PART FIVE

THE WILL OF THE POEM

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SECTION ONE

IMAGINING CATHOLICISM

Since McAuley, Webb and Buckley belong to the Vatican II period of Catholicism - a period often described as one in which liberal and conservative forces struggle for power - it is tempting to classify each poet on the basis of his "liberal" or "conservative" theology and then interpret the relationship between his poetry and his Catholicism as simply a reflection of that theology. In some recent Australian Catholic writing, McAuley and Buckley are positioned to the left or right on various theological issues. (Webb does not generally call attention to himself.) Such writing, however, requires careful reading: not only can it confuse an ideological position with a religious one, but it can also disguise the degree to which its portrait of liberals and conservatives is shaped by the imaginative character of its own narrative.

In Against the Tide, B.A. Santamaria constructs his McAuley as a fellow fighter against Communism, a man who preferred principle to party politics. He remembers how, when Catholics were accused of undermining the Labo r Party, McAuley wrote:

> Is the Labo r Party to be regarded . . . as a supreme and total moral authority to which all other loyalties must bend or break? Does one have to check one's principles at the door, or is it permissible to take them into the party rooms? In particular, may Christians seek to develop the consequences of their Christian principles and persuade men to their views without being accused of tainting the pure milk of Australian Labourism with a Levantine ideology? [1]

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1. "Sydney Morning Herald", 29/10/54. Cited, B.A. Santamaria, Against the Tide, p. 274.

As such a man of conscience, his McAuley also opposed any post-Vatican II ecumenism which entailed a "softening" of Catholic dogmas.[1] As such a man of conscience, he was (like Santamaria) betrayed - and betrayed by bishops. When the Catholic hierarchy of Sydney refused to endorse the Movement, Santamaria and McAuley saw this as a betrayal. McAuley's response was not to deny episcopal authority as such, but to resist an improper use of it, an unwarranted intrusion into the legitimate authority and autonomy of the laity. In McAuley's words, "The issue became fundamentally a question of clericalism versus the rights of laymen."[2] In Santamaria's words, McAuley disapproved of "those who insisted on clerical control of political action at the expense of lay autonomy".[3]

While Santamaria's narrative fails to acknowledge that its theme of "honour betrayed" is both interpretative structure and historical matter, it does distinguish between political and ecclesial authority in a manner which suits McAuley's own imaginative habits. This distinction is very much in danger of disappearing when Edmund Campion introduces his McAuley in Rockchoppers. He remembers a McAuley who "once said that the church he entered in 1953 had only one word over its door: SUBMIT."[4] This recollection is itself situated in Campion's contrast between an old, authoritarian Church and a renewed Church distinguished by "a hierarchy attentive to the voice of the laity and respectful of individual consciences".[5] Campion continues:

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1. "Sydney Morning Herald", 29/10/54. Cited, Santamaria, p. 280.
2. "Sydney Morning Herald", 1/9/58. Cited, Santamaria, p. 280
3. Santamaria, p. 280.
4. Edmund Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 19. (McAuley converted to Catholicism in 1952.
5. Campion, p. 19.

> At the deepest level, we tried to live as if the church of the New Testament were a possibility: a community whose members found each other in a circle, face to face, each with a different function but with equal responsibility for the life of the community. We refused to think of the church as a pyramid in which power was concentrated at the apex and there was a trickle down to the base.[1]

While Santamaria also depicts a McAuley who would support "the rights of laymen", he does so while still using a vertical model of authority. Campion has situated McAuley within a horizontal image of authority and Church, and one could be forgiven for inferring that McAuley supported a democratic Church. McAuley's Catholicism is, however, complex. Vincent Buckley once remarked of him:

> His colour in the political spectrum . . . is very different from the colour he displays in the inter-Catholic controversies which over the past few years have so engaged and exhausted him. In them, he stands unmistakably for lay initiative as against clericalism, and for a liberal as against an integralist view of the place of Catholics in a pluralist society.[2]

Vincent Buckley is portrayed, in this recent literature, as an opponent of the Movement, a liberal who anticipated Vatican II, a discontented observer of liturgical renewal, and a patriarchal memorialist. Santamaria records:

> Throughout 1952 and 1953 a well-organized Catholic opposition to the Movement established itself, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney. It provided the atmosphere without which the eventual split in the ranks of the hierarchy would have been impossible to achieve.
>
> The Newman Societies in both universities, although, as always, representing only a small minority of Catholic graduates and undergraduates, then enjoyed an exceptionally gifted group of leaders - which included a person of such distinction as the poet Vincent Buckley - and they were almost uniformly opposed to the Movement.[3]

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1. Campion, p. 19.
2. Vincent Buckley, "James McAuley: The Man and the Poet", Westerly, 3, 1960, 14.
3. Against the Tide, p. 156.

