like Hopkins, Eliot and Lowell. He distrusts the noun, "religion": it defines religion as something separable and static. Therefore, he conducts his discussion using more experiential, dynamic terms: "the religious" and "the sacred", rather than "the revealed" or "the dogmatic".[3]. Declaring that "poetry is an act both sacred and sacralising"[4]., he says that one can find in writers such as David Jones, W.H. Auden, A.D. Hope and Dylan Thomas the key difference: between "religion in poetry" and "poetry as a religious act" -

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 253.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 250.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 5.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 8.

> they are speaking not of religion in poetry but of poetry as a religious act; and that they are locating the religious nature of that act neither in some thesis about the autotelic status of poetry nor in some contention about the basic themes or subjects for poetry but in terms of how the poet is brought as a religious being, concerned with human life and an actor in its drama, to create works which themselves carry his religious being, fortify creation and exist as, in a sense, sacred spaces.[1.]

Buckley is, therefore, wary of the term, "religious poetry", since it is too often taken to mean "the religion in poetry". On the other hand, he stresses "the strongly affirmative nature and extraordinary persistence" of the notion of poetry as a religious act.[2.] In such poetry, doctrinal and devotional elements "will be religious forces only so long as they are seen as having a present relevance to questions of personal identity, meaningful action, and the inner structures of feeling".[3.] Accordingly, in discussing medieval poetry, Buckley does not see as "religious" poetry which finds the world distasteful and looks for salvation beyond it. Rather, he nominates a work like "A Lyke-Wake Dirge", where he finds the poet's struggle "to sacralise himself in and through his 'profane' activities".[4.] Spenser is most religious when least concerned to be devout.[5.] Wordsworth gives little evidence of "a personal God in the traditional Christian sense", but does create his experience of "forces which made available to him an 'opening toward the transcendent'." [6.] This does not imply a reduction of religious terms to personal ones: working from the studies of Mircea Eliade, Buckley shows that sacred objects and hierophanies exhibit "both a movement into the world of common experience and a movement within the common experience to transcend or complete itself".[7.]

---

1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 9.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 10.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 11.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 27.
5. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 30.
6. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 44.
7. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 15.

We see the imaginative structure of Buckley's earlier theology of Incarnation being extended and confirmed, as he cites Eliade: "it is 'supernature' that the religious man apprehends through the natural aspects of the world." [1]. Once more following Eliade, Buckley observes that the modern age has seen, not a complete failure of religion, "but a shift from the transcendent to the immanent, from person to process, in specifying the sacred". It is not only, he says, belief which has been impaired, but "certain central capacities of the psyche".[2]. The capacities are presumably those to do with discovering and uttering a rhythmic movement on the page and within the psyche, for Buckley continues:

> And in such a world, if it is strange that poetry survives, it is still stranger that poets should find in themselves the impulse and strength to go on defining their experience in such a way as to redefine God-acting-in-the-world: what we may even call the reappearance of God. [3].

It is noticeable that while poetry is set the task of recovering the world's source or centre, the poet still betrays an uneasiness, a sense of the world's disconnected rhythms.

This informs Buckley's comment on Dylan Thomas as a religious poet. Thomas, he says, combines an almost magical view of language with a sacramental one; Thomas implies that if a world of innocence may be renewed in poetry, then poetry may reveal that even the modern world hides things which have sympathy with that innocence. [4]. Christian poets (Eliot, Hopkins, Auden) do not celebrate the world as Thomas does: they see the world, not as radiant facts, but as shaped by

---

1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 16. The reference is to Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, Harper Torchbook Edition (New York, 1961), p. 118.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 60-63.

salvation and they "do not believe that poems can be innocent in the common world".[1] If Poetry and the Sacred records Buckley's concern with how to be a religious poet, he clearly prefers experiencing profane spaces till they show themselves and are made holy.

By the time Late Winter Child and The Pattern are published (1979), Buckley has, as we have seen, declared that he no longer feels any allegiance towards Catholicism as an organisation and that all dogmatic definitions are inadequate before mystery.[2] In Cutting Green Hay, Buckley gives other reasons for the distant stance he assumes within Catholicism. These strengthen the picture of one dissatisfied with ideological positions: it is largely an unrestrained ideological and institutional impulse within Catholicism which changes morality into moralism, turns priestly service towards priestly dominance, and sets an opposition between "aprioristic thinking" and "existential speculation".[3] To appreciate how far Buckley has travelled within his Catholic context, we need to linger over a comment made in his interview with Jim Davidson:

> I should add that I'm not an ex-Catholic who hates Catholicism, or who wants to reject it or anything of that sort at all. In fact, I would go to Mass sometimes, but I am a non-believer in any sense that would be meaningful to the great majority of Catholics. On the other hand, I think that the Catholic mystical tradition and the Catholic sacramental tradition are magnificent historical developments.[4]

While this seems conciliatory, Buckley, a skilled theologian, has quietly discarded the majority view by referring to the sacraments

---

1. Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 63-64.
2. Cf. Elizabeth Booth, "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27-32. Jim Davidson, "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 443-458.
3. Cf. Cutting Green Hay, pp. 231ff.
4. Davidson, p. 450.

as "historical developments", thus emphasising their temporal and changing character. Conventional Catholic theology would not give such an emphasis without qualifying it, by affirming that the sacraments are, in their origin and efficacy, of the supernatural order.

At one level, this shift in Buckley's position occurs because of his anthropological exploration of religion. At another level, it is the expression of an imaginative need. Buckley himself is aware of this: while applauding the theological renewal of Vatican II, he notes that it may still be irrelevant to "the needs of those whose imagination cannot entertain the presence of God".[1] There has been, he argues, over the past two centuries, a weakening of the sense of the prophetic power, the sense of nature as hierophanous, and the sense of "the sacral possibilities in human relationships".[2] Catholic theology continues to emphasise its "sacraments", but fails to appreciate this "divorce in sensibility": great emphasis is placed on the cultic and liturgical celebration of the sacraments, but very little on the sacramental context, the sense of Christ's sacramental presence beyond the official enactment.[3] In other words, the Catholic Church has nurtured its theology of the sacrament, but neglected that sacramental imagination which is needed if the rituals are to sacralise the heart, the subconscious, and the ordinary object. Buckley, then, names the contemporary religious crisis as one of imagination and says that Vatican II failed to address it:

> The council has in turn expressed a rather vague perception of the problem by seeking to make 'the sacraments' more accessible to the church's members at the same time as it makes her members

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
3. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.

> more open to dialogue with non-Catholics. The attempt is a gallant one and must be praised unreservedly. But there is a sense in which it comes a hundred years too late; it comes into a de-sacralized world and to de-sacralized imaginations. The effect of it may well be both to encourage indifferentism and to weaken the sense of the sacramental power, unless a great effort is made to widen the scope of the sacramental action, and to rejoin what we call 'the sacraments' to the sacramental qualities of the word, of nature, and of loving relationships, from which, as I say, they have been too readily divorced.[1]

Buckley's emphasis is all the more compelling if we recall that, for him, the sacralising imagination uncovers and utters the world at its moment of "deepest realisation", and if we relate this to his concern to deepen the natural rhythm of language - a rhythm he closely associates with the very pattern and pace of perception and sensation.[2] This emphasis on the almost sacred particularity of sensate objects and on language incarnate with "the idiom of sensation" has obviously taken Buckley in a very different direction from that proposed in "An Art of Poetry" (dedicated to Buckley), where McAuley directs him to "the Word" as the true source of language and as the guarantee of "universal meanings".

The paucity of Christian reference in Buckley's later poetry is all the more significant if we consider that the experiences at the heart of this poetry - death, birth, love, and source-country - are liminal experiences which, in the earlier poetry, might have invited a more theological treatment. For instance, "Ceol-Beag for James McAuley" (TP, 45) makes no mention of their shared Catholicism. Admittedly, Buckley and McAuley embody different styles within Catholicism. Still, one of McAuley's very last poems - "Explicit" - shows him still engaged with the theology of eternal life, still believing in the sacrament of the eucharist. Buckley's poem ends with the speaker in

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
2. Cf. Vincent Buckley, "Ease of American Language", The American Model, ed., J. Kirkby, pp. 137-159.

Ireland, recalling how his friend (now dead) once said, "I'm terrified of the Ireland inside me", and using the Irish landscape to mediate an atmosphere of ultimate redemption:

> Her light stands in the chestnut trees: vase-shaped:
> the peony leans backward, open-sided, tall, the true crimson.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Buckley ought to have written a "Catholic poem", merely indicating that his imagination has considerably shifted from the theology, in "Impromptu For Francis Webb" (MI, 44-47), that the poet's world "will be glorified". Again, "November 15th" (SP, 5) deals with his mother's death, but does not invoke the language of passover and resurrection which distinguished "Stroke" (AOP, 3-9). Indeed as it tries to link this death with "the pulse of leaf under the snow", the poem actually moves away from theological language and towards the language of the senses:

> Useless, quite useless now, to turn back
> to the grave's rectangle, and pursue you,
> spirit shall I call you, or memory,
> or bird, or bright ribbon,
> with my sense of smell, blackness, anger. (SP, 6)

Late Winter Child tells of birth and love. Here, though, love does not receive the heraldic treatment afforded it in "Prothalamion For a Christian Marriage" (TWF, 12), nor does the woman become a Christ-figure as in "Movement and Stillness" (MI, 48). Similarly, Buckley never says of the new and late child that he has "seen/ God work in her" - a belief expressed in "A Prayer for Brigid" (TWF, 16). While we cannot conclude that sacral possibilities are not sounded in these poems, we can say that when Buckley now wants to name the sacred, he uses a language which no longer needs to include the vocabulary of his Catholic tradition.

There is evidence that, while it may have abandoned a great deal of Catholicism, Buckley's work has maintained some belief in the

sacralising role of poetry. In "Imagination's Home", speaking of Brennan, Buckley links "linguistic feeling" and "religious range" and suggests that, in a poet of substance, religious feeling and poetic feeling tend to be the same.[1] It is clear that his concern for natural language is a development of such a belief. In his interview with Elizabeth Booth, he speaks of his own strong rhythmic sense of life and tells how his feeling for "the wonder of the world" started, when he was very young, "to express itself in miniscule rhythms and with perceptions which (he) now take(s) to have been poetic".[2] Having suggested that poetry at its best matches the vibrations of nature with the inner vibrations of the human person, Buckley affirms the interdependence of rational, intuitive and telepathic modes of communication, then remarks: "I think this is the key religious act: to try to experience, to understand and sometimes extend what Freud called the 'oceanic feeling'."[3] In his interview with Jim Davidson, he observes that, with Golden Builders, he was looking for a "locally mimetic" poetry, showing an intimate relation between the world outside the self and the language which the self has learned.[4] When he calls Ireland a "source-country" it is because it represents a religious sense of the relationship between person and place.[5] In a more recent interview, Buckley's position is even less dogmatic.[6] Responding to questions about Poetry and the Sacred, he seems to retain that book's emphasis on the psychic and rhythmic nature of poetry, but to avoid any too confident reassertion of the

---

1. "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 28.
2. "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27.
3. Booth, p. 30.
4. "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 454.
5. Davidson, p. 444.
6. Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch, "Scored for the Voice: An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Southerly, 3, 1987, 249-266.

sacralising nature of the poetic act. Speaking of Poetry and the Sacred, and his attempt to break with Catholic restraints on the imagination, Buckley is concerned less with "the sacred" and more with his own anti-ideological stance:

> I agree with Eliade that everybody specifies places, people, and occasions in a way that makes them sacred. I think that sacred means pretty much the same, no matter how the thing is done. But all this had an unfortunate effect, because the so-called Cold War Years had been succeeded by the so-called Vietnam Years, and I was supposed to be a right-winger in both decades. Anything I wrote was supposed to be supporting a Catholic hegemony, and helping Jim McAuley tie up the Commies . . . I was writing Poetry and the Sacred in order to broaden my thinking, but a lot of readers took it to be a different version of sectarianism - or a denominationalism without the determination - so I was getting my Catholic point across without using Catholic language. But I was not doing that at all. I was trying to do the opposite. I was trying to keep my Catholic base, but extend the meaning of everything I was thinking so that it did not have to have any reference at all to institutional ties.[1.]

If this seems to reduce the sacred to a psychic product, Buckley later agrees that his poetry is concerned with "the paradisal possibilities of life"[2.] and proposes that only poetry can "use all the processes of language to create either the depth and intensity, or the transparency, of experience".[3.]

This pattern is very clearly demonstrated in Buckley's later poetry. In one sense, this poetry becomes more deeply a sacralising act, because it more transparently embodies the deepest rhythms of sensation and language. In this sense it becomes more "religious" by becoming more "human"; it completes one of the directions in Buckley's early metaphor of incarnation. Yet there is clearly much less religion in this poetry. Catholic references have almost entirely disappeared. Where they do occur, they do not so much represent

---

1. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 262.
2. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 263.
3. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 265.

Catholic belief as refer to Catholicism as a cultural phenomenon. As we have seen, this creates a difficulty in evaluating the religious imagination which informs the later poetry. It is possible to say it is "more religious": this poetry realises the interest in rhythms and holy spaces which always determined its appropriation of dogma. It is possible to say it is "less religious": compared to the preceding volumes, Late Winter Child and The Pattern have suffered something like a loss of memory. A religious tradition, if it realises its creative influence, can be more than an ideological system; it can be a kind of memory in which dogmas, stories and metaphors become themselves holy spaces. Buckley's anti-ideological imagination is so strong, however, that he sees ideology only in its institutionalised form and begins to create his holy spaces in such a way that Catholicism contributes a cultural and historical meaning, but not a dogmatic and theological one. The later poetry enacts the failure of imagination which Buckley perceives in Catholicism itself.

