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 <u>on trust</u> 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. <u>The Interpretation of Cultures</u>, 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 <u>The Sea of Faith</u>.
3. Coulson, <u>Newman and the Common Tradition</u>, 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 <u>uninvertible</u> 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, <u>Flaws in the Glass</u>, 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, <u>Religion and Imagination</u>, 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.