What then emerges is a picture, not just of political differences, but of very different models of human freedom. The Movement, in its determination to combat Communism, wants Catholic unity as its weapon and believes that national security transcends individual liberty, while the Newman Societies are concerned with "the freedom of the Catholic to hold differing viewpoints on political issues, without their Catholicism being impugned".[1] While Santamaria's Buckley might easily betray Catholicism for humanism, Campion's Buckley is "at the centre of the Prospect team" and Prospect is an "adult attempt" to face the world and to ask how Catholics might live in a pluralist society. As an expression of Christian humanism, Prospect anticipates the renewal of Vatican II:

> The journal was a harbinger of what was to flow from the Second Vatican Council, the release of tensions, the dismantling of barricades, the untroubled enjoyment of being an Australian.[2]

Yet, Michael Gilchrist enlists Buckley among those who disapprove of liturgical renewal - and this in such a way as to suggest that Buckley's position is equivalent to Gilchrist's own (that the "new church" is "kneeling before the world"). Gilchrist claims that Buckley argues "that the potential benefits of Vatican II for the Church in Australia were undermined by conditions in the contemporary world with which Catholics were required to come to terms".[3] This is so general a paraphrase of Buckley's position that it might be taken as his refusal to kneel before the world. When, however, we consult the actual reference Gilchrist gives, we find Buckley arguing that Vatican II was too late, that "Something had failed deep in the Christian spirit" and that it was a time for him "to move back from institutional definitions of reality, to take an anthropological

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1. Against the Tide, p. 157.
2. Rockchoppers, p. 32.
3. Michael Gilchrist, Rome or the Bush, pp. 9-10.

approach, as it were, to institution and self alike".[1] Buckley returns to this argument when he suggests that, for all its doctrinal renewal, Vatican II failed to address the real problem - the desacralised imagination.[2] Buckley's models of religious experience are clearly very different from Gilchrist's, and his argument about Vatican II moves in the opposite direction to that implied by Gilchrist's use of it.

While Buckley may thus easily avoid the company of Gilchrist, he may not so easily escape the censure of Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids.[3] This book represents something of the emerging voice of women within (and without) Catholicism. Many of its contributors object to the dominance of male power in the Church and challenge the patriarchal models which are seen as authorising or, at least, allowing the oppression of women. Therese Radic finds that Cutting Green Hay reminds her of Newman Society men who protected their power within the group. She asks, "Why were our men so sexually afraid that they downed themselves at the pub out of female reach?"[4] and thus initiates an entirely new reading of Buckley's own preoccupation with (male) puritanism. Lorna Hannan also remembers differently:

> No amount of reading and reflecting about the world as remembered by Eddie Campion prepared me for Vin Buckley's Cutting Green Hay. His description of Newman Society days at Melbourne University should have been about my life too. I bought it the day it appeared in the shops and read it from cover to cover. I realized that if I accepted that things had been as Vin described, we women had not been there or had at best been offstage peeking in at a manmade world where what they were working out would be for the good of us all. I realized that Vin's story is about his life and the way he remembers things. The women who were there have no part in his story and their story has not been written.

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1. Vincent Buckley, Cutting Green Hay, p. 256.
2. Buckley, pp. 291-293.
3. Kate Nelson and Dominica Nelson, eds., Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, Penguin, 1986.
4. Therese Radic, "Extracts from a Half-breed's diary", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 119.

> Well, it wasn't as Vin wrote it. We were there. We were part of the talk. We were in the same room. We were in the room next door. I can still see us and hear what we had to say, but what had seemed to me to be a partnership was not that to others.[1]

These texts illustrate how "liberal" and "conservative" classifications can be dangerous if they are used in a way which simply describes ideological positions and obscures imaginative structures. Indeed, they begin to indicate that Vatican II Catholicism[2], while it obviously contains conflicting ideologies, might better be interpreted as a tension between various models. I want to pursue this because I believe an emphasis on such models offers a very effective way of articulating the relationships which exist between Catholicism and the poetry I have been considering.

Edmund Campion's Rockchoppers is structured to highlight certain shaping concerns: Catholicism as a tribal experience, the role of critical independence within the Catholic Church, the need to address questions of poverty and justice. This model of the Church has its appropriate symbol in Roger Pryke, to whom the book is dedicated. For Campion, Pryke embodies (even before the Council) the values of a renewed Catholicism. Not only is he intelligently independent, but he is also committed to the theological education of the Church's members. He wants to apply theology to political realities, standing against the Vietnam War and for prison reform.[3] Appointed chaplain to the Newman Society of Sydney University in 1951, he works to overcome a traditional (and clerical) suspicion of "secular learning" and encourages University graduates to think critically about the

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1. Lorna Hannan, "The Last Word", Sweet Mothers . . ., p. 82.
2. Vatican Council II opened in 1962 and closed in 1965. I am using the term "Vatican II Catholicism" to indicate not simply the post-conciliar era, but also those movements, in liturgy, biblical studies, and ecumenism, which prepared for the Council. This will become more apparent as the discussion continues.
3. Cf. Campion, Australian Catholics, p. 206.