There is a moment in "Two Half-Languages" (SP, 12) which registers this:

> But thoughts never stop. In the stark night
> I lie awake, inside the crackling traffic,
> insomnia, like language,
> an eighth sense, knowing
> I've lost it all, the sound
> of their blood, the nose-pitch of their voices,
> the rustle of their God, the music
> inside me, once steady as a millwheel. (SP, 13)

This represents some loss of "God", but refers more to the God of culture than the God of personal belief. "God" is lost because the source's sense of interconnected and inherited rhythms is lost. The poem suggests that this loss has been suffered in the journey from the Irish language to the Australian situation. This is seen in the grandfather, whose Australian context does not quite banish the

language of his source-country:

> Above Deep Creek my grandfather,
> his pupils dark, blinking like ash,
> turns his head, rapidly,
> from side to side, to all of them
> who will steal your secret. Each eye
> is a half-spoken language
> stuttering "Friends. A chairde,"
> to the bent tussocks that do not even
> hold his dead. (SP, 12)

Buckley has recorded how his grandfather, wanting to stress his Australianness, denied his Irishness.[1] He has also argued that where connections with a source-country have been severed, there may persist "the traces in emotion of a language",[2] just as he here indicates those traces:

> If
> they walked towards us now,
> we'd never recognise the stride,
> the nasal speech, the moisture-heavy faces;
> of whom we know nothing, except
> that each had a "beautiful head of hair"
> and stayed up all night dancing (SP, 13)

The poem's speaker, then, finds language divided between its source and its present situation and cannot achieve the unifying pattern, here imaged by personal relationships:

> Whom can you touch, or love,
> in two half-languages? (SP, 12)

Whiskey provides the solution - through its embodiment of some reciprocal rhythm or music. Throughout the poem the lost language has shown its traces, even in the dancing where the music of Ireland's psyche still expresses itself. These, however, have been traces. They have not had the sense of completion. Whiskey does. As the poem opens we are told that whiskey has a stillness "like a land's stillness", "a fume of light/ we have no language for". As the poem

---

1. Cf. Cutting Green Hay, p. 11.
2. "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 25.

closes, the whiskey is turned and turning like music:

> You hand me the whiskey, turn it
> ice-bright as the light
> in a mirror: turn it
> like music, and look into
> the amber smokiness, turning me like music. (SP, 13)

The music between the speaker and the whiskey is reciprocal: it is a ritual of recognition and union. Rather than conclude that God has here given way to whiskey, it might be better to consider whether Buckley's poetry is now more firmly taking up a new direction: searching for the "mythic substratum" of his Irish identity, which might deepen his imaginative (and religious) life in its "psychological substance". These are terms Buckley uses when he describes the effect of exile on his ancestors:

> What was obviously missing from their lives was the mythic substratum of the Irish religion in which they took such a psychological interest. Because the Irish past, the reality of Irish imaginative experience, had been snipped away from their beliefs, they lived a foreshortened religious life, often intense and sometimes generous, but lacking in psychological substance. Further, they lacked all sense of themselves as having a defined and important family history, for they were the inheritors of Anonymous Man. [1.]

The poems about Ireland, as we have seen, attempt to recover precisely this "mythic substratum" and "psychological substance".

"An Easy Death" [2.] is not so confident of finding the "mythic substratum". Here there is no sense of relationship between person and place - indeed, one character, who is to deliver a message, is shown as aimless and quite mistaken in his natural faith:

> He takes the note, wanders
> diagonally down Main Street,
> gawking, stupid as a leaf,
> his eyes all hair and cheekbones,
> believing in the world
> that bears him up. That will go soon.
> Even as he goes his messages.

---

1. Cutting Green Hay, pp. 11-12.
2. Meanjin, 2, 1984, 218-221.

Nature is not kind. It provides very bleak images, such as "the crow's picked bones", "dead breast bones", and "stupid as a leaf". Where it does seem to have regard for the human figure, to disprove Rilke's 'Nature knows nothing of us', it is represented by a pregnant mare "mooning by the electric pole,/ tricked by her hormones", and by a gamebird who knows the speaker well enough to keep out of his way. This refutation of Rilke turns into a dark irony, since Nature knows only the immediate sensate moment, and has no remembrance of time past, no concept of personal existence, absurd or otherwise:

> It is Rilke they know nothing of,
> and nothing of Proust, either, or Sartre.

The one point where Nature and speaker harmonise is at the very beginning, where a torn wing vibrates to the rhythm of a faltering heart:

> Death makes its sweep over the grass,
> wind rolled in leaves, a torn wing.
> An answering fickle beat
> flaps at the ribcage.

Nor do personal relationships provide continuity or comfort. Thomas Hardy is told that when he is dead people will not be thinking of him, as he supposed. He is advised to think of his name "as something/ burnt up in a moth-flight". Another figure finds that "Poetry, Vertu, Soul, are all/ feats of the body" and makes friends with the telephone. The speaker himself is tired of the world of personal relationships, wants to forget it all - the loves, the half-finished work, the poverty and injustice -

> and care for nothing
> but the sun on this brass ring,
> those dead breast bones.
> But I've been down so deep
> there's no strength to wish
> anything, even that blankness;

This overall atmosphere of disorientation and disintegrating relationships finds its focus in a final stanza where the speaker

watches his heart being removed and left to turn black and shrink under the light. It encourages, too, a ritual of loss: in the opening stanza the speaker is preparing for death by disposing of his possessions. When, in this context, he invokes his Catholic background, the sacrament of the sick (once called extreme unction), operates in the poem more as a lost ritual than as a deeper ritual of loss:

> Catholics, we were trained for it,
> the maze of words, the candles
> unrolled from years of tissue paper
> for this moment, the petite firm
> forward-leaning priestly movements,
> necessary as the dying itself;
> 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 homegoing,
> the rising mist of time,
> this priest packing his cold oils.

This detached catalogue does more than recall a lost Catholic world where sacramental ritual provided a pattern for death. The last line places the priest among the crises for which the soul has to compose itself. By using "cold", it also implies that the sacralising oils are indifferent to the suffering, perhaps impotent before them, and so it opens a gap between the world of private suffering and that of official ritual. It incorporates, therefore, the very criticism Buckley makes of Catholicism: its failure to develop a sacralising imagination as the enlivening context for the sacraments themselves. While it presents itself as an intimate, sensory memory, this perception is informed by that sense of distance and displacement which, in "Stroke", is so closely associated with the perception of death.

If "An Easy Death" thus registers some failure in Catholicism's

sacralising life, "Purgatory" (TP, 31) registers the profound shifts which have occurred in dogmatic and theological areas. In conventional theology, purgatory, imagined as a temporary fire, represents a process of purification which some souls - those marred by "venial sins" - must undergo before entering heaven. In the poem, purgatory becomes little more than a projection of the puritanical heart. The father is praying the rosary and imagining the fires of purgatory. However, the real fires are within him, inherited from his own father's fierceness, his "drooping" mother and "his gangrened brother". Here Buckley is returning to the territory of "Stroke", where his ancestors subdue the land with "the spirit hot in their bodies" (AOP, 6).

He is concerned with a fierceness which destroys spiritual and emotional sensitivities. "Purgatory" finds the father unable to mature and journey towards his own happiness (a kind of "heaven") because he is so trapped by his ancestry:

> he listened
> to them as to flames, bowing
> his muttering face before them; there
> he was 'the boy' still,
> still to go on his journeying.

In contrast to this interior imprisonment fashioned by so puritanical a form of Irish-Catholicism, the natural world is represented as glowing with new existence and freedom:

> Outside, a rising wind; objects
> in the night paddock
> lay free, gaining their new existence
> away from him: axle, hubcap, milk-can
> abandoned in the tussocks,
> in the rusty grass, glowed with moisture.

Here, as in the poetry generally, the impulse to observe details of this world breaks free of a dogmatically-expressed concern with the next world. Once again, facts are found to have a radiance - and

their "moisture" gently rebukes the fires, whether of puritanism or purgatory.

With "Your Father's House" (TP, 28), it is paradise that makes a faint appearance: paradise, though, as a place within sensation where the rhythms of various noticings combine to hover "on the edge of outcry". It is the paradise of a childhood memory - "A first, frail paradise", a dream appreciated only in later life. It is also a lost paradise, since his mother "lived thereafter/ in the unlike house". Within this paradise of unified sensation, there is one perception with a specifically Catholic significance: "Behind the door/ the pale blue Child-of-Mary cape". This momentarily conjures a time when Catholic culture offered a secure source of identity and ritual. The "Children of Mary" sodality was a group for unmarried women, whose members wore a blue cloak and white veil, colours of the Blessed Virgin. On the third Sunday of each month, wearing their regalia, they sat together during Mass in pews marked by the sodality's banner and standards. On the same Sunday they attended Benediction and held their own meeting. Their blue and white presence also graced processions, such as those of Corpus Christi and Holy Thursday. Clearly, this reinforced a model of church which was concerned to establish visible identity, and which, while it also provided a degree of excitement and difference, gave women a virgin symbol. Buckley's reference is, however, quite dispassionate: the blue cape is simply one sensation among others, including spittle and pipe smell, which create the moment. He is not mourning the loss of such a Catholic world. He is not offering any critique of the "Children of Mary" symbolism. He is remembering and celebrating his own early, pre-poetic "idiom of sensation", where the pace of breathing matches the pace of noticing:

No place was like your father's house. I followed
you round and round, grinning,
nervy with your pleasure; even when,
bedded down, fatigued with ancestry,
kneeing the blankets, I heard their
soft laughter rustling the kitchen
and over the orchard's dung smells
the apple trees made their furred sound
of green moving
                it was as though
I lay along the buds
of my mother's body
                so close to sleep I felt
the farm sliding in water, myself
growing crafty as a farmer, all of it
hovered   on the edge of outcry.

Catholicism, then, stays in Buckley's imagination as one of the idioms of sensation. Where its colours, smells, and patterned movements contribute a sense of the immanent sacred, a sense of identity and origins, Catholicism keeps a place within his structures of feeling and language. Even so, that place is on the edge of sensation. Although they are recreated with a sense of intimacy, the sensory elements of Catholicism are refused a certain immediacy: they belong almost to "another" self, since they are identified with the self-as-object, the self being almost clinically observed by a consciousness which sees them only as historical and cultural moments. The doctrinal elements of Catholicism have lost their force and relevance for "questions of personal identity, meaningful action, and the inner structures of feeling".[1] While it may be legitimate to explain this as a failure within Catholicism, or as a shift from transcendent to immanent models of the sacred, it is also an expression of the anti-ideological impulse in Buckley's imagination, and the manner in which his poetry has come to privilege the language

1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 11.

which the self has learned and forget the language which tradition teaches.

In fact, Buckley's imagination has always constructed "God" as something of an exile. "In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom" has God voyaging between the heroism of Mindszenty in Europe and the professed cowardice of the speaker in Melbourne. "The World Awaiting Redemption" is self-consciously aware that its image of the God of the Galilean nose is distant from conventional Catholic expectations of that period. Similarly, "The Strange Personality of Christ" rejects images of Christ which are seen as too familiar, and prefers to see him as an hierophany. "Stroke" is searching for God in the dry distances of the land and the heart. "Golden Builders" locates its God somewhere between the city and the grave, and we do not even know if the grave is meant to be empty or inhabited. "God", then, is structured in a way which corresponds to the poetry's own central concerns and strategies - as, for example, the relationship between estrangement and belonging which characterises Buckley's treatment of Australia and Ireland, the relationship between intimacy and distance which lies beneath his evocation of love, and the liminality of a language which wants to enter deeply into sensate experience and break through to moments of deeper realisation, transparency, even innocence. What the later poetry shows is the later stage of this process, whereby traditional symbols of God, Christ, and church, are more and more incorporated into Buckley's expatriating imagination.

SECTION FOUR

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: FRANCIS WEBB

In focusing on the style of Catholicism implicit in Webb's poetry, I want simply to return to one aspect of his poetry: the way it can express a very conventional piety, yet also assume, as its model, a church of the poor, which gives power and authority to the weak, placing its wounded Christ on the margins of respectability.

Webb's poetry can be interpreted as an expression of devout Catholicism (even if this does somewhat sanitise it). It incorporates central dogmas about Christ, Mary and the eucharist. It reverences martyrdom, believes in the eternal triumph of the Church, and celebrates Catholic devotions such as "The Angelus" and "The Stations of the Cross". In "Five Days Old" (CP, 150), Christ is the redeemer, the divine child who incarnates "All the fullness of Heaven" and makes danger and sin "Faint and remote". If we momentarily overlook the poem's tensions, its iconography is markedly conventional: the stable and its straw, the gifts of the magi, the inn, the manger, and the kneeling figures. "Canobolas" (CP, 197) presents Mary very much as Mother of God, with her mediatory powers and her consoling breasts. She is also the fount of wisdom, since humanity can "learn from her the True Form" of nature perfected in Christ. In "Our Lady's Birthday" (CP, 200) she is Immaculate Conception, Mother of Sorrows, and mediator. In both poems Mary is treated with an abstract transcendence, although this is qualified by a search for an immediate, if obscure, consolation (a search which risks sentimentalism). Webb's poetry constantly reveals its fascination with the eucharist, the wounded centre of all love, but "Song of Hunger" (CP, 212) offers a particularly fervent expression:

So carouse with charity, hurry to this place,
My splayed eternity for your embrace:
Hold up the anna's fiery Host, and call,
See life's spotless calligraphies crease my face
While rickety skeletal shanks work up above
Canvas, space-platitude, race
To His tiny stall.

O my love, O my love! (CP, 213)

This has an intensity comparable to that experienced by Maria Goretti, who, in "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262) was often "in tears at Mass before the Communion". While "The Stations" (CP, 94) confronts a busy, educated and cynical world with the foolish sign of the cross, "Beeston Regis" (CP, 145) affirms the supreme power of prayer and the eternal nature of the invisible Church.

Yet, as we have seen, Webb's poetry is so deeply touched by his characteristic model of suffering, that it cannot represent the power and glory of this dogmatic and devotional tradition in so simple and straightforward a manner. Even as The Canticle creates its traditional Francis, with his poverty, song and stigmata, and honours his restoration of the Church, it challenges the boundaries of polite devotion by having the leper confront the Church's self-serving charity. In one sense, this expresses a traditional notion: if Christians really believe in the eucharist they will imitate its communion in their lives. In another sense, this comes very close to a radical critique: it sympathises with the leper when he reverses devotional logic, arguing that, if he does not experience communion in the Church, then the Church does not really believe in the eucharist. If this grants an unusual religious authority to the leper (and not to the "scampering priest"), "The Stations" (CP, 94) and "Derelict Church" (CP, 220) discover Webb's preferred model of church, not in the cathedral, the high achievement of Catholic culture, but in the

"threadbare room" where love is "the moment", and in the "gaping wreck" and "crippled church", where "The Cross slopes down to jackboot and grimy truck" as Christ's redemptive presence enters the terror and toil of human history. Christ, in "Harry" (CP, 224), identified, not with McAuley's image of the Word, but with a language which breaks the categories of reason. Christ, in "Poet" (CP, 152), is identified with the sinner, confronts the established language of righteousness, and establishes instead a language, not of stones, but of desert winds and sands - a scoured word of forgiveness. In other words, while Webb's poetry does employ Catholic symbols of transcendence, such as the eucharist and the cross, it does not use a transcendent mode. Its models of authority, Christ, and church are fundamentally and consistently communal.

While this does not mean that his poetry becomes automatically and simply anti-institutional, it does mean that it incorporates a Catholicism very much in accordance with "the will of the poem". Without any further recapitulation, I want to illustrate how Webb's poetry makes Catholicism in its own image and to suggest how it also embodies a subversive potential.

One of the ways in which Christ is seen to fulfil the Suffering Servant prophecies is in his kenosis or self-emptying.

> His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.[1]

---

1. Philippians, 2:6-11.

In the way it emphasises the humiliation and glory at the heart of Christ's mystery, this Pauline text appeals to Webb's kind of imagination and lies behind a poem like "Back Street in Calcutta". (CP, 220)

For the poem endures its own kenosis. The language prepares for it: "I have walked among you sorriest skeletons". The initial assurance gives way as the detached observer quickly finds himself thrust into the midst of sorriest humanity, as the focus moves from "I" to "you". This signals the pattern of the poem, which works on a power shift: initially from being a self-contained observer of Calcutta's hunger, the speaker becomes one of the starving, an importunate mouth begging salvation from the tormented one (who represents the body of Christ).

