

P A R T F O U R

H O L Y S P A C E S

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"

P A R T F O U R

HOLY SPACES: VINCENT BUCKLEY

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Abbreviations:

<u>AOP</u>	<u>Arcady and Other Poems</u> , Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966
<u>GB</u>	<u>Golden Builders and Other Poems</u> , Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1976.
<u>LWC</u>	<u>Late Winter Child</u> , OUP, Melbourne, 1979.
<u>MI</u>	<u>Masters in Israel</u> , Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961.
<u>SP</u>	<u>Selected Poems</u> , Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981.
<u>TP</u>	<u>The Pattern</u> , OUP, Melbourne, 1979.
<u>TWF</u>	<u>The World's Flesh</u> , 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 paradisaical 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.

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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 fruitfulness¹ 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 arms¹:

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 Bucleys." (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 tintured 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,

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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

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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 inter-connecting 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,

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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 Christ¹:

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 deepening 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 love¹, 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 suggests²: 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.

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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 discomfited 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 poetry, 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.

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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

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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 sense 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'

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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 discomfited 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 paradisaical 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

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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

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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 paradisaal 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

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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

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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

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

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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,

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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)

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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 difficult¹: 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 typewriter 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

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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.

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

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

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

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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

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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

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 invitational 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.

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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

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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 invincible³, 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

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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

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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

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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 membrane
 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

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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 refugees³.

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.

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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 paradisaical 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

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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

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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 paradisaical 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 reciprocally 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

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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.