Church's involvement in industrial and political issues.[1] He is a major contributor to liturgical renewal, celebrating the eucharist in a way which symbolises the Church's ecumenical and communal character.[2] Increasingly frustrated with the institutionalised Church, Pryke eventually left the official ministry. Campion does not mention this, but relies on his reader to know, thus using Pryke, subtextually, as a subversive memory. At this level, Rockchoppers is an imaginative work, which wants to vindicate the model of Church symbolised by Pryke. This is made clear in Campion's first substantial description of him:

> Roger Pryke was intelligent, gregarious, sympathetic, and open-minded. He was soon known and liked all over the university. In the Newman Society, he encouraged us to become honestly involved in the life of the university, not in order to colonize it for the church but to serve it with our talents. Some clerics seemed rather frightened of the university, as if it were a danger to the faith. Roger loved it and taught us to love it. One of his specialities was the liturgy. At weekend camps, he showed how the Mass could become a sensitive personal prayer, not just a ritualized obligation. The phrase is hackneyed now, but for me and many of my contemporaries, Catholic and non-Catholic, Roger Pryke showed Catholicism with a human face.[3]

Campion's memory provoked a violent reaction from Gary Scarrabelotti in an article entitled, "The Disintegration of Intellectual Catholicism".[4] Scarrabelotti's is not a story of renewal, but of destruction (and betrayal). Having discovered that the circulation figures of Catholic newspapers[5] entered a sharp decline in 1963, he interprets this as follows:

> The year 1963 found the Catholic Church in the midst of its Second Vatican Council. And looking back, the passage of years deepens awareness of the disaster which since then has unfolded. Rereading the decisions made and counsels offered by the

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1. Cf. Campion, Rockchoppers, pp. 169-170.
2. Cf. Campion, Rockchoppers, p. 166, and Australian Catholics, p. 209.
3. Rockchoppers, p. 12.
4. Quadrant, November, 1982, 79-83.
5. He does not specify which newspapers were consulted, and assumes that the problem is with the reader rather than the publication.

> Church at that time one asks - suspecting, however, that one is grappling uselessly with the problem of evil - how has it been possible that collapse could have followed immediately upon the most complete and inspiring expression, in modern times, of the perennial Catholic vision?[1].

Scarrabelotti then devotes his "review" to establishing Campion's contribution to this "evil" which is destroying "the perennial Catholic vision".

Scarrabelotti attacks what he calls the gnostic, elitist and narcissistic character of Rockchoppers. He accuses Campion of lying about the promises of Vatican II, then blaming the Church for his disappointments. At the basis of his attack is a dissatisfaction precisely with the "worldliness" and historicity of Campion's text and Church. Whereas Campion implies a more historical, contextual notion of faith, Scarrabelotti reiterates the more absolute, propositional model which, while it might not exactly qualify as "perennial", dominated the post-Reformation Catholic Church: "For the Catholic, faith is a virtue by which he knows revealed things to be true."[2]. In Scarrabelotti's text the propositional mode of religious language oppresses the symbolic. He would obviously prefer an unworldly text. He castigates Campion for associating religion with political questions such as the Vietnam War, poverty, and Aboriginal rights. In his model these do not have a sure place - that is reserved for matters of "faith and morals". Questions of poverty and justice are questions which admit of different (political) answers - presumably, properly religious questions admit of only one right answer. Accordingly, a text which is relative and historical stands opposed to a text which is absolute and doctrinal.

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1. "The Disintegration of Intellectual Catholicism", p. 79.
2. "The Disintegration . . .", p. 81.

These two texts begin to symbolise the contemporary circumstantiality of the Australian Catholic world and language. Scarrabelotti represents one response to the change occurring within Catholicism: the denial of historicity, and the reaffirmation of the propositional model of faith and the absolute character of religious language. Campion represents another response: the repossession of religious experience (coded in story and symbol) and the recognition of the cultural and historical dimensions of the Church (and of religious language itself).

Ronald Conway next entered the debate and, while opening in support of Scarrabelotti, he carries his argument with a more complex imaginative pattern.[1] He criticises Rockchoppers for its "eerie absence of numinous and transcendental concerns".[2] The Church's call to "socio-economic activities and temporal causes" is "(worthy enough when assigned its secondary status)" - secondary, that is, to transcendental concerns, to "Christ's promise of eternal life".[3] Accordingly, he argues a loss of the transcendent in the area of Catholic dogma:

> Endless heart-on-sleeve catechetical sophistry about 'social justice' thus becomes part of the daily diet of religious teaching in Catholic secondary schools, where many senior students may privately confess their scepticism about the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and even the immortality of the soul.[4]

Conway retains this transcendent model in arguing for individual freedom over "ethical determinism" and lamenting the manner in which obsessive innovators have distorted or gutted the "psychological