Pain is first of all a "vacuum" - no meaning, just fact: "nothing good,/ Crevasses in the flesh, emergence of bones". Having seen this, the speaker next partakes of an anti-eucharist: he eats alone - there is no identification, no fellowship operating. He feels guilty - as much because he lacks suffering, as because others have it. Searching for consolation in music (Bruckner) and philosophy ("dim sad concepts of order"), he seems to see the others' pain unexpectedly increased, until it becomes a devil/cross on their backs:

> A little guiltily I shall take my food,
> I shall sit playing Bruckner, have his tones
> Awaken some pain and anger, then relax,
> Or dim sad concepts of order fill my veins:
> Of beauty I'll sing to you silent on your backs. (CP, 220-221)

This is marvellously ambiguous: is it the complacent singer who is the burden on their backs, or is it some form of "beauty"?

The final stanza gives the answer, by moving out from the submerged image of the cross, "silent on (their) backs", as the sufferers become

Christ's tormented flesh (his eucharistic body). Meanwhile, the speaker, heir to Bruckner and Aquinas, becomes the guilty one who must make confession and ask absolution, not in the official sacrament of the Church, but in the back streets of civilisation. Here the poem fulfils the promise of its first line, as the enclosed ego is emptied out and finds itself within a humbled address to those who, previously objects of his pity, are now the potential agents of his salvation:

> In all your agonies O spare compassion
> For me, the well lined and articulate fool
> Who knows he tears you, stretched so still, to live.
> Tormented flesh that is my flesh, forgive!
> And lap around my deathbed like a pool
> That starving I may make a true, final confession. (CP, 221)

This poem incorporates Catholic elements in a way which confirms the more horizontal character of Webb's religious imagination. It is based in a conventional meditation on the Last Judgment, where the Son of Man, having rewarded those who helped him among the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, and imprisoned, then turns to the wicked and says, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me."[1]. While it was quite usual for this passage to be given, in sermons and devotional reading, a moral interpretation (an exhortation to perform works of charity), Webb sharpens and shapes it into a parable of Christian perception and involvement. A moral reading easily allows a certain detachment, as the sufferers can remain "objects" of charity. Webb's poem breaks down that detachment. The poem shifts from an objective power-base to an intersubjective one - and this suggests an imagination pushing at the walls of conventional Catholic thought, which is highly objective.

---

1. Matthew, 25:31-46.

The last moment also recalls a typically Catholic concern: the chance of "final confession". Again, however, Webb is shifting power: the speaker is not praying to a priest, but to a derelict; he is moving power from the Sacrament of the Church to the sacrament of the poor. Webb's conventional devotion includes, then, a de-formalising instinct to find Christ in unexpected places.

This poem also recalls the Catholic practice of "The Stations of the Cross", where the faithful were reminded that their neglect had nailed Christ to his Cross, and where they imagined the physical aspects of his suffering. The poem follows this pattern: the speaker reprimands himself for his indifference, concentrates on the "tormented flesh", acknowledges his guilt, and then prays for forgiveness. Yet, this final prayer, as well as confessing indifference before suffering, completes the poem's own underlying confession of faith: that the weakness of the speaker and the sufferers is their common glory. This imaginative tension between the two connotations of "confession" - acknowledging sin and giving voice to faith - gives the poem its toughness, and saves it from that sentimental stance which too smoothly sees Christ in the sufferer and which responds, not really to mystery, but to its own self-conscious and paternalistic charity.

As many a holy card can testify, Maria Goretti has suffered more from the sentimental intentions of believers than she ever suffered from the seductive intentions of her assailant. Webb's "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262) manages, however, to break the subject free of such associations.

Maria Goretti is a saint whose holiness might have gone unnoticed, had she not, at the age of twelve, been stabbed to death for refusing the

sexual advances of a young man. She then became, in popular Catholic devotion, a patron saint for (female) purity. Working from this context, Webb instinctively touches the ambiguities beneath the story's clean surface. His first image shows this: "The virginal belly of a screen/ Winces before the blade, the evening wind". (CP, 262) A white screen beside Maria's hospital bed flinches from the wind as her body had before the knife (and the penis). The image, then, does more than recall a pure girl's martyrdom. It makes the woman vulnerable before the male thrust, which expresses itself not just in attempted rape, but also in the lewd fascination with virginity which is the darker side of the cult of Maria Goretti. It is almost as if Webb here encodes a critique of the very devotion to which he is himself committed.

Certainly, Webb is not concerned to celebrate univocally the ultimate victory of the virgin-martyr, as popular devotion does (often sanitising the surrounding brutality and obscenity). He is searching the "wash of space" between her death and her sanctity, hoping to centre them both in the one moment. In the first stanza he makes Maria - wounded, dying - the poem's own questing centre. We are thereafter either focused on the meaning of her face, or moving with the currents of her chloroformed mind. In this way the poem makes her, not an elevated icon for devotion, but rather a dramatic centre, shifting between objective and subjective perspectives, drifting almost involuntarily towards the disintegration which may take her into glory. With its shifting perspectives, the poem explores and enacts the ambiguity within Maria's Christian heroism. It asks us to consider how much she is victim, how much agent of her sanctity. This is effected through the tensions within and between the two voices, Maria's and the commentator's, which together provide the poem's

dramatic base.

If we follow first the commentator's voice, which frames the poem, what we have is a searching of "this child's face", a searching which moves more deeply into ambiguity even as it moves more deeply into peace. In the first stanza, the commentator moves from a fascination with the obscene aspects of Maria's death, through a wounded sense of transcendence in which a weakened star "Twitches like a puddle on scoured hygienic stone" towards a rather tentative suggestion that Maria may act as some kind of reconciliatory symbol for the wreckage of historical, cosmic, and even apocalyptic wars. The suggestion is kept tentative by the way Maria's role remains passive, and by the way the wreckage is left drifting in "the wash of space" which seems to be something of a neutral, not to say "exhausted", zone "Round the pretty bays of this child's face". Here too one of the main dramatic tensions is seen: the almost saccharine "pretty" sits with difficulty in the same stanza as the blade, the twitching star, the cruel war and the "toothless broken ships", just as the child's face seems suddenly small before all the suffering which circles it. She may be too weak to bear the mystery. There is no clear sense of her actively and voluntarily incorporating these destructive forces into her suffering, making it vicarious. That is an issue which the poem seems to leave drifting in the space between the two voices.

In the third stanza the commentator speaks again. Maria's face is now a "thirsting wilderness", a desert of pain desperate for water. That the water is Christ is implied by the way Webb likens the "Aves" of the Angelus to buckets of water "passed in a slow time/ Up to a thirsting land". (Eventually, Maria's voice will take up this reference to water, making its Christian reference explicit.) In the

fifth stanza the commentator names Maria's desolation by speaking of Ferriere, the place where her much-loved father died and she and the family endured great poverty. This is the place of Maria's own deepest doubts and emptinesses. Yet with its final moment, the commentator's voice has achieved a real, though ambiguous, peace:

> Six o'clock. And the Miserere. Final Grace.
> And Death and the Woman, strangely at one, will place
> Ambiguous fingers on all of this child's face.

The first line operates from a devotional context. Six o'clock is the hour at which the Angelus is prayed and Christ's incarnation and redemptive mission are recalled. During the Angelus, in the repeated "Aves", believers also ask Mary, mediatrix of grace, to "pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death". "The Miserere" is one of the penitential psalms, Psalm Fifty One, and was often said to prepare for death. Its relevance can be indicated with two verses:

> Save me from death, God my saviour,
> and my tongue will acclaim your righteousness . . . (v.14)
>
> My sacrifice is this broken spirit,
> you will not scorn this crushed and broken heart . . . (v.17)

"Final Grace" refers to what was commonly called the "final grace of a happy and a holy death". The signs for Maria are all positive, but Webb reintroduces a strong note of ambiguity when he has the Woman (whom I take to represent Mary) "strangely at one" with Death.

The commentator's is a voice which is emblematic, and anxious for some general pattern of meaning. Maria's voice is more immediate and personal. The commentator wants to speak of the larger, outer world, to name the mystery of things, while Maria's is a small voice, struggling in much simpler language to name her own dying. It is also a voice which is holding and breaking under chloroform, while the commentator's is firmly located between the hour of prayer and Christ's mystery ("Six o'clock.") and "this child's face", the

particular and immediate humanity. The interplay between these two voices creates an effect similar to that in A Drum For Ben Boyd, where truth is most present in the empty spaces between different voices.

Maria's voice is addressed to her friend, Teresa, who sat beside her death-bed (although what she says has the feel and force of an interior monologue, since it explores her own consciousness and makes only very faint connections with the outer world). She begins as one finding some relief from pain, though even the chloroform resembles a blade, coming "Like a stiletto to our gasping void". The chloroform comes to represent the tension between unravelling and remoulding, holding and dissolving, which is central to Webb's religio-poetic structure, as well as to Maria's spiritual struggle:

> Sometimes you look lovely swimming there beside me
> While chloroform unravels the holy lines of your face,
> I would take you into my hands to remould you, shape you,
> But the pain, the pain . . .

There is a strong feeling here that "the pain" refers as much to what Teresa would feel under creative remoulding as to what Maria feels from her wounds (her remoulding). By imagining herself as Teresa's reshaper, Maria actually creates a fellowship of suffering between herself and her friend. This means that although the pain is a stronger presence in these lines - stronger than "the holy lines of your face" which unravel - it is not a pain which can be simply described as negative. There is companionship. "And pure, honest companionship may implicitly carry comfort within itself, neutralizing the often frightening sense of solitude in our affairs."[1].

Teresa's companionship is not, however, an absolute comfort. In the next moment, Maria is a frightened little girl wanting her dead

---

1. Webb, introducing the selection of his poems in 12 Poets, 1950-1970, ed., A. Craig, p. 20.

father. He seems to rise, but does not come through the chloroform drifts and into reality (perhaps because his rising would represent some escape from her suffering). Webb makes this moment of tenuous communion very poignant with the image, "a flight of birds hangs like a rosary". Maria said the rosary daily for her dead father. Yet "flight" also connotes a passing moment - and so it is: "he is smiling, but the chloroform will dissolve him."

Maria wants to be comforted, yet expresses deep faith in Christ's real presence in the Mass. She recalls how, at the moment of Communion, she "seemed to see Him there, heaving up to Golgotha,/ And rising and falling." This is, of course, the suffering Christ - "heaving" - and it is interesting that Webb here places the "falling", not the "rising", last: indicating again his suspicion of easy transcendence. And Maria is falling: through her guilt about stealing "two spoonfuls of Angelino's polenta", into the last notes of the Angelus, into the chloroform, then into the disintegration of her own conscious ego. It is in this final void that Christ is first heard to speak: "Take up your cross". This is a fragmentary reference, but it incorporates into the text not only Maria's vocation to suffer, but also the paradox which follows immediately in the original text:

> Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.'[1].

The fragment, then, is full of promise. It does not, though, keep Maria unafraid of suffering's dreadful solitude, and she calls, "Touch me. Teresa, quickly . . ." She is holding on to the outer world as a way of holding the boundaries of herself together.

---

1. Matthew, 16:24f.

In Maria's final speech, she is torn between Ferriere, the place of death, and Corinaldo, the place "Where I was born". Corinaldo seems to win - and it seems to win because of the companionship between Maria and Teresa which brings "words of water". Maria says:

> Teresa, I can still see you: Ferriere is closing in:
> The chloroform works at you. Be dainty Corinaldo
> Where I was born. I can hardly read or write:
> But your breast is our little pet hill, your hair like shadows
> Of clouds on our grain, your mouth like a watercourse.
> Have you spoken? have words of water been truly uttered
> To my thirst - it's this drumming, drumming in my ears.

As the place of birth becomes the place of water, Webb makes a clear reference to Christ. Maria here confirms the commentator's words: that her face was a "thirsting wilderness" and that prayer was bringing it water.

Still, Maria does not escape the terrifying disintegration and absolute displacement of death. Her voice ends as her words lose their shape and identity, becoming scrawl. (Something of Webb's concern for the poet's broken eloquence sharpens this moment.) Yet she seems to let herself be named, written in a way that gives her representative status: "All life writing me on earth". Her surrender is her way to attain the ultimate fellowship, once more signalled by Webb's use of "all".

This, however, is not the last word. That belongs to the commentator, as we have seen. Coming back to those words, we find their ambiguity enriched rather than simplified by Maria's status as a Christ-figure. "Ambiguous" retains its stressed position at the beginning of the last line. There is, however, one change to the commentator's framing device which is highly significant. His words have, throughout, been uttered between "Six o'clock" and "this child's face", the former referring to the hour the Angelus is prayed and Christ's mystery

remembered, the latter referring to one particular and suffering face. This frame quietly insists on the problem of faith: whether in this immediate and dying face it is possible to see Christ. At the very end, Webb breaks the pattern and affirms Maria's representative and transcendent status: he writes, "all of this child's face".

Since it never seriously questions Maria Goretti's status as a representative and Christ-like figure, Webb's poem still situates itself securely, if innovatively, within conventional hagiography. It never, for instance, entertains the possibilities exploited by Amanda Lohrey when she recalls going, in the very early sixties, on a convent school excursion to see a film on Maria Goretti and to learn that "Death is better than defilement." This is not the message she receives:

> This film was a gross and unforgiveable miscalculation. To us, all Italian boys were handsome. Brooding. Sensual. And dark. The archetype of the demon lover already well established in the romantic trash we read. As Alessandro brooded over Maria we tightened in our seats, suppressing an uncomfortable excitement . . . This film did little for purity. For female masochistic impulses, yes. For rape fantasies, yes. For purity, not a lot.
>
> The obliviousness of the nuns and the Catholic hierarchy to the potent message of the sub-text and the subversive hermeneutic of the unconscious is no better illustrated than in the widespread practice of the Maria Goretti cult.[1].

Compared with this critique, Webb's poem remains an exercise in innocence. The same cannot be said of "Homosexual" (CP, 227-229). Here we see how Webb's model of church-Christ, so privileging the authority of suffering, can release subversive possibilities.[2].

---

1. Amanda Lohrey, "Work-in-Progress or A Writer's Lament", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 226.
2. This reading of "Homosexual" once prompted an angry reaction from a Catholic devotee of Webb's, who thought I was arguing that Webb disagreed with official teaching on this matter. I am, therefore, prompted to repeat the obvious: my concern is to follow the imaginative directions of the poem, not to guess at Webb's personal moral theology.

"Homosexual" says that the rejected homosexual embodies Christ's love more deeply than do his virtuous judges. It could, of course, be argued that the poem represents a "spiritual" or "pastoral" position, as distinct from a "moral" one. (Official Catholicism has long maintained a distinction between the objective moral order and the subjective moral state of the individual). Such an argument would, however, have to ignore the highly significant fact that the official response to homosexuality and the poem's response to the homosexual emerge from different imaginative assumptions.