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1. Ronald Conway, "Another Chopper at the Rock", Quadrant, January/February, 1983, 24-29.
2. Conway, p. 25.
3. Conway, p. 25.
4. Conway, p. 25.

power and numinous authority" of sacramental and liturgical forms.[1] Yet he also resists too literal and too authoritarian an application of it: he disagrees with Scarrabelotti's claim that Vatican II expressed the "perennial Catholic vision" and remarks, "Even in its most devoted form, faith is not knowledge; it is more a provisional link with the Creator by a creature in search of union with the divine."[2] Then he shifts to an historical and developmental model in order to challenge the importance given to "the absolute monarchical prestige of the Roman Pontiff" and to attack the excessively prescriptive and stubbornly "natural law" sexual morality, which persists "as if Kinsey, Kraft-Ebing and Freud had never lived or never written so much as a paragraph".[3]

Gerard Windsor, however, realises that Rockchoppers deals with "the cultural setting of Catholicism", not with the "traditional corpus of central Catholic doctrine".[4] While acknowledging that Campion's work calls for "argument and expansion", he demonstrates that Scarrabelotti's attack is misguided and recalls the traditional dictum, "Ecclesia semper reformanda."[5] Nevertheless, Windsor is concerned with the current "anorexic" condition of "Catholicism, as a culture", a condition which he attributes to the breakdown of a Catholic metaphysics. By this he intends to defend dogmas, not to encourage theological absolutism, but to preserve their influence

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1. Conway, p. 25.
2. Conway, p. 26.
3. Conway, p. 27.
4. Gerard Windsor, "How Far Can You Go?", Quadrant, March, 1983, 62-65.
5. This might be translated, "The Church is always in a process of, or in need of, reformation". It is a dictum which traditionally stands in tension with the notion of the Church as a perfect society and an indefectible institution of salvation.

on imagination and thus on the metaphysical aspect of culture. Since he is concerned with the way doctrines such as "grace" operate in writers like Graham Greene, he argues a relationship between theology and culture which is more reciprocally creative than Scarrabelotti would allow. He quietly mediates between immanent and transcendent models of religious language and refuses the distinction which the other writers have made. Indeed, he appreciates the properly metaphorical character of dogmas:

> The great standby of the Catholic novelist of this century has been the doctrine of grace - from Brideshead Revisited out of Chesterton, through Greene and on into Flannery O'Connor. The classic situation has been the individual stopped in his tracks by some spiritual force, and unwillingly but perversely following a new path ahead. The whisky priest goes back into hostile territory, Julia Flyte says no to Charles Ryder, O.E. Parker has the face of the Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back. It is worth noting that Flannery O'Connor, a marginally later writer, has grace working in more mysterious ways than do Greene or Waugh. She's not bound at all by any literal reading of extra ecclesiam nulla salus. She serves as a stark example that what is required from theologians is not the extinction of doctrine but its sophistication.[1]

Of course, this clash of theological models is not confined to these selected reviews of Rockchoppers. For instance, Ted Kennedy wants a model by which the Church identifies itself with the poor and participates in the struggle for aboriginal landrights. He wants to challenge the model by which "the Catholic Church is securely planted near the local police-station, court-house, town-hall or council chambers". In his view, Australian Catholicism has emphasised "religion" at the expense of "the spiritual": whereas "religion" too easily becomes the possession of a power group "whose power reinforces the power of all the other institutional forces in society", being "spiritual" demands a capacity to "live at the very centre of the

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1. Windsor, p. 65. Extra ecclesiam nulla salus: "Outside the Church there is no salvation".

human dilemma".[1] Kennedy, then, is arguing for an ecclesiological model which is prophetic, historical, and poor.

This model contrasts with the more conventional one used by Archbishop Edward Clancy when, quoting Pope John Paul II, he enumerates four elements of "a truly Catholic spirituality": an appreciation of the supernatural life of grace, prayerful meditation on the Scriptures, devotion to the Eucharist, proper use of the Sacrament of Penance. Here the imagination responds to what is supernatural, eternal, mystical; it is a kind of high-sacramental model of spirituality. With its preference for the supernatural, this then harmonises with the hierarchical model of authority and the propositional model of doctrine which are used as Clancy warns against too much trust in theologians and recalls

> the absolute requirement that we preserve the purity and orthodoxy of the doctrines of our faith. These doctrines have their source in Christ's own teaching, and have been given shape and confirmation by the Church's living tradition through nearly 2000 years. It is true that these doctrines are subject to varying expressions and applications with the demands of changing times, and are always open to a deeper understanding. But the substance itself of the doctrines is never subject to change. We must not, therefore, attribute more authority than is due to what we hear and read - even when the authors are theologians. Theologians have an important role to fill, and, in general, fill it very well to our great profit and advantage. However, it must never be forgotten that the Pope, and the Bishops in unity with him, are the ones ultimately responsible for teaching and safeguarding the truths revealed by God to His Church.[2]

Such a model is also applied, though more rigidly, by Michael Gilchrist, as he blames "a new class of religious professionals" for corrupting Catholicism and taking renewal much further than Vatican

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1. Ted Kennedy, "The Church in Australia", Newsletter, National Council of Priests of Australia, June, 1984, p.1.
2. Archbishop Edward Clancy, "Pastoral Letter: Lent, 1987", Sydney, 1st February, 1987.

II intended.[1] His sternly vertical model of Church can be deduced quite easily from the way he describes his opponent, the New (not renewed, Catholic) Church:

> In essence the New Church promotes the horizontal, (a de-sacrilised (sic), man-centred, world-centred emphasis), it weakens allegiance to papal and magisterial authority in favour of "democratic" grass-roots discussion groups and finally undermines attachment to defined, revealed, permanent truths (for Catholics); instead, we have rampant pluralism, on-going revelation and the enthronement of feelings, experiences and sovereign conscience.[2]

Gilchrist broadens this argument in his Rome or the Bush. In this book (a work of hearsay history and indictment by innuendo), Gilchrist proposes his vertical model as the only true way to preserve liturgy, doctrine, morals, education, and seminaries in a way which guarantees their Catholic identity - and "identity" is an important concern in his model of religion. He employs an antagonistic distinction between sacred and secular realms and declares: "Catholicism's decline in Australia since Vatican II is best explained by the Maritain phrase, 'kneeling before the world'." [3]

Paul Collins, in Mixed Blessings, argues that Vatican II Catholicism is shifting modes: from the conserving mode to the prophetic mode. He claims that the theology of the Council was a compromise between conservative and prophetic forces, and that this compromise has caused many of the difficulties and contradictions confronting Catholics today.[4] He observes:

> Lurking just under the surface today are two mutually exclusive ideas of what the Church is and what it is all about. The

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1. Michael Gilchrist, "New Class, New Church", Quadrant, September, 1986, 44-47. Cf. Paul Collins, Mixed Blessings, Chapter Two, for a less absolutist version of Vatican II's intentions. Collins observes: "Conflicting forces were at work within the Council and they deeply influenced the formulation of its documents, which were often the result of compromise." (p. 13)
2. Gilchrist, p. 45.
3. Gilchrist, Rome or the Bush, p. 283.
4. Paul Collins, Mixed Blessings, pp. 3-87.

> origin of this disjunction is to be found in Lumen gentium, the dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Here two views of the Church are presented which are much more mutually exclusive than the Council realised. The Church is described in chapter three of Lumen gentium essentially as a hierarchy. In the first two chapters it is described essentially as a sacramental community.[1]

While Collins himself argues that the Council "clearly opts for the communal model"[2], he recognises that its initiatives have been traumatic for "mainstream Catholicism . . . (which) had defined itself in terms of a narrow and static orthodoxy".[3] In describing this trauma, Collins shows the basic conflict extending to other areas of the Church's life. In ministry, for example, there is conflict between the old, hierarchical understanding and a participatory model where "all members of the Church are radically equal".[4] Liturgy is involved with a similar tension: "In the old liturgy the emphasis was on the priest as celebrant. In the renewed liturgy the community is the primal focus of the celebration."[5] Liberation theology is a new way of doing theology which starts with experience - "in contrast to the old way of doing theology which began with dogma or Church teaching".[6] Whereas older priests were trained in jurisdictional and cultic models, there is now a need for "priests who work out of the pastoral leadership model".[7] Finally, Collins applies his notion of "shifting modes" to the Church's future. The future Church will need to develop a more profound spirituality (and morality) in response to the world and its environment - and so challenge a too rigidly transcendent model of the sacred which might oppose sacred and secular realities.[8] Furthermore, "a basic question for the Church will be

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1. Collins, pp. 53-54.
2. Collins, p. 58.
3. Collins, p. 51.
4. Collins, p. 60.
5. Collins, p. 64.
6. Collins, p. 146.
7. Collins, pp. 192-193.
8. Collins, pp. 230-237.

the shift in focus from the centrality of the hierarchical Roman Church to an emphasis on the local community."[1].

Another of the developments which Collins envisages is that of ministry for women. He hopes that women will assume the ministry of liturgical leadership, but in such a way as to create new, less clerical models. This will then reflect Vatican II's primary model: the Church as "the People of God" in which all are equal by right of baptism.[2]. Mixed Blessings was published in 1986 - in the same year as Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, which tells how twenty women have experienced Catholicism in the post-war years.

At one level, many of the book's contributors challenge what have been dominant Catholic models for women: bride of Christ, bride of man, and Mary, Mother of God and Blessed Virgin. In this way the book challenges the Church's male, celibate power-base and begins a theologising which is experiential and relational in its emphases and assumptions. At another level, it represents a renewal of religious imagination, as it denies masculine models their established dominance within religious language and declares that these dominant models (or idols) exclude so much of women's experience.[3].