The official position has been (and remains) that, in the objective order, homosexual actions are sinful because intrinsically disordered, but that, in the subjective order, a prudent assessment should be made in regard to the degree of freedom - and hence the degree of moral responsibility - involved in such actions. This distinction between objective and subjective morality has been used to create a space between moral and pastoral approaches to homosexuality. What is important here, though, is the imaginative structure of the official teaching. It imagines moral truth in objective terms: truth resides in the natural law and in Christ's revelation (preserved in the Church). Truth, therefore, has an immutable character and a transcendent authority because it expresses the will of God. It also imagines moral truth as metaphysical and, therefore, independent of or at least more important than such truths as those propounded by psychology. It further imagines its own authority as binding, indeed as divinely approved: Cardinal Ratzinger, reasserting the Church's conventional condemnation of homosexual activity, claims that the role of Catholic magisterium is to protect the truth of Scripture and Tradition, and that its teaching cannot be interpreted "only as if

it were an optional source for the formation of one's conscience".[1.]

Ratzinger also argues that those who condone homosexual activity "reflect, even if not entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual".[2.] This assumes a metaphysical, even vertical model of personhood[3.]: the genuine truth of each person is without, in the realm of the absolute; it can be apprehended by reason (enlightened by revealed truth); the will, should, therefore, follow reason (and the magisterium). Here too the goal of moral life is imagined after a model of "perfection" - as distinct, say, from a model of "wholeness" which is more democratic in its implications.

This hierarchial imagination is summarised in Ratzinger's assertion that "the Catholic moral viewpoint is founded on human reason illumined by faith and is consciously motivated by the desire to do the will of God our Father".[4.] In this kind of imagining, "will of God" language becomes less metaphorical and more categorical - indeed, Ratzinger's letter continually suppresses the multivalence of metaphorical language when it interprets "the creative wisdom of God", the "Way" of Christ, and the Genesis myth of creation (which he uses to establish that heterosexual marriage is the moral norm). In

---

1. Joseph Ratzinger, "The pastoral care of homosexuals", issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, The Tablet, 8 November, 1986, 1214. This letter reaffirms the Congregation's earlier, "Declaration on Certain Problems of Sexual Ethics" (Cf. Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents, Vol 2, pp. 486-499.)
2. Ratzinger, p. 1213.
3. It also assumes that it is not using a model at all.
4. Ratzinger, p. 1212.

accordance with such an imagination, the objective moral status of homosexual activity is declared:

> It is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good. A person engaging in homosexual behaviour therefore acts immorally.
>
> To choose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator's sexual design. Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life; and so it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living . . .
>
> As in every moral disorder, homosexual activity prevents one's own fulfilment and happiness by acting contrary to the creative wisdom of God. The Church, in rejecting erroneous opinions regarding homosexuality, does not limit but rather defends personal freedom and dignity realistically and authentically understood.[1].

Nor does the argument end there. The distinctions between object and intersubjective moral states, and between moral and pastoral concerns are themselves regularised. In a further display of its hierarchical imagination, the letter goes on to argue that no pastoral response to homosexual women and men is valid which does not take its ultimate authority and starting point from the Church's objective teaching:

> But we wish to make it clear that departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral. Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral.[2].

Webb's poem takes as its starting point:

> To watch may be deadly. There is no judgment, compulsion,
> And the object becomes ourselves. That is the terror:
> (CP, 227)

By subtly parodying tones of intimacy and moral concern, this discursive opening has a powerfully confrontative impact. We are immediately situated within the poem's central drama: the choice - and it is made "our" choice - between the security of righteousness and the risk of compassion. As detached, disapproving observation more

---

1. Ratzinger, p. 1213.
2. Ratzinger, p. 1214.

and more surrenders to sympathetic engagement, it becomes clearer that the poem is displacing the conventional, objective model of truth in favour of an intersubjective one.

Nor is it any intersubjective model; once again it is the fellowship of suffering which reveals the truth, as it reveals Christ's love

and, in different style, "the will of God". Therefore the poem only briefly indicates the homosexual's innocent joy (which he loses through the fault of others), and constructs instead a figure who cannot find himself reflected in love's eyes, only in "Pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment", who is imprisoned in pharisaic language since there "remain to him only/ The words of sin, escape, which is becoming all of life". Yet, as this language more and more tries to contain and reject him, the poem is continually beating at its walls so that "the object" is always becoming "ourselves". This procedure signifies the redemptive character of his suffering. The one denied love sits in judgment over us. An added irony is achieved here: we are identified as "one of the Twelve Tribes", and this gospel text concludes with the promise that "Many who are first will be last, and the last, first."[1]. Those who rejected the homosexual are condemned or saved by his suffering. They are saved, as the speaker is, if they understand that his movement, his thought, his being, his dying, even his sin, are no longer "his", but "ours" (since "ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried"[2].). They are condemned if they fail to see this - that is, they are ironically excluded by the "objective" wall they have themselves constructed, by their fear of sympathetic imagination. As the poem communicates

---

1. Cf. Matthew, 19:27-30.
2. Isaiah, 53:4.

this visionary and redemptive theme, it also includes a great deal of discursive poetry which confronts us with its realism - though that realism is compassionate rather than detached.

Once the choice between detachment and compassion has been introduced in the opening lines, the poem elaborates our "terror" at the prospect that "the object becomes ourselves". What is terrifying is the radical, simple process whereby our/his movement, thought and being are given over to mortality. This terror may support the walls of detached observation, or it may shake them and expose the common, human moment: the moment when existence may be "simply given". Once more the impoverished moment becomes the universal one as we are urged to "disentangle the disgust and indifference" and "Be all a thin hurried magnanimity". While he acknowledges "Popular magazines, digests, psychoanalysts", the speaker achieves understanding through sympathetic imagination: "I shall only watch."

Watching becomes a kind of participative awareness as, having indicated "the lighted house, the security, the Beginning", the speaker sees the homosexual's terror:

> Now the God,
> The Beginning, the joy, give way to boots and footmarks.
> Pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment
> Embody him; and words and arbitrary laws.
> He is embodied, he weeps - and all mankind,
> Which is the face, the glass even, weeps with him.

In its Catholic context, this is more subversive than we might at first realise. The poem is so informed by its vision of the broken one revealing God, that it is not only affording the dying homosexual a representative and radical humanity, and arguing that he may be specially loved by God, but also arguing that repressive and righteous attitudes have not, as would presumably be intended, preserved God.

They have actually expelled him (or her). Further, it says that the actuality and sympathy of experience is replaced by pharisaic "words" and that personal freedom is destroyed by "arbitrary laws". This position is not precisely a theological one (except inasmuch as this imagination might anticipate and attract a theology consistent with its meaning-intention). What we see here is the degree to which Webb's vision is directed more by metaphor than by doctrine.

The participative awareness which encourages the speaker to believe that the homosexual is "all mankind" is not as confrontative as that which enables him to shift the focus from "his" sin to "our sin" - and the context clearly indicates that "our sin" is his:

> The first window broken. Something nameless as yet
> Resists embodiment. Something, the perennial rebel,
> Will not rest. And this, his grandest element,
> Becomes his terror, because of the footsteps, us.
>
> I shall not consider sin beginning, our sin,
> The images, furtive actions. All is a secret
> But to us all is known as on the day of our birth
> He will differ, must differ among all the pale glass faces,
> The single face contorted in hate or merriment.

This use of "our sin" confronts the public and walled mentality with its disrespect for human difference and its need to oppress "the perennial rebel"; it asks such a mentality to surrender power and share the homosexual's suffering. In this way it initiates process which will reverse the irony whereby "his grandest element,/ Becomes his terror", and will make that reversal a pattern of redemption. These lines have both an obvious and a secret irony. The obvious irony is that it is the homosexual's capacity for love ("his grandest element") which attracts such hatred. At another level, the "grandest element", the "Something nameless" and restless, not yet embodied, is precisely the vision embodied by the time suffering and poem end: the Christ within his suffering. That is, his grandest element is

precisely the element which is repulsive to the footstepping mentality.

It is the Christian direction within this irony which is followed as the final stanza opens:

> And now he is here. We had him conveyed to this place
> Because our pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment
> Left only sin as flesh, the concrete, the demanded.
> He does not speak or hear - perhaps the pox.

The reference to someone "conveyed to this place" remembers Christ being taken to the place of the skull - and it once more identifies the oppressive mentality with pharisaism. Similarly, "He does not speak" recalls:

> Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly,
> he never opened his mouth,
> like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house,
> like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers
> never opening its mouth. [1].

Given the poem's emphasis on the redemptive irony in the homosexual's suffering, its refusal of oppressive language, and its struggle for a compassionate, intersubjective reality, these bits of memory are enough to authorise the poem's final belief:

> Again I am tempted, with the Great,
> To see in ugliness and agony a way to God:
> Worse, I am tempted to say he has found God
> Because we cannot contort our faces in merriment,
> And we are one of the Twelve Tribes - he our king.
> He has dictated silence, a kind of peace
> To all within these four unambiguous walls,
> Almost I can say with no answering scuffle of rejection,
> He is loving us now, he is loving all.

The impact of this is fully appreciated only if we realise that, whereas Cardinal Ratzinger assures homosexuals that celibacy is their part in the Cross of Christ and that they can learn this from the Church, this poem is saying that Christ is crucified in the

---

1. Isaiah, 53:7.

homosexual's suffering and oppression, and that the church of the poor must learn from him. If the speaker uses "Almost", it is not because he is unsure of what he says; it is because what he says must keep its own shape close to suffering.

SECTION FIVE

GIVES A WORD TO THE SAND?

If, within its Catholic context, Webb's poetry can be subversive, it can also be innovative. Implicitly, but none the less profoundly, it challenges the assumption that any one model can dominate religious language and life and can so ignore its imaginative origins as to present itself simply as a closed metaphysical system. Because of its richly metaphoric character, Webb's poetry dislocates that propositional mode of theological language which had become institutionalised within Catholicism, and renews the language of belief by holding a conversation between symbols and metaphors of the Christian tradition and those of the modern-Australian culture and experience.

Another, and more fundamental, way of describing Vatican II Catholicism is to speak of a shift from a dominant, propositional mode of theological language and towards a range of metaphorical and symbolic modes. Avery Dulles describes how, from about 1850 to about 1950, a neo-Scholastic theology became all but universally dominant within Catholic theology. Neo-Scholasticism argues that supernatural revelation transmits conceptual knowledge by means of words, and its model of speech is objective and rational. Dulles cites Dieckmann, who claims that supernatural revelation in speech "has truths as its object and cannot be perceived by man except through the intellect, although perhaps it may be proposed to him by means of certain images".[1] This reflects a widespread neo-Scholastic suspicion that the imagination was unreliably emotive and ambiguous. Dulles also

---

1. Avery Dulles, Models of Revelation, p. 42.

cites the Anti-Modernist Oath (1910) which asserts that faith is "a genuine assent of the intellect to truth externally communicated by hearing, whereby, on the authority of the all-truthful God, we believe as true what has been said, attested and revealed to us by the personal God who is our Creator and Lord".[1] Whereas revelation has an active sense - the process of prophecy, inspiration and teaching by Jesus which builds up "the deposit of faith" - it is this "deposit of faith" which constitutes objective revelation: "the body of propositional truth contained in Scripture and apostolic tradition".[2] This in turn leads to a particular image of Catholic dogma:

> One must therefore believe the dogmas as though they were uttered by Christ himself. In equating the dogmas of the Church with divine revelation the neo-Scholastics are faithful to their propositional understanding of revelation. The concept of a dogma as a divinely revealed truth serves in turn to reinforce the propositional view of revelation.[3]

It also reinforces an hierarchical view of authority, since it is the magisterium which is "the proximate and universal norm for determining what is of revelation".[4] Further, it encourages a propositional mode of tradition, inasmuch as tradition becomes a preserved collection of revealed truths.

While this propositional model has certain advantages - it is coherent and methodical; it fosters a sense of unity and loyalty, mission and identity - Dulles notes that it is now in decline. Its image of the Bible as a collection of propositions has been displaced by more recent biblical criticism, which has demonstrated the great variety of literary forms and conventions within the sacred text.

---

1. Dulles, p. 43.
2. Dulles, p. 44.
3. Dulles, p. 44.
4. Dulles, p. 44.

Its objectifying theory of knowledge and speech is unacceptable to modern theories, which include emphases on the contextual and inter-personal nature of such processes. Its rather static notion of tradition has been replaced by a more dynamic notion. Moreover, by suppressing its own metaphorical character, this model encourages a separation of revelation from human imagination and experience. Dulles observes:

> Further objections to the propositional model are made under the heading of its inadequacy to experience. The model is a highly authoritarian one, requiring submission to concepts and statements that have come out of situations radically different from those of the contemporary believer. The propositions in the Bible and in the Church's tradition are held to be revelation, irrespective of whether they actually illuminate the believer's own situation. In this approach, little appeal is made to the evocative power of the biblical images and symbols; little motivation is given to seek signs of God's presence in one's own life and experience; little allowance is made for the kind of faith that probes and questions.[1].

John Coulson makes the same point. The general argument of his Religion and Imagination is

> that the real assent we make to the primary forms of religious faith (expressed in metaphor, symbol and story) is of the same kind as the imaginative assent we make to the primary forms of literature. In the articulation of this assent the theologian and the literary critic share what I have referred to as a common grammar, if by grammar is understood that underlying form or structure which is revealed as we learn and use a language.[2].