This account symbolises the complex character of Vatican II Catholicism and of the change it is still experiencing.[4]. It should indicate how Vatican II Catholicism might more usefully be

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1. Collins, p. 237.
2. Collins, pp. 239-241.
3. I am here interpreting Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids in terms proposed by Sallie McFague in Metaphorical Theology.
4. Cf. Severino Diarich, "The Current State of Ecclesiology", Concilium, June, 1981, 92-97.

interpreted, not as conservatism versus liberalism[1.], but as a paradigm shift, by which one dominant model of the church (and of theology generally) has been displaced by a plurality of models.[2.]

It has been suggested that the notion of an "ideological consensus" helps describe the pre-conciliar Church, and that the particular consensus which characterised it was a "Counter-Reformation" ideology.[3.] I would suggest that this ideological consensus is itself an expression of an imaginative consensus, by which one model of the Church is allowed to dominate and is interpreted less as a model and more as an ideology. This model has its classic formulation in the ecclesiology of Robert Bellarmine:

> The one and true Church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff.[4.]

Such a model clearly emphasises the visible marks of identity, the hierarchical and Roman aspects of authority, and the conformity of belief (belief itself being associated very much with unity and truth). It also has little sense of its own analogical character. In the Catholic culture which existed prior to Vatican II, this model expressed and established itself through a consistent and cohesive web of emphases: the transcendent efficacy of the sacraments (which at times made them appear almost magical); the sovereign role of objective truth and reason in moral decision-making; the clarity and coherence of the moral code; the otherworldliness, permanence and

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1. Even so, these terms can help clarify the change: cf. James P. Mackey, The Church: Its Credibility Today, pp. 141-146.
2. For instance, see Peter Hebblethwaite, The Runaway Church, pp. 228-229.
3. John Thornhill, Sign and Promise: A Theology of the Church For a Changing World, Ch. One.
4. Cited, Avery Dulles, Models of the Church, p. 14.

universality of the Latin liturgy and its elevated celebrant; the holy discipline of the marriage vows; the "will of God" mentality of the religious life; the supreme and at times infallible authority of the Pope. In Australia during the post-war years, such an image of Catholicism was widely reinforced by the growth of Catholic education and the fight for state aid, as well as by the continuing battle with that old, unifying enemy, Communism. There was a church-building boom, as well as a proliferation of devotional sodalities and intellectual societies. There was a great deal of confidence in Catholic intellectualism, whether it adopted the more incarnational mode of Melbourne's Apostolate, or encouraged the renaissance of Thomistic philosophy at Sydney's Aquinas Academy, whether it adopted the former's position within the university, or the latter's stance against it.[1] There was also an hierarchy of roles: "In roles in life, as in everything else, the hierarchy was maintained: male over female, priest, brother, husband over nun, wife and mother." [2]

Such a model of the Church (like any model) contained ambiguities. It may have provided a sense of identity, purpose, certitude, and continuity, but it could also be self-serving[3]. Its darker side was exposed by Bishop De Smedt in a speech at the Vatican Council, when he described the institution or "perfect society" model of the Church as "clericalist" (seeing the clergy as the source of all power and initiative), "juridicist" (imagining authority in simply secular models and emphasising laws and penalties), and "triumphalistic" (dramatising the Church as an army opposed to Satan and the powers

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1. Cf. Edmund Campion, Australian Catholics, pp. 159-200; Patrick O'Farrell, The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History, pp. 354-405, and particularly pp. 406-411.
2. Anna Rutherford, "A Long Line of Maiden Aunts", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 138.
3. Cf. Thornhill, Sign and Promise, Chapter One.

of evil).[1]. Even before the Council opened, this model was being challenged by other models which derived from deeper scriptural and historical sensitivity, and which stressed spiritual and charismatic dimensions of the Church's character. John Thornhill notes those renewal movements which arose in the years prior to the Council, and encountered "institutionalised resistance" (another characteristic of an ideological consensus). He refers to the liturgical movement, the biblical movement, the lay apostolate movement, and the ecumenical movement, and notes how all were, in fact, supported by the major encyclicals of Pope Pius XII. [2].

After Vatican II, the institution or "perfect society" model of the Church is no longer able to dominate. Avery Dulles names - in a non-definitive manner - four other models which have exerted strong influence on the Catholic theological imagination: the Church as mystical communion, as sacrament, as herald of the Word, as servant. The institution model locates revealed truth in a body of doctrinal propositions, the mystical communion model locates it within a personal communion with Christ and the Spirit; the sacrament model sees the Church itself as the symbol of revelation. The herald model recovers a more Protestant emphasis on the Word of God in Scripture and wants to confront the world with the gospel, while the servant model is receptive to the inbreaking of the divine into history.[3].

By encouraging this plurality of theological models, Vatican II also helped to reaffirm the tensive character of the theological imagination itself. The pre-conciliar confidence in clear and univocal theological concepts was displaced by a renewed

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1. Cited, Avery Dulles, Models of the Church, pp. 35-36.
2. Cf. Thornhill, Chapter One. Cf. also, Dulles, pp. 35-37.
3. Cf. Models of the Church, pp. 166-178.

appreciation of the Church as mystery and of theology as an analogical work. Models, exploring and releasing meaning (rather than explaining it), were more and more evaluated in terms of the tensions which they mediated: between human and divine, charismatic and institutional, local and universal, historical and eschatological, official and personal. This affected the way various areas of the Church's life were imagined and understood. In ecclesiology, as we have already seen, there was an attempt to articulate the relationships which might exist between institutional and spiritual realities, and between historical and eschatological ones. In Christology, a theology "from above" had to relate to a theology "from below", as more and more questions emerged about an historical and even political concept of Christ. In liturgy, a tradition of the transcendent and universal met with a demand for the immanent and local. In morality, there was a difficult task of reconciling objective norms with subjective truths, absolute truths of "natural law" with the relational truths of love, and conscience with authority. In catechetics, doctrinal modes of learning Catholic belief were complemented (and confronted) by more experiential modes. In short, the phenomenon called "Vatican II" focused and released a profound imaginative process, which cannot be reduced to liberal and conservative ideologies, nor even to horizontal and vertical images of authority. Rather it is a highly complex dynamic in which various theological models, and their many-layered implications, confirm and contradict one another.

This is why the controversy over Humanae Vitae, Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter on human life, sexuality and reproduction, became, in Australia as elsewhere, so important. This controversy is all too easily translated into a conservative versus liberal schema: those who

wanted the Pope to uphold the traditional teaching (that artificial contraception was immoral) against those who wanted the decision to be left to individual conscience (and to married laity rather than celibate clergy). Without denying that this dynamic was a major component of the crisis, I would suggest that Humanae Vitae exemplified the paradigm shift in its most concentrated form. At one end of the continuum and controversy, truth was seen as eternal, objective and "natural" (intrinsically ordered); at the other end, it was seen as existential, relational and personal. One argument appealed to the authority of office, and suggested that the encyclical was a quasi-infallible exercise of the Church's official teaching power (or magisterium). Another appealed to the authority of experience, to the right of a dissenting conscience, and stressed that revelation was also disclosed through people and history, and not contained only in the doctrinal propositions of the magisterium. One side had confidence in the clarity of theological language and the supremacy of the moral law; another side wanted to speak of "the spirit of the law", emphasise the difficult distance between moral principles and their practice, and maintain the supremacy of love. One side said that love could not exist without truth; another believed that love was the first and highest truth. One side imagined sexuality in terms of particular sexual acts; another in terms of ongoing personal relationships: the former was concerned with "a contraceptive act", the latter with "a contraceptive mentality". Nor did these variations simply line up in such a way that the former agreed with the Pope's teaching (and with his authority to proclaim it) and the latter disagreed. Some people agreed with the principles, but not with the vertical model of authority. Some disagreed with the principles and the authority, though they still imagined sexuality as

acts, not as relationships. Some agreed with the teaching and with the Pope. If, then, Humanae Vitae remains a watershed for Vatican II Catholicism, it is largely because of the way this question managed to attract to itself so many of the different theological models authorised by the Council's own theology and to focus, in such a concentrated fashion, the conflict which can exist between them.

Once we consider Catholicism as such a network of models - at times complementary, at times contradictory - we can relate the poetry of McAuley, Buckley, and Webb to its Catholic culture and belief in such a way that we not only integrate the dogmatic and experiential dimensions of their work, but also indicate the differences which exist within the one tradition. We can search for continuities and discontinuities existing between the models which express Catholicism and those which convey the poetry.

SECTION TWO

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: JAMES McAULEY

McAuley concluded his 1976 Latham Memorial Lecture:

> In the course of my own experience I have come to believe that there is no substitute for sober realism tempered and sustained by whatever faith and charity we may possess. Even this does not take one very far, for society is not a simple transparent thing: it is exceedingly complex and opaque, resistant to attempts to analyze and control its present workings or predict and control its future developments. In this world, we stand on a dimly-lighted present moment, and move forward into dark uncertainties. Precisely for this reason the past, so far as we can grasp it and assimilate it, is a great resource; there is no wisdom without tradition. It is in this sense I understand a remark by Schelling, which I translate as follows: "It is not the weak, succumbing to every new gospel, but only the strong, the spirits who hold firmly to the past, who can construct the real future."[1].

Of course, this could easily be seen as the statement of a lurking reactionary, but only by undervaluing its imaginative substructure, where the will restrains, disciplines, yet does not expel "dark uncertainties", where the past operates as symbol of a knowledge which is precisely difficult to achieve, requiring the effort (and honour) of "sober realism", and promising somewhat dimly to redeem the present and the future. If we respect such balances, characteristic of McAuley's imagination, we can appreciate the relationship between his belief and his poetry.