When he discusses theological inhibitions which prevent us discovering and using this common grammar, Coulson argues that theology has neglected its imaginative character. Having acknowledged that theologians may sometimes find it pastorally prudent to believe the old things in the old ways, he remarks that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was polemical, not pastoral, considerations which encouraged theologians "to show an overweening confidence in their theological explanations - at the cost of imaginative

---

1. Dulles, p. 50.
2. John Coulson, Religion and Imagination, p. 145.

responsiveness".[1] In the nineteenth century "the difficulty was to bring the dogmatic, or rudimentary, forms of religious belief into accord with the experience of what seemed to be a uniquely modern way of life."[2] However, Coulson continues, the papacy was more concerned with safeguarding dogmas (and, for that reason, with centralising and asserting its own authority). Contemporary experience presents an even more difficult challenge to imagination and religion:

> The most serious source of theological inhibition, however, arises when the language of religion appears to be no longer that of the secular culture, and when its words, as they fall out of general use, become meaningless - the sentiments they stand for fading with them. The common grammar may then seem plausible only within a vanished culture. The Great War, for example, intensified what the Industrial Revolution had revealed. While the degree of obedience which enabled men to die in the mud of Passchendaele testified to the strength of their moral and religious convictions, as the war dragged on, so the language of such convictions was felt to be a rhetoric without power to affect the motive for social and political action, and the common grammar seemed to be that of a dead language.[3]

A disconnection between "beliefs" and "the primary forms of faith" has lead to a situation where "the language of religion ceases to nourish the hitherto common language of church and society".[4]

This awareness is shared by a number of other theologians. Ian Ramsey argues that religious language displays a logical impropriety and thereby evokes the religious situation (which Ramsey describes as a combination of odd discernment and total commitment). It is not a straightforward language, but a language created from its own characteristic combination of models and qualifiers. The description of God as "infinitely wise", for example, combines an empirical, concrete image with a conceptual qualifier ("infinitely") which

---

1. Coulson, p. 147.
2. Coulson, p. 147.
3. Coulson, pp. 147-148.
4. Coulson, p. 82

protects the model from anthropomorphism and idolatry. In this way religious language can at once retain its familiarity with immediate experience and preserve its strangeness or mystery.[1] Edward Schillebeeckx relates the contemporary crisis in religious language to what he terms the "two-language approach": the assumption that the Church as described by the language of faith is different from the Church as described by sociology and history. In his view "it is most important not to forget that it is the same reality that is approached and interpreted, although from different points of view and with different questions".[2] Since the language of faith is historically conditioned, and since this historicity is an integral part of its hermeneutic, "The linguistic event should not . . . be raised to the level of 'timeless' categories."[3] He continues:

> Speaking in the language of faith, then, is essentially an historical and hermeneutical undertaking. Anyone who denies the historicity of the Christian faith and its language and therefore denies the necessity of this hermeneutical undertaking will inevitably - but mistakenly - believe that a crisis in the language of faith is a crisis of faith as such and, by polarization, force a state of crisis in the Church.[4]

The language of faith is not a ghetto-language; it becomes meaningless "if it does not contain a recognizable reference to man's experience in the world".[5] Langdon Gilkey, arguing that theological and liturgical symbols must express the sacred quality of the secular if they are to be meaningful, makes much the same point: "Religious symbols lose their reality if they are separated entirely from the life-world; yet they lose their integrity if they are simply

---

1. Ian Ramsey, Religious Language.
2. Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Crisis in the Language of Faith as a Hermeneutical Problem", Concilium, May, 1973, 37.
3. Schillebeeckx, p. 32.
4. Schillebeeckx, p. 33.
5. Schillebeeckx, p. 35.

identified with the social symbols that structure that world."[1].

Gilkey's thesis is that if Catholicism is to become more creative in the modern situation, it must relinquish its absolutism and recognise "the new world of relativity - the relativity of its institutional structures, of its ecclesiastical hierarchy, its dogmatic formulations, its canon law, its liturgical forms".[2]. This, he claims, will deepen and widen - not diminish - the Church's sacramental character: not only because "secular reality" will be found more revelatory, but also because the interaction of religious and social symbolism will be empowered.

> If Catholicism, or Protestantism, is to achieve this task of mediating the divine grounding, the divine judgment, and the divine possibility to our entire secular existence, it must widen the scope of both word and sacrament far beyond their present religious, ecclesiastical, dogmatic and merely "redemptive" limits. . . The proclaimed word must intersect, in judgment and approbation, in critical analysis and deep support, the whole realm of social symbolism and of social behaviour . . ., a relation of deep and dangerously potential idolatry on the one hand, but on the other the necessary condition for creative human life, since we humans cannot be at all, especially, in a divine kingdom, without a symbolic social structure.[3].

Another important contribution to this shift in Catholic imagination has come from David Tracy, who thinks that the task of theology is not to "repeat the shop-worn conclusions of the tradition", but to risk a genuinely hermeneutical position. To repeat the "fundamentals" is not to interpret the tradition: hermeneutics is a mediation of past and present, "a translation carried on within the effective history of a

---

1. Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence", Theological Studies, June, 1974, 252.
2. Gilkey, p. 264. Ian Barbour makes substantially the same point when he remarks that "the theologian should be cautious about identifying religious beliefs with any closed metaphysical system". (Myths, Models and Paradigms, p. 170.)
3. Gilkey, p. 265.

tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings".[1] Tracy agrees that theological language is derived from and retains imaginative elements: it is "a second-order, reflective language that claims fidelity to the originating religious languages of image, metaphor, symbol, myth and ritual expressive of the religious sensibility".[2] What he understands by "the religious sensibility" becomes clearer as he continually authorises religious language by relating it back to liminal experience rather than closed metaphysics:

> In either the limit-situations of the everyday or in the limit-questions of moral and scientific inquiry, a dimension limiting (as limit-to) and grounding (as limit-of) the ordinary is disclosed. For that basic dimension to our lives a language re-presentative of the basic faith disclosed in moments of crisis and of ecstasy seems appropriate. That basic faith in the worthwhileness of existence, in the final graciousness of our lives even in the midst of absurdity, may be named the religious dimension of our existence. The meaningfulness of both religious language and of the form of life it re-presents is grounded in the experience of a basic faith and is mediated cognitively by reflection upon limit-situations and limit-questions.[3]

As Tracy himself acknowledges, his position developed in close collaboration with the biblical critic, Norman Perrin, and the philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. In their joint study of New Testament language, they shaped an hypothesis that:

> the New Testament consistently modifies the traditional use of the language of proverbs, eschatological sayings and parables through such procedures as intensification, transgression, and "going to the limits" of language; these modifications allow the interpreter to propose that the sense of this language should be described as a limit-language of a genuinely religious character.[4]

It is not surprising, then, that when Ricoeur wants to consider the notion of revelation, he carries it back to what he describes as "its

---

1. David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, p. 99.
2. David Tracy, "The Analogical Imagination in Catholic Theology", in David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr., Talking About God, p. 18.
3. David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order, p. 119.
4. David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order, p. 124, and also p. 138, n. 25.

most originary level", which he terms "the discourse of faith". This, he argues, is the origin of theological discourse, and, if interpretation of "revelation" makes this return, it avoids "a monolithic concept of revelation" based on propositions and encounters instead "a concept of revelation that is pluralistic, polysemic, and at most analogical in form".[1.]

Following the general direction of such thinking, I would, therefore, argue that Vatican II Catholicism is best described as an attempt to recover the imaginative possibilities of religious and theological language, to reconnect dogmatic symbols with their mythic and linguistic counterparts, with social and personal symbolism.

One of the most influential formulations of this position is John Shea's Stories of God. Borrowing from Eliade, Shea declares: "Sacramental consciousness does not desert the concrete, historical world but turns it to symbol. It is sensitive to every experience for all human interaction is capable of becoming revelatory."[2.] He then proposes that stories of God should be grounded in fundamental religious experience, which he describes as an awareness of Mystery generated by experiences such as contingency, communion, collapse, moral ambiguity, and disenchantment.[3.] In discussing how disenchantment can be a religious experience, Shea refers directly to recent Catholic experience. After stating that "the Catholic world of the immediate past" betrayed "a tendency to merge the symbols of sacrality with the Sacred itself", he argues that this faulty

---

1. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed., Lewis Mudge, p. 75.
2. John Shea, Stories of God, p. 21.
3. Shea, pp. 16-33.

understanding of the Church was then exposed during the sixties, leaving many Catholics angry, bitter and disenchanted. This disenchantment he sees reflected in an almost self-conscious emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the Church. Further, this disenchantment discloses negative and positive aspects. Negatively, it represents the pain of loss and disillusionment, inasmuch as humankind's relationship to God "has been guided by an understanding of Church that claimed too much". More importantly and positively, when a symbol has become an idol and is then broken open again, this process engenders a double freedom:

> Disenchantment is an experience of Mystery reasserting itself. Whenever a person mistakenly equates Mystery with finite reality, he creates an idol. An idol is not a symbol of Mystery but the pretension to be Mystery itself. . . In this setting the process of disenchantment is also a process of disengagement, a double freeing. Mystery is freed from the idol's exclusive hold and the idol is freed from its false identity. Mystery is restored to its status as genuine Mystery and finite reality, previously idolatrous, now has the possibility of being appropriated as a symbol, not the usurper of the sacred but one of its mediators.[1.]

Such a description of Catholicism may seem remarkably remote from Webb's poetry. However, an important correspondence begins to emerge if we recall the tension between familiarity and strangeness which has distinguished this appreciation of religious language. If it is true that religious language is fundamentally metaphorical, the task of appropriating or re-enacting religious language will itself be determined by a tensive structure. Not only must religious language avoid becoming idolatrous, but it must also avoid becoming irrelevant.[2.] If it is to remain relevant, and creative, religious language must be continually initiating a conversation between traditional symbols and immediate experience - in such a way that it respects both the sometimes strange, sometimes familiar integrity

---

1. Shea, pp. 35-36.1.
2. Cf. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, p. 3.

and independence of religious language (as oddly logical) and the sometimes strange, sometimes familiar integrity and independence of human experience (as liminal). In such an enterprise (or hope) it is crucial that certain tensions are creatively pursued: between theological, and personal symbols, between dogmatic and historical perspectives, and particularly the tension, so characteristic of metaphor, between dislocation and renewal of meaning.[1] Of the three poetries being considered here, Webb's is the one which best reveals this process. In this sense, it is Webb's poetry which most deeply engages Vatican II Catholicism.

In McAuley's poetry, religious language is grounded in tradition. Tradition relates most positively and authoritatively to the past; it has a limited and essentially redemptive relationship to the present. Tradition also embodies a lost age of metaphysical wisdom. McAuley's poetry, then, is always locating the origin and object of religious language beyond the present moment, turning from modernity's confusion of individual, arbitrary and self-expressive tongues and willing itself back to the Word. This is true even of the more immediate style of symbolism employed in the later poems. There symbols such as resurrection and eucharist, although they are mediated in a very immediate fashion, are nevertheless associated with a landscape or situation which confronts the controlling observer with the heart's wandering darkness or the world's persistent despair. In other words, the symbols seem to be close to him, but they actually confirm the distance between his historical moment and his transcendent ideals. They call - ultimately and preferentially - from beyond.

---

1. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", On Metaphor, ed., Sheldon Shacks, pp. 141-157.

Even though Buckley names the contemporary religious crisis as one of imagination,[1] his poetry attempts to recover an innocent and original language in the patterns of its own sensations and perceptions. It refuses to maintain any tension between transcendent and immanent modes of the sacred, and simply shifts its allegiance to the immanent mode. Eventually it refuses to maintain any tension between traditional and individual directions within religious language, and either expatriates the language of Catholicism or uses it to signify an historical culture. In this way, fulfilling its own anti-ideological and egocentric stance, Buckley's poetry is finally haunted by the absence of a traditional and transcendent God. It opts only for the immanent direction within religious language and comes to exemplify the line of argument followed by J. Hillis Miller:

> If any spiritual power can exist for the new poetry it must be an immanent presence. There can be for many writers no return to the traditional conception of God as the highest existence, creator of all other existences, transcending his creation as well as dwelling within it. If there is to be a God in the new world it must be a presence within things and not beyond them.[2]

In contrast to both of these, Webb's poetry searches for a religious language in which the sacred enters history, shares in the community of suffering, yet challenges the established power- structures of experience and language - not with divinity's supreme power, but with Christ's supreme woundedness. This is Webb's central metaphor for a love descended into humanity and raised beyond it. His language, therefore, indicates the sacred neither in terms of Absolute Truth and Being, nor in terms of a depth-dimension or ultimacy within psychological experience, but in the attempt to "Mould those dismantled words about the Cross".[3] Like the effect of any profound metaphor, Christ's presence in Webb's poetry guarantees only that

---

1. Cf. Vincent Buckley, Cutting Green Hay, p. 256, pp. 291-293.
2. John Hillis Miller, "The Poetry of Reality", Literature and Religion, ed., Giles Gunn, p. 185.
3. "Good Friday, Norfolk", Collected Poems, p. 210.

meaning will be continually wounded, and continually healed.

As a way of bringing this study to something like a conclusion, I want, therefore, to give a particular reading of Webb's Eyre All Alone (CP, 181-192). This reading is, in Paul Ricoeur's terms, not "a hermeneutics of the text", but "a hermeneutics based on the problematics of the text".[1] It stands, as it were, in front of the text and reads the possibilities projected by the text - in this case, possibilities related to the renewal of religious language within Australian Catholicism.

One approach to Eyre All Alone is to read it as representing a search for the way of religious language, and to see how Webb's poetry identifies the authority of such language not with positions of power and grandeur, but with moments of humility. While it is obviously possible to establish an overreaching correspondence between Eyre's historical expedition and the biblical Exodus, this is an interpretative process somewhat out of tune with the poem's own. The poem does not invoke biblical language as the authoritative way of naming the religious quality in Australian history and experience. Its authority structure is not quite so vertical and hierarchical. Traditional religious symbols are not allowed any privileged status in the text: they must engage with Australian symbols as neighbours; they may even be re-named by Australian experience. They must, along with their neighbours, enter the poem's dominant metaphor and so share a journey which humbles them, teaching them a simplified and suffered tongue.

---

1. Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical hermeneutics and theology", Theology Digest, Summer, 1976, 155.

As Webb begins his search, he takes Eyre into alienation - an alienation which he does not temper with any dogmas of communion. In this, Webb's imagination is acknowledging its creative need to contact religious forces in Australian landscape and history, as well as its more peculiar need to enter the desolate centre. Eyre is first situated in an exile which is deeply historical: isolation from England and from Perth, alienation from the landscape (the town seems to be a sacrifice to the land), a tenuous thread of communication (the whaler). There is even an image of convictism, implying a world more savagely absurd than tragic:

> We are isolated. Is man man?
> He shrugs among guffaws, transports of old jailbird dayshine
> Riotous in the stocks, and drooling. (CP, 181)

We need to add, from beyond the text, that Eyre is alienated from his own ambition, having just failed to discover the inland sea.

Alienation breeds its own kind of dreaming. It may be a Webbean irony that, when the hope of the isolated settlers is expressed, the movement is towards the direction of the setting sun:

> So we dream of the stock-route, east to homely west,
> To Perth, and the Sound, and the river of elder swans:
> Now a huge cable of winged sheep and bullocks
> Whirls through vast fords, milky ways, lies coiled
> Upon fat pastures. Man to man. Which is sometimes
> God to man, under all seven stars, westward. (CP, 181)

In this dream, which blends echoes of biblical mythology, Aboriginal mythology, and Australian idiom, it is noticeable that the reference to the Incarnation, though highlighted by placement, is momentary, inconclusive, and swiftly incorporated into the general movement "westward". It is not a consolation: as the refrain says, the journey leads "Past bitter waters, sands of Exodus". Similarly, in "Water", the poem's line of argument is declared: "thirst is the logician, thirst" (CP, 182). Eyre does not deny that water, "essential

sweetness beneath (his) tableland", will restore his "mind's blank deserted tableland"; he does not deny the possible allusion to St John's water of eternal life.[1] Indeed, he cries out for grace:

> Water, drown the current lies of refraction,
> Drown the shrill theories of thirst. (CP, 182)

But then we move further into alienation as Eyre's companions and journey "Lay open the bight of (his) soul to a groping beauty" (CP, 182). Like Leichhardt, Eyre will "explore/ Time after time this death's-head continent" (CP, 44).

At first Eyre's own "skull is of rebellion and is frightened" (CP, 183). He would prefer the soft-edged community he describes as he watches Baxter and the "three gentiles" sleeping. This language of oneness incorporates a reference to the eucharistic communion of the early Church: "We are one mind, one body even."[2] As if suggesting that such unitary aspirations in language may well be illusions, Webb snaps the rhythms and tones of "fluid sleep", replacing them with a world of sudden fact and confused significance as Eyre tries to comprehend that Baxter is dead and two aborigines have fled. Even as he tries to face the facts, he is reaching for their higher meaning, invoking, in a dramatically jumbled manner, the desert and the moon. From the bewilderment and pain, language and vision emerge simplified:

> That game left foot will always somehow limp,
> My friend, lie spotless there and very simple.
> Your pain and your great patience in the dream
> Are working oddly over the Bight and gleaming.

---

1. Cf. John, 4:5-42.
2. Collected Poems, p. 182. Cf. Acts, 2:42-47, 4:32-35.

Transfixed in fear and loneliness I burn.
Maimed my brain, maimed my limbs. And a journey -
Daybreak, snigger of dawn. I am alone. (CP, 183)

Here, very simply, a language is found which is authoritatively and integratedly religious. In one sense, it is centred in Webb's own imaginative structure, focusing on the moment of weakness, discovering there a vision of crucifixion. In another sense, it is opening out the path of religious imagination generally, since it integrates so many dimensions. It casts the experience of death and isolation as a tension between the absence of human consolation and the presence of an inscrutable universe. This gives the moment a shape in keeping with the way "raw experience" is often given religious interpretation (the sense of the sacred constituting at once an alienating and identifying moment). It hints at an identification of Eyre, one of Australia's failed explorers, with the crucified Christ; it even manages, with the "snigger of dawn", to have that "Christ" mocked by an Australian sense of the sardonic universe. The language is not that of sure belief: it is itself "Transfixed in fear and loneliness", and it burns.

Eyre must now more deeply name his own failure, and, as he does so, the poem dramatises his growth in language. Grovelling on hands and knees through a land which does not own him, Eyre describes Wylie's relationship to the land in language which is very "external" and cliched, showing how far he has to travel if he wants to reach the more unified consciousness of the aboriginal. (He even refers to Wylie's "boomerang-shaped smile".) He is humbled by his failure to reach the Centre since

Desert, big stick, or inland sea
Were all the Promised Land to me. (CP, 184)

Yet his failure is edging him towards a less literal reading of "Promised Land". His approach to metaphoric vision is, however, quickly tested: he must resist the metaphor of the sea, so tempting and transcendent with its blue essence and grave, pure language, and continue the journey. He must, as in "Aboriginals" (CP, 186), allow his biblical notion of divine omnipresence to enter the Aboriginal sense of the land's spiritual presence. He must find the banksia: a very concrete image, coming from the local earth, but able to contain and release the struggled meaning of the poem's Exodus-like refrain. Even so, he must continue to "Cape Arid" (CP, 187), whose landscape appears to confirm his paradoxical progress: it has a "dogmatic forehead" which can resist heretical erosions, yet Eyre says,

> An outline quotes me God
> On my pilgrimage. (CP, 188)

Still the journey continues. The whaler, "Mississippi", is found to be "the gracious sacramental barque" (a standard image of the Church), where Eyre is given rest, food, and memories of a "holy family" childhood. He cannot dream with the rest: "But one fool in their midst will slump awake." He is drawn back to "creation's very edge":

> That same white grace beyond the window-ledge
> Lures me again into old disconsolate lands.
> The Ridings, green fare of boyhood, can take form
> Only it seems at creation's very edge.
> I quench the lantern with my own two hands
> And stare out gingerly into the storm. (CP, 189-190)

With grocery-list language, Eyre then sets off towards Jericho (where, we might expect, the walls of language will once more collapse) and, in a moment of strange fusion, the barque becomes Eyre's donkey (and Christ's Palm Sunday donkey?). Here too the war between France and England is resolved in a small image of peace - the handshake between Rossiter and Eyre - and tested in the gospel command to love the enemy:

Lord, who is my neighbour
On the long road to the Sound? (CP, 190)

Even when he reaches "The Sound" (CP, 191), Eyre anticipates rather than accomplishes the end of his search. He is "truly alone" as Wylie is welcomed home by his land - and his language has become more sympathetic: Wylie "is unbound geometries of the good soil". Eyre's perspective is scourged "with grey straight lines of rain", as if "A geometry ruling without angle or curve" is destructive of vision. Yet he does not pretend that the mountains and hills, curved as they are to the "Shape of the breast", would offer more illumination: "These would pick expedient pockets of eyeball and sound." Eyre moves with the rainfall and, so close to home, experiences the summit of his isolation. In this world of "straight grey lines" the doors are closed; inside are the "golden faces, pure voices", outside:

My torn stinking shirt, my boots,
And hair a tangle of scrub; the long knotted absurd beard
That is my conscience grown in the desert country.
How shall I face their golden faces, pure voices?
O my expedition: Baxter, Wylie! (CP, 192)

In the language of "straight grey lines", the doors will not be opened, and the expedition will be a failure. "But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves." If this is the Christ of Emmaus, we must travel between the poem and the gospel[1] to say so, and we must not change the "Someone" into "Christ". That would close the relationship which the poem, as a drama of recognition, leaves open-ended. It would shift the balance of authority back towards the familiar ground of religious language, whereas the poem has been reclaiming its strangeness. It would also privilege the biblical story, whereas the poem's religious symbolism is not a process of imposition, even invocation, but more of interaction.

---

1. Luke, 24:13-35.

This interaction is more than a thematic principle - it is a structural one. What gives such extraordinary power to Webb's writing is that, as well as seeing language within a religious process, he is seeing religion within a linguistic process. It is not as if Webb creates Eyre as metaphor for Exodus. Rather, he recreates Exodus in recreating Eyre. The metaphoric process rules the religious one. In order to illustrate this, it is helpful to return to two points already mentioned: how, in the conversation between symbols, it is not possible to make easy transfers of meaning which privilege belief; how, in that same conversation, the integrating power seems so often to come from a kind of "earthing" process. Biblical stories and symbols (Exodus, Jericho, Emmaus, fire, bread, Christ) are not allowed to speak, as it were, from on high. Even if revelatory, they are no more so than the banksia - and, like it, they emerge as moments in the dry-tongued landscape.

Meaning cannot be transferred quickly and securely from the biblical world to the historical, Australian world. The clearest sign of this is the open-ended last line, where the reader must travel the distance between the poem and the gospel, and yet meet "Someone". There are other indications. The "Walk, walk" refrain itself trudges through the poem, trying to secure the symbolism of Exodus. When it first appears, it follows and seems to extend the faint reference to the Incarnation. Yet it is itself followed by a very Australian reference:

> Prickly ethics of scrub and dwarf tea-tree:
> My mind's blank deserted tableland
> Has, therefore, root and action. (CP, 181)

This puts the Exodus reference back into the Australian experience and prevents any hasty hope. The Exodus theme will not save the poem from

its own suffering. Next, the refrain, somewhat abstract in mode, is located between Eyre's deeply realised and simple response to Baxter's death and his highly superficial rendering of Wylie's "boomerang-shaped smile", the former written from within experience, the latter from without. To find the meaning of the refrain here, the reader must consider the distance between the two - but it is the imaginative issue which centres the biblical reference. Just before the third refrain, Eyre admits his distance from the Aboriginal sense of land, yet, even as he does so, he is surrounded by words which convey a spacious sense of divine presence. Webb here changes the last line of the refrain: "Past bitter waters, sands of experience" becomes "Through bitter waters, sands of Exodus". Having followed the aboriginals to water, Eyre then crosses "through" the refrain to a densely metaphorical text where history is a "wasted and decadent pack-horse" trudging with him through the desert. Out of such a densely metaphorical moment comes the simple moment of the banksia. It is then that the Exodus is renamed by the Australian flower:

> Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer
> Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground. (CP, 187)

To cross the final refrain, Eyre asks about his neighbour, then sees the "Promised Land", though it seems at first he may not be able to enter. The language establishes an intermediate zone: an historical account of the meeting with Rossiter, officially an "enemy", (and an echo of the Good Samaritan loving his enemy); the dense language of the close where Eyre, land and rain are precisely observed but merged into an almost apocalyptic confrontation between the derelict and the gold; the sudden reversal to a simple, factual level of language - "But the rain has stopped"; then another simple statement which unlocks the doors of meaning: "On the main road Someone moves." Webb uses both the Good Samaritan and Emmaus references to open more than

close meaning.

Something similar occurs in "Aboriginals" (CP, 186). At its primary level, this section records Eyre's sense of the pervasive presence of the aboriginals - a presence which assumes the character of the land, and which, heightening his feelings of isolation and vulnerability, directs him back to the metaphor of brokenness:

> Innumerable times the great expedition of my thought
> Has gone to pieces,
> Frightened horses galloping in all directions.
>
> You are everywhere at once. (CP, 186)

At another level, the omnipresence of the aboriginals suggests the omnipresence of God. The language, however, controls the suggestion, refusing to go the way of simple transcendence, placing its sense of God between intimacy and distance:

> You are beyond me - and so often
> Dangerously close, it seems. (CP, 186)

This is supported by the narrative structure, where Eyre is frightened of the aboriginals, yet gratefully follows their footsteps to find water. It is this structure of over-reaching presence and individual isolation which, in certain lines, strikes a biblical resonance. As the poem opens -

> All my days and all my nights
> You haunt me (CP, 186)

we may recall Psalm 139, Job's sense of God as oppressor and redeemer, and that Catholic favourite, Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven". However, these resonances are not sufficiently explicit and dogmatic to justify a conclusion that "You" is God. Rather, they return to the primitive imaginative structures from which the notion of an omnipresent God is derived: the relationship between "all" and "me", the sense of an enormously close presence behind the veil of history.

Significantly, Eyre reacts to this sense of God - ambivalent, even arbitrary - by reasserting, in purposeful language, his love for the wholly familiar and controlled world:

> My instinct is to shudder away from you.
> Love? It is for dry bread like a stone in my mouth,
> For petty concentric days stemming from me,
> For stars all white abroad in my fame,
> For sleep crawling solicitously towards me,
> For myself at all ages since I began walking. (CP, 186)

While the poem very clearly shows that Eyre's attitude is too egocentric to receive the divine ambivalence, it also implies that so large a sense of "God" is lacking in focus and needs a centre of attention. Eyre All Alone could be read as arguing that the ambivalences of the sacred, which theological language can too easily neutralise, can be more dynamically expressed through well-earthed symbols. The image of the "game left foot", mentioned earlier, seems to be a coda for this. This moment occurs not simply because Webb's belief in redemptive suffering leads his imagination to value such a broken moment. It also occurs because Webb's imagination leads his belief: his is an imagination which locates transcendence immanently, which assumes that the poverty of words is their paradoxical power, and which, in turn, revitalises its utterance as it resimplifies its focus and draws "from earth a power". If this echoes Christ's descending and ascending pattern, it is, again, not simply because the imagination is led by belief, but more because the imagination leads into belief.

In this context, I would read out from "The Sea" (CP, 185) and "Banksia" (CP, 187) an argument about the way to word transcendence. The sea tempts Eyre with her consolation and "her witching falseness". [1] He passes through the "Barriers of knighthood" - the

---

1. "The Room", Leichhardt in Theatre, Collected Poems, p. 44.

sea's two jealously attentive lovers, moon and sun - and joins with her in an eternal moment. Webb's sea is not usually so beguiling, but here it tangles Eyre's Exodus feet:

I

Find a rocky pass down to your place of hiding,
And join the thousand other lovesick fools.
Man's feet and horse's flounder in your bedding,
I learn your brackish lips, my honour reels
Under the cynical halloos of the gulls. (CP, 185)

The sea is seductive, the gulls mocking, and the explorer victim of a very soft form of oppression: "Beauty is walled in freedom". Webb now makes the question - and the temptation - of language quite explicit. Language is not dedicated to the preserved and protected beauty. Eyre senses this, but doubts he has the sanctity for desert words, and stays for the moment with the blue language of the transcendent essences.

Beauty is walled in freedom: eyes of the serf
Pester her keyhole; hardly an actual kiss.
East to west no elegant rivers, pools.
Outcrops of thought mope on in sulkiness.
Pens buzz for honey - but could the whitest souls
Absorb these vespers, counterpoint of gulls?

Therefore I walk squinting at chaste blue,
Unwashed, in a corona of rotten clothing,
Over marvellous flagstones in her sacred halls.
Blue is the Sound, form, essence out of nothing;
Blue is Today harnessed, nodding at my heels;
Blue is the grave pure language of the gulls. (CP, 185)

We have to remember that the gulls, counterpoint to waterless words, were earlier mouthing "cynical halloos" and watching the sun roll in his blood. It is beautiful language: it appeals strongly, if subtextually, to a Catholic imagination with its Thomistic formulae, "form, essence out of nothing", and its chaste blue words (which summon the shadow of the Virgin Mary). But Eyre does not have Mary's crown - he has a "corona of rotten clothing". Moreover, when he faces the "chaste blue", he is caught squinting. The Mary-like sea offers only false community - and Webb's counterpointing reinstates his way

of the wound:

> Innumerable times the great Expedition of my thought
> Has gone to pieces,
> Frightened horses galloping in all directions.
>
> You are everywhere at once. (CP, 186)

As the mind loses its spatial and temporal categories, it is broken open to the symbol of presence found in the aboriginal land.

"Banksia" represents an alternative way of words. Though it too opens with a densely metaphorical moment, the metaphor is centred in the interaction between weakness and tenderness. History becomes a burdened pack-horse, wasted by the drying up of "national motives" and still "Girt with rusted iron" - but it trudges "so tenderly". From this first stanza, following as it were the will of the poem, there emerges a line which registers waste and tenderness, and which also simplifies: "Baxter is dead. Wylie, can you hear the Sound?" It is important that this line represents a return to broken fact and to fellowship. Still, the journey is mocked by the "large agnostic ribaldries of ocean", then caught once more in dense language - though the state of weakness is here abused by symbols of brutal power:

> But suns will rock in my sleep, maul the moth-eaten pockets
> Of memory for a few counterfeit coppers
> To thump on the counters of stalls in a looted market.
> (CP, 187)

While this presents weakness, it shows that the powerful, oppressive stance of the language is out of sympathy with that weakness. The poem then turns back to the tiny language of fellowship and fact. In that turning, it begins to receive and reveal:

> Wylie, what can you see?
> I see a flower.
>
> Turn the horses loose. Out of earth a power:
> Banksia, honeysuckle, forked-lightning-fruit of pain.
> (CP, 187)

Once again, it is not just that the revelation determines the

perception, but that the language shapes its revelation. With "forked-lightning-fruit of pain", we are returned to Webb's root metaphor, which directs our reading out from the text.

The banksia next revitalises the traditional religious symbols:

> Swimming oversea, underfoot, the brawny light
> Sings saviour of this unique approaching night.
> Stolid elation of a single star.
> Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer
> Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground. (CP, 187)

Yet Webb's imagination seems again to draw back from this crypto-liturgical mode of religious language. As the poem ends, its language turns back to fellowship and simple fact:

> Wylie, what do you hear?
> I hear the Sound. (CP, 187)

This is a very open ending: because the "Sound" gives equal authority to its factual and its symbolic meaning. It can operate effectively as a religious symbol because it is so firmly located as a fact.

If it is valid to perform such a criticism - criticism as imaginative variation - and explore the implied relation between this poem and its Catholic culture, then Webb's poem can be said to have shifted the foundation of authority: when Australian and Christian stories meet, they do so in a way which is very open-ended. Each is equally determined by the ruling metaphor. This engages us in its own (religious) hermeneutic, exercised by way of the narrative frame of this journey through isolation, the strange and familiar presence apprehended in "Aboriginals", the tender movement of bedraggled history. It is, however, a hermeneutic most powerfully exercised through those marvellous and simple moments: the game left foot and the banksia.

Eyre All Alone respects the intersubjective character of symbols and the interactive dynamic of their interpretation. It challenges that style of Catholicism which chastely prefers "objective truth", suspects the imagination of being an unreliable faculty, privileges the propositional mode of revelation and theology, and regards its own centralised authority as the believer's best and sure guide to the will of God. The poem follows its own will. In rejecting the chaste blue language of the sea, it implies that the task of religious language is not to protect the truth, but to suffer it. It lets itself be crucified by "The moody nails of the sun" (CP, 181). Entering Exodus, it becomes itself the "sandy tongue-tied barren ground" (CP, 187) over which the fire is carried. Surrendering the "castle walls" and "sacred halls" of sea-language, it goes down to the earth and the banksia. If this kenosis is a religious process, it is also, and for the same reason, an imaginative one.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I: JAMES McAULEY

Works on James McAuley:

Poetry:

Under Aldebaran, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1946.

A Vision of Ceremony, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1956.

The Six Days of Creation, Illustrated by Leonard French, An Australian Letters Publication, Adelaide, 1963.

James McAuley, Sel. and ed. by James McAuley, "Australian Poets" Series, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963.

Captain Quiros, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1964.

Surprises of the Sun, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969.

Collected Poems: 1936-1970, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971.

Music Late at Night, "Poets of the Month" Series, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1976.

Time Given, Brindabella Press, Canberra, 1976.

"B.P.I" and "Explicit", Quadrant, December, 1976, 4-5.

A World of Its Own, With paintings by Patricia Giles, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977.

The Darkening Ecliptic by "Ern Malley" (James McAuley and Harold Stewart), Reed & Harris, Melbourne, 1944. Reprinted, Ern Malley's Poems, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1961.

Hymns:

McAuley's hymns can be found in the "Living Parish" Series, particularly:

We Offer the Mass, Sydney, 1959.

Hymns for the Year of Grace, Sydney, 1963.

Songs of the Promise, Sydney, 1968.

More conveniently, a good selection can be found:

The Living Parish Hymn Book, ed., A. Newman, Halstead Press, Sydney, revised edition, 1968.

Translations:

The Song of Songs, The Jerusalem Bible, ed., A. Jones, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1966.

(This is a modified translation, as McAuley explains in "A Small Testament", Quadrant, December, 1976, 12.)

Music in the Mirabell Garden, by Georg Trakl. (Translation by James McAuley, music by Larry Sitsky, illustrations by John Olsen) Ed., John Winter. With an introduction by Gwen Harwood. University of Tasmania, New Albion Press, Hobart, 1982.

Prose:

The End of Modernity, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1959.

"Learning the Mother Tongue", The Bulletin, 14th October, 1961, 35. (A review of Mircea Eliade's Images and Symbols.)

A Primer of English Versification, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1966.

The Personal Element in Australian Poetry, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1970.

"A Friend of the Permanent Things", Quadrant, March-April, 1970, 40-43.

Christopher Brennan, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1973.

The Grammar of the Real, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975.

"The Rhetoric of Australian Poetry", The Fifth Herbert Blaiklock Memorial Lecture, University of Sydney, 1975. The Wentworth Press, Sydney, 1978. Also published by the University of Sydney in Blaiklock Memorial Lectures, 1971-1981.

ed., A Map of Australian Verse, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975.

"Culture and Counter-Culture: A personal view", The 1976 Latham Memorial Lecture, Quadrant, September, 1976, 12-21.

"Albrecht Durer - Self and the Word", Quadrant, November, 1976, 8-16.

"A Small Testament", Quadrant, December, 1976, 6-12.

James McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary, ed., L. Kramer, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988.

Works on James McAuley:

Balzidas, D. "James McAuley's Radical Ingredients", Meanjin, 3, 1980, 374-382.

Bradley, D. "James McAuley - The Landscape of the Heart", The Literature of Australia, ed., G. Dutton, Penguin, (1964), 1976, pp. 443-460.

Brissenden, R.F. "The Wounded Hero: James McAuley's Collected Poems, 1936-1970", Southerly, 4, 1972, 267-278.

Buckley, V. "Classicism and Grace: James McAuley", Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1957, pp. 177-195.

"James McAuley: The Man and the Poet", Westerly, 3, 1960, 13-15.

Cutting Green Hay, Penguin, Melbourne, 1983, esp. pp. 148-150, 172-182.

Burns, A. "Theology and the Arts", Meanjin, 4, 1952, 342-347.

Coleman, P. The Heart of James McAuley, Wildcat Press, Sydney, 1980.

Colmer, J. "McAuley and the Tradition", Quadrant, July, 1976, 78-80.

Conway, R. "Culture and Counter-Culture: A Response to James McAuley", Quadrant, October, 1976, 10-13.

"James McAuley, Catholic", Quadrant, May, 1981, 26-29.

Dobrez, L. "The Three McAuleys", Southern Review, 3, 1976, 171-184.

Docker, J. "James McAuley: The Poetry and the Attitude", Arena, 26, 1971, 73-86.

In a Critical Condition, Penguin, Melbourne, 1984, esp. pp. 71-82.

Dutton, G. "The Classic Pose", Australian Letters, 3, 1959, 49-53.

Elliott, B. "Savage and Scarlet", The Landscape of Australian Poetry, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1967, pp. 331-335.

Gaffney, C. "Music Out of Decay: McAuley's Later Poetry and Georg Trakl", Southerly, 4, 1976, 407-419.

Hope, A.D. "My First Acquaintance with Poets", Native Companions, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp. 13-16.

"The Epic Theme: James McAuley's Captain Quiros", Native Companions, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp. 175-185.

"Poetry and the Art of Archery", Quadrant, December, 1979, 4-7.

Hughes, R. "The Wrong End of Modernity", Australian Letters, 3, 1959, 44-57.

Hunt, P. "James McAuley: Catholic Poet of Captain Quiros", The Catholic Weekly, 23rd February, 1983, p. 20 and 2nd March, 1983, p. 26.

Jeffares, N. "The 'Ern Malley' Poems", The Literature of Australia, ed., G. Dutton, Penguin, 1964, edn., pp. 407-412.

King, B. "A.D. Hope and Australian Poetry", Sewanee Review, LXXXVII, 1979, 119-141.

Kirkpatrick, P. "Patience and Despair: James McAuley's Pessimism", Southerly, 2, 1984, 191-205.

Kramer, L. "James McAuley's Captain Quiros: The Rational Paradise", Southerly, 3, 1965, 147-161.

"James McAuley", Quadrant, November, 1976, 5.

"Judith Wright, Hope, McAuley", An Introduction to Australian Literature, ed., C.D. Narasimhaiah, John Wiley & Sons, Brisbane, 1982, pp. 83-92. (First published in 1980, in Mysore, India, as a special issue of The Literary Criterion, subtitled The Flowering of Australian Literature.)

"What Did James McAuley Do With His Life?", Quadrant, October, 1985, 36-40.

ed., James McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988.

Macainsh, N. "Busted Penguins - Max Harris and Ern Malley: Another Perspective", Quadrant, July, 1980, 19-24.

"Music in Mirabell: James McAuley and Georg Trakl", Quadrant, September, 1984, 18-23.

"The Late Poems of James McAuley", Southerly, 3, 1985, 330-342.

Nagarajan, S. "The Personal Element in the Poetry of James McAuley", ACLALS Bulletin, 4, 1976, 26-31.

Quadrant Memorial Issue, March, 1977.

Robinson, D. "The Traditionalism of James McAuley", Australian Literary Studies, 2, 1983, 205-215.

Rowe, N. "The Catholic Element in James McAuley's Poetry", Quadrant, May, 1984, 45-48.

Sharp, G. "An Artful Theory or a Theory of Art?" Meanjin, 1, 1953, 114-116.

Smith, V. "Australian Poetry in the Sixties", Balcony, 4, 1966, 46-51.

James McAuley, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1970, revised edition.

"James McAuley", Australian Literary Studies, 1, 1977, 3-6.

"Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 383-392.

"Experiment and Renewal: A Missing Link in Modern Australian Poetry", Southerly, 1, 1987, 3-18.

Talbot, N. "Reasonable, Decorous and Epic", Quadrant, October-November, 1964, 69-75.

Thompson, J. "James McAuley: Interview", Southerly, 2, 1967, 96-106.

Vassilieff, E. "The Temple and the People's Palace", Meanjin, 2, 1953, 209-216.

Wallace-Crabbe, C. "Beware of the Past: James McAuley's Early Poetry", Meanjin, 3, 1971, 323-330. Reprinted: Melbourne or the Bush, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp. 104-113.

Wright, J. "James P. McAuley", Preoccupations in Australian Poetry, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965, pp. 177-188.

II: FRANCIS WEBB

Works of Francis Webb:

A Drum For Ben Boyd, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948.

Leichhardt in Theatre, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1952.

Birthday, Advertiser Printing Office, Adelaide, 1953.

Socrates and Other Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961.

The Ghost of the Cock, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1964.

Collected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969.

"Introductory Note" (to his own poems), Twelve Poets 1950-1970, ed., A. Craig, Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1971, p. 20.

Works on Francis Webb:

Ashcroft, W.D. "'The Broads of the Spirit': The Poetry of Francis Webb", Meanjin, vol. 33, 1974, 7-18.

"The Storming of the Bastille: The Technique of Francis Webb's Poetry", Southerly, 4, 1974, 355-370.

"Centre of Fierceness: Francis Webb's Vision of the Artist", Australian Literary Studies, 12, 1975, 160-175.

"Pain's Amalgam with Gold: Francis Webb's 'Around Costessey'", Westerly, 2, 1976, 62-73.

"All Joy . . . And All Pain", Hemisphere, August, 1976, 25-27.

"'realer than the Real': Francis Webb's 'Ward Two'", Australian Literary Studies, 1, 1979, 59-70.

Brissenden, A. "Cloudy But Clear", Southerly, 2, 1965, 138-141.

Buckley, V. "The Poetry of Francis Webb", Meanjin, 12, 1953, 30-34.

Essays on Poetry, Mainly Australian, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1957.

"The Poetry of Francis Webb", Quadrant, March-April, 1970, 11-15.

Dobson, R. "When Poets Read Poets", Hemisphere, March, 1976, 10-13.

Excell, P. "Francis Webb as Mythmaker", Australian Literary Studies, 2, 1981, 101-105.

Feltham, E. "Francis Webb and Robert Lowell: Self-Exploration and Poetic Control", Quadrant, VI, 2, 1962, 19-27.

Griffith, M. "Francis Webb's Library", Southerly, 3, 1980, 348-358.

"Francis Webb: 'The Poet of our Desolation'", Southerly, 2, 1982, 189-202.

"Francis Webb's Challenge to Mid-Century Mythmaking: The Case of Ludwig Leichhardt", Australian Literary Studies, 4, 1982, 448-458.

Gross, G. "Australian Poetry in the 'Sixties", Poetry Australia, 5, 1965, 33-38.

Hall, R. "Poetry for the Converted", The Australian, 9th August, 1969.

Heseltine, H. "The Very Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb", Meanjin, 26, 1967, 255-274.

"Francis Webb, 1925-1973: A Tribute", Meanjin, 33, 1974, 5-6.

Kinross Smith, G. "The Gull in a Green Storm - A Profile of Francis Webb (1925-1973)", Westerly, 2, 1981, 49-64.

Lehmann, G. "Love of Language", Bulletin, 19th July, 1969, p. 50.

McGlade, J.A. "Some Easter Poems of Francis Webb", private manuscript.

Macartney, F.T. "Spotlight on Leichhardt", Southerly, vol. 14, 1953, 134-136.

Murray, L.A. "The death of a poet", Sydney Morning Herald, 19th January, 1974, p. 15.

Poetry Australia Commemorative Issue, No 56, September, 1975. Includes articles by A.D. Hope, R.F. Brissenden, Vincent Buckley, W.D. Ashcroft, Michael Griffith, James Tulip, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, and Sister Francisca Fitz-Walter.

Semmler, C. "Australian Poetry of the 1960s: Some Personal Impressions", Poetry Australia, August, 1970, 44-52.

Shapcott, T. "Australian Poetry Since 1920", The Literature of Australia, ed., G. Dutton, Penguin, revised ed., 1976.

"Francis Webb: Collected Poems", Poetry Magazine, October, 1969, 5-9.

Smith, V. "Poetry", The Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981. (Particularly, pp. 411-413).

Stewart, D. "An Australian Epic", Bulletin, Red Page, 19th May, 1948.

"Webb on Leichhardt", Bulletin, Red Page, 18th June, 1952.

Tulip, J. "The Poetry of Francis Webb", Southerly, 3, 1969, 184-191.

Wallace-Crabbe, C. "The Habit of Irony? Australian Poets of the 'Fifties", Meanjin, 20, 1961, 164-175.

"Order and Turbulence", CLF Lecture, 1961, Melbourne or the Bush, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp. 114-126.

III: VINCENT BUCKLEY

Works of Vincent Buckley:

Poetry:

The World's Flesh, Angus & Robertson, Melbourne, 1954.

Masters in Israel, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961.

Arcady and Other Places, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966.

Golden Builders and Other Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1976.

Late Winter Child, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, and The Dolmen Press, Dublin, 1979.

The Pattern, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, and The Dolmen Press, Dublin, 1979.

Selected Poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981.

"An Easy Death", Meanjin, 2, 1984, 218-221.

Prose:

ed., The Incarnation in the University, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1957. (First published by the Newman Society of Victoria, 1955.)

Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1957.

Poetry and Morality, Chatto & Windus, London, 1959.

Poetry and the Sacred, Chatto & Windus, London, 1968.

Cutting Green Hay, Penguin, Melbourne, 1983.

Memory Ireland, Penguin, Melbourne, 1985.

and

"Remembering What You Have To", Quadrant, September-October, 1968, 19-27.

"The Strange Personality of Christ", Quadrant, September-October, 1970, 11-25.

"Poetry in a Pop Culture World", Quadrant, August, 1971, 36-43.

"Poetry and Pollution", Quadrant, October, 1971, 39-50.

with Robert Wilson, "Persona: The Empty Mask", Quadrant, November, 1975, 81-96.

"National and International", Southerly, 2, 1978, 145-156.

"Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 24-29.

"Identity: Invention or Discovery?", Quadrant, August, 1980, 12-19.

"Ease of American Language", The American Model, ed., J. Kirkby, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, pp. 137-159.

Works on Vincent Buckley:

Booth, E. "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27-32.

Brady, V. "Return to the Centre: Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders", Westerly, 2, 1973, 68-76.

Buckley, B. "Vincent Buckley's Melbourne", Quadrant, August, 1983, 35-38.

Carter, D. "The Death of Satan and the Persistence of Romanticism", An Introduction to Australian Literature, ed., C.D. Narasimhaiah, John Wiley & sons, Brisbane, 1982.

Coady, T. "Buckley's Prospects", Meanjin, 3, 1983, 349-357.

Crennan, M. "Obliged to Destiny", Australian Book Review, September, 1980, 13.

Curtis, P. "Vincent Buckley as Poet", Quadrant, 4, 1962, 55-65.

Davidson, J. "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 443-458.

Goodwin, K. A History of Australian Literature, Macmillan, London, 1986, pp. 208-209.

Hadgraft, C. Australian Literature, Heinemann, London, 1960, p. 227.

Hanrahan, J. "Inside Catholic conflicts", The Age, 4th June, 1983, p. 12.

Josephi, B. "Images of Suburbia", Quadrant, April, 1978, 64-67.

Kavanagh, P. and Kuch, P. "Scored for the Voice: An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Southerly, 3, 1987, 249-266.

Macainsh, N. "Six Volumes of It", Overland, 22, 1961, 52.

Matthews, B. "Believing what you can", Australian Book Review, August, 1983, 2-4.

Pringle, J.D. "How the Irish in us sees the world", The Sydney Morning Herald, 11th June, 1983, p. 42.

Rosenbloom, H. "An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 317-325.

Smith, V. "Poetry", Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed., L. Kramer, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 417-419.

Steele, P. "Vincent Buckley as Critic", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 309-316.

"Between private and public", Australian Book Review, November, 1982, 22-23.

Thomson, A.K. "The Poetry of Vincent Buckley: An Essay in Interpretation", Meanjin, 3, 1969, 293-308.

Tulip, J. "The Public and Private Poetry of Vincent Buckley", Quadrant, May, 1981, 74-75.

Wright, J.M. "Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders", Westerly, 3, 1973, 48-53.

Other:

Erdman, D. ed., The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, Doubleday & Co, New York, 1970. (Fourth printing, with Revisions.)

Blake: Prophet Against Empire, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.

Lindsay, J. William Blake, Constable, London, 1978.

IV: GENERAL

(Literature and Religion)

Note: Biblical references are to The Jerusalem Bible, ed., A. Jones, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1966.

Abbott, W., ed., The Documents of Vatican II, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1966.

Abrams, M.H., ed., Literature and Belief, Columbia University Press, New York, (1958), 1965.

Acerbi, A. "Receiving Vatican II in a Changed Historical Context", Concilium, June, 1981, 77-84.

Altick, R. Victorian People and Ideas, Norton, New York, 1973.

Arbuckle, G. "Theology and Anthropology: Time for Dialogue", Theological Studies, 47, 1986, 428-447.

Barbour, I. Myths, Models and Paradigms, Harper & Row, New York, 1974.

Baum, G. Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology, Paulist Press, New York, 1975.

"Definitions of Religion in Sociology", Concilium, June, 1980, 25-32.

Baxter, J.K. "Literature and Belief", The Man on the Horse, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 1967.

Berger, P. A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural, Penguin, London, 1973.

Black, M. Models and Metaphors, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1962.

Boff, L. Church: Charism and Power, trans., J.W. Diercksmeier, SCM Press, London, 1985.

Ecclesiogenesis, trans., R. Barr, Orbis Books, New York, 1986.

Brady, V. A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God, Theological Explorations, Sydney, 1981. (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion.)

Brett, R.L. Fancy and Imagination, Methuen, London, 1969.

Brooks, C. "The Problems of Belief and the Problem of Cognition", The Well-Wrought Urn, Dennis Dobson Ltd., London, 1949.

Brothers, J. "On Secularization", Concilium, January, 1973, 46-57.

Brown, N. "Theology and Australian Literature", Faith and Culture, 6, Catholic Institute of Sydney, Manly, 1982, 1-9.

"Creative Imagination: Poetry and Theology", Faith and Culture, 8, Catholic Institute of Sydney, Manly, 1983, 10-32.

Brown, R., et al., eds., The Jerome Biblical Commentary, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970.

Cahill, P.J. Mended Speech, Crossroads, New York, 1982.

"Theological Education: Its Fragmentation and Unity", Theological Studies, 45, 1984, 334-342.

Campion, E. "Australian Catholics", Quadrant, April, 1978, 86-88.

Rockchoppers, Penguin, Melbourne, 1982.

Australian Catholics, Viking, Penguin, Melbourne, 1987.

Cantwell-Smith, W. Faith and Belief, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979.

Clancy, E. "Pastoral Letter, Lent, 1987", Archdiocese of Sydney, 1987.

Collins, P. "A growing crisis in the priesthood", The Australian, 17th September, 1986.

Mixed Blessings, Penguin, Melbourne, 1986.

Congar, Y. Power and Poverty in the Church, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1965.

Conway, R. "Another Chopper at the Rock", Quadrant, January-February, 1983, 24-29.

"An Obsession with Sex", The Australian, 15th September, 1986.

Cook, M. "Revelation As Metaphoric Process", Theological Studies, 47, 1986, 388-411.

Copleston, F. A History of Philosophy, Nine Volumes, Image Books, New York, 1965. (Published in three books, 1985.)

Costigan, M. "A diminished voice in the affairs of State and society", The Australian, 16th September, 1986.

Coulson, J. — Newman and the Common Tradition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970.

Religion and Imagination, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981.

"Faith and Imagination", The Furrow, September, 1983, 535-542.

Cupitt, D. — The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1984.

Dianich, S. — "The Current State of Ecclesiology", Concilium, June, 1981, 92-97.

Dillistone, F. — Religious Experience and Christian Faith, SCM Press, London, 1981.

Dougherty, M. — "Splendid Failure: Where Poet and Mystic Meet", Review for Religious, 39, 1980, 448-455.

Drury, J. — The Pot and the Knife, SCM Pess, London, 1979.

Dulles, A. — Apologetics and the Biblical Christ, Burns & Oates, London, 1964.

Models of the Church, Doubleday, New York, 1974.

"The Symbolic Structure of Revelation", Theological Studies, March, 1980, 51-73.

Models of Revelation, Doubleday, New York, 1983.

Ebeling, G. — Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language, trans., R.A. Wilson, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1971.

Eliade, M. — Patterns in Comparative Religion, trans., R. Sheed, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1958.

The Sacred and the Profane, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1959.

Emilson, W., and Irvine, A., eds., — Remodelling God, The Joint Board of Christian Education and Desbooks, Melbourne, 1983.

Flannery, A., ed., — Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents, Volume II, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1982.

Frye, N. — The Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957.

The Educated Imagination, CBC Publications, Toronto, 1963.

The Great Code: The Bible and Literature, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982.

Gallagher, M.P. "Imagination and Faith", The Way, April, 1984, 115-124.

Gardner, H. Religion and Literature, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971.

Geertz, C. "The Struggle for the Real", Islam Observed, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968, pp. 90-117.

The Interpretation of Cultures, Basic Books, New York, 1973.

Gilchrist, M. "New Class, New Church", Quadrant, September, 1986, 44-47.

Rome or the Bush, John XXIII Fellowship, Melbourne, 1986.

Gilkey, L. "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence", Theological Studies, June, 1974, 249-267.

Society and the Sacred, Crossroad, New York, 1981.

Girard, R. Violence and the Sacred, trans., P. Gregory, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977.

"To double business bound", John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978.

Greeley, A. Religion: A Secular Theory, The Free Press, Macmillan, New York, 1982.

"Fiction and the Religious Imagination", America, 6th April, 1985, 274-277.

Gunn, G. ed., Literature and Religion, SCM Press, London, 1971.

The Interpretation of Otherness, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979.

Happold, F.C. Religious Faith and Twentieth Century Man, Penguin, London, 1966.

Hardy, A. The Spiritual Nature of Man, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979.

Harris, D. et al., eds., The Shape of Belief, Lancer, Homebush, Sydney, 1982.

Haughton, R. The Changing Church, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1969.

Hawkes, T. Metaphor, Methuen, London, 1972.

Structuralism and Semiotics, Methuen, London, (1977), 1983.

Hay, D. — Exploring Inner Space, Penguin, London, 1982.

Hebblethwaite, P. — The Runaway Church, Collins, (1975), 1978.

Hellwig, M. — Theology as Fine Art, Michael Glazier, Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 1983.

Houghton, W. — The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1957.

James, W. — The Varieties of Religious Experience, (The Gifford Lectures, 1901-1902), Collins, London, 1977.

Kelsey, M. — Myth, History and Faith, Paulist Press, New York, 1974.

Kennedy, T. — "The Church in Australia", National Council of Priests of Australia, Newsletter, June, 1984, 1.

Kohmescher, M. — Catholicism Today, Paulist Press, New York, 1980.

Leon-Dufour, X., ed., — Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970.

Lonergan, B. — "The Origins of Christian Realism", Theology Digest, 20, 1972, 292-305.

Method in Theology, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1972.

Loy, A. — "Australian Poetry and Religion", St Mark's Review, September, 1977, 14-29.

MacCormac, E.R. — Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1976.

McFague, S. — Metaphorical Theology, SCM Press, London, 1983.

Mackey, J. — The Church: Its Credibility Today, The Bruce Publishing Company, New York, 1970.

Macquarrie. J. — In Search of Humanity, SCM Press, London, 1982.

Maritain, J. — Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, Meridian Books, New York, 1957.

Martin, D. — The Breaking of the Image, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980.

Mascall, E. — Words and Images, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1968.

Metz, J.B. — "Freedom as a threshold problem between philosophy and theology", Philosophy Today, 10, 1966, 264-279.

Faith in History and Society, Burns & Oates, London, 1980.

Miall, D., ed., Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives, Harvester Press, Sussex, 1982.

Millikan, D. The Sunburnt Soul, Lancer, Homebush, Sydney, 1981.

Moore, S. God is a New Language, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1967.

Mostert, C. "Theological Hermeneutics", A paper read at the conference, Words and the Word, The University of Sydney, 7th November, 1987.

Mueller, J.J. "Appreciative Awareness: The Feeling-Dimension in Religious Experience", Theological Studies, March, 1984, 57-79.

Murray, L.A. "Poems and Poesies: How we form reality", 'The Age' Monthly Review, December-January 1987, pp. 3-6.

Nelson, K. and D., eds., Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, Penguin, Melbourne, 1986.

Nichols, A. The Art of God Incarnate, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1980.

Niebuhr, R. Christ and Culture, Harper & Row, New York, 1951.

O'Brien, P. "Catholic Revolutionaries", Quadrant, August, 1971, 21-35.

Olson, A., ed., Myth, Symbol and Reality, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1980.

Otto, R. The Idea of the Holy, Oxford University Press, London, 1959.

Panikkar, R. "Man as a Ritual Being", Chicago Studies, 1, 1977, 5-28.

Rahner, K. The Church After the Council, Herder & Herder, New York, 1966.

Foundations of Christian Faith, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1978.

Ramsey, I. Religious Language, SCM Press, London, (1957), 1982.

Ratzinger, J. Introduction to Christianity, trans., J.R. Foster, Search Press, London, 1969.

"The Pastoral Care of Homosexuals", Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican, Rome, 1986. Published: The Tablet, 8th November, 1986, 1212-1215.

Redemptorist Fathers — The Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, Redemptorist Fathers, Mayfield. (Undated)

Ricoeur, P. — The Symbolism of Evil, trans., E. Buchanan, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.

The Conflict of Interpretations, ed., D. Ihde, trans., W. Domingo et. al., Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1974.

Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth, 1976.

Essays on Biblical Interpretation, SPCK, London, 1981.

The Rule of Metaphor, trans., R. Czerny, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1986.

"Philosophical hermeneutics and theology", Theology Digest, 2, 1976, 154-164.

"The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", On Metaphor, ed., S. Sacks, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, pp. 141-157.

Robertson, R., ed., Sociology of Religion, Penguin, London, 1969.

Ruthven, K.K. — Myth, Methuen, London, 1976.

Sacks, S., ed., — On Metaphor, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979.

Said, E. — The World, the Text, and the Critic, Faber & Faber, London, 1984.

Santamaria, B.A. — Against the Tide, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981.

Santayana, G. — Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1905.

Scarrabelotti, G. — "The Distintegration of Intellectual Catholicism", Quadrant, November, 1982, 79-83.

Schaldenbrand, M. — "Metaphoric Imagination: Kinship Through Conflict", Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, ed., C. Reagan, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1979.

Schillebeeckx, E. — "The Crisis in the Language of Faith as a Hermeneutical Problem", Concilium, May, 1973, 31-45.

Scott, N.A. — The Wild Prayer of Longing, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971.

Sharr, R. "Bruce, Son of Orpheus, Meets the Queen of the Sciences", St Mark's Review, September, 1977, 5-13.

Shea, J. Stories of God, Thomas More Press, Chicago, 1978.

"Experience and Symbol, An Approach to Theologizing", Chicago Studies, 1, 1980, 5-20.

Sheridan, G. "A choice of paths for shepherds and flocks", The Australian, 18th September, 1986.

Smart, N. The Religious Experience of Mankind, Fontana, London, 1971.

The Philosophy of Religion, Sheldon Press, London, 1979.

Beyond Ideology, Collins, London, 1981.

Soskice, J.M. Metaphor and Religious Language, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985.

Streng, F.J. Understanding Religious Life, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, (1969), 1976.

Suenens, L. Essays on Renewal, Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1977.

Tate, A. On the Limits of Poetry, The Swallow Press, New York, 1948.

Terrin, N. "On the Definition of Religion in the History of Religions", Concilium, June, 1980, 72-77.

Thornhill, J. "Is Religion the Enemy of Faith?", Theological Studies, 45, 1984, 254-274.

Sign and Promise: A Theology of the Church for a Changing World, to be published by Collins, May, 1988.

Tilley, T. Talking of God, Paulist Press, New York, 1978.

Story Theology, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1985.

Tillich, P. Theology of Culture, Oxford University Press, London, (1959), 1980.

Todorov, T. Symbolism and Interpretation, trans., C. Porter, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983.

Tracy, D. Blessed Rage for Order, Seabury Press, New York, 1978.

The Analogical Imagination, Crossroad, New York, 1981.

with John B. Cobb, Jnr., Talking About God, Seabury Press, New York, 1983.

with Stephen Happel, A Catholic Vision, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.

Turner, V. "Religion in Current Cultural Anthropology", Concilium, June, 1980, 68-71.

Warnock, M. Imagination, Faber & Faber, London, 1976.

Wheelwright, P. Metaphor and Reality, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1975.

White, E. Itineraries of Meaning: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic of the Idea of the Sacred, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, The University of Sydney, July, 1986.

Wilson, Bruce Can God Survive in Australia?, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1983.

Wilson, Bryan Religion in Secular Society, Penguin, London, 1969.

Windsor, G. "Australian Literature and Catholicism", Australasian Catholic Record, April, 1981, 115-121.

"How Far Can You Go?", Quadrant, March, 1983, 62-65.