In "Culture and Counter-culture" McAuley commits himself to a traditional culture, distinguished by elements such as Christianity, a public morality, the constitutional system (with its principles of freedom), the tradition of science and technology, and a modified capitalist economy. Even as he articulates this commitment, he glances, like the trespasser of "Private Devotions", to either side and remarks:

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1. James McAuley, "Culture and Counter-culture", Quadrant, September, 1976, 20.

> There are doubtless internal stresses and strains and inconsistencies in this set of cultural elements but they hang together as the civilization we have in Australia.[1]

While the defenders of "culture" admit imperfection, they tolerate reform only within "the principles and procedures of the system" and refuse the apocalyptic and utopian wiles of "counter-culture". Even so, imperfection also means that those committed to culture will sometimes have to accept "conformities to which (they) do not always wholeheartedly assent" and that they will discover within themselves "the potential for counter-cultural reaction".[2] McAuley then proceeds to interpret his own experience of counter-culture. Even if he is clearly prejudiced in favour of culture, he still maintains some degree of tension between his statement of principle and his awareness of imperfection.

McAuley's admiration for Blake as a great poet is set against his dismissal of Blake's eccentric theories, particularly the theory that "spontaneous impulses are good and holy so long as not distorted or corrupted by a moral code or an imposed authority".[3] McAuley's early anarchism is read as a misdirected attempt to ensure the principles of freedom - an attempt which ultimately leads to "a firm attachment to our constitutional system with its under-girding liberal principles as the best so far devised".[4] Similarly, anarchy is discovered, thanks to "that shy humourist (sic) Ern Malley", to be an unsound practice in poetry, even if Dame Ethel Malley "has presided over the renascence in the late 1960s of a neo-romanticist, neo-modernist, and neo-anarchist poetry which still flourishes".[5] This lecture, then,

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1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 12.
2. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
3. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
4. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 15.
5. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 16.

works within familiar frames. It tells of the search for the rational and reasonable disciplines which guarantee freedom, the "sober realism" which allows the human will to contain imperfection, but also celebrate order in a world of principles and absolute values. Operating from a particular model of the human person, it identifies personhood in terms of a rational nature: reason has supremacy in defining the self; reason knows the objective order and informs the will of its ultimate good. This is a metaphysical model of personhood, as distinct, say, from a psychological model which might identify the person more in terms of individual integration, self-knowledge and relational capacities. Since McAuley employs such a rational, metaphysical model, he argues that the choice between culture and counter-culture "is ultimately one of rationality against irrationality". [1]

When McAuley recounts his acceptance of "Catholic orthodoxy", this image of the human person plays a central role. It enables him to see his tradition providing for "the unique significance of each human existence", as well as for social, political, cultural and moral coherence. It informs his rejection of the "counter-culture" tradition, which, in his case, was the notion of a perennial Tradition found in the writings of Coomaraswamy and Guenon. McAuley records how he found this Tradition powerfully attractive, partly because it refused the materialism and pragmatism of Western modernity, and also because:

> Their central notion was that a "normal" society would be a symbolic and analogical system, all whose structures and activities, besides having their own reality, would exemplify in their own degree, principles that are in the first place cosmological but finally metaphysical.[2]

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1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 14.
2. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 18.

If McAuley then resists this view of a perennial Tradition (and it is closer to the medievalism of which he is sometimes accused), it is because of his suspicion that it would be too ordered, because of his belief in the historical and personal character of the Christian tradition: "Western culture and Christianity are deeply immersed in the concrete, the historical, the unique significance of each human existence, not only in the secular order but also in the religious".[1]

While The End of Modernity, as we have seen, rages against an anti-metaphysical modernity and proposes the supremacy of the sacred realm, it also argues that Christianity, as distinct from gnosticism, allows the secular realm its own freedom, that "its creative, regulative inspiring action upon culture . . . is compatible with a very great flexibility and liberty of development in the secular order".[2] By defending the distinction between the sacred and the secular, McAuley hopes to free the secular so that "each part (of culture) is left to exercise initiative and self-regulation within the limits of its competence, instead of being determined in detail by analogical deduction from theological principles".[3] It is largely this tension which allows McAuley to resist too rational a model of the poetic process:

> If poetry is created "by a word conceived in the intellect" this word must nevertheless become flesh. In poetry the intellect works, so to speak, within the domains of sensation, feeling, imagination, desire, and submits in a certain measure to their laws. The intellectual act is mediated through other powers of the mind, endued with them, incarnated in them. It goes down to them in order to raise them to itself.[4]

Even when, in 1970, surveying the confusions of the post-conciliar Church, McAuley declares himself "A Friend of the Permanent

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1. "Culture and Counter-culture", p. 19.
2. The End of Modernity, p. 12.
3. The End of Modernity, p. 12.
4. The End of Modernity, pp. 133-134.

Things" [1], he does not abandon the difficult relationship between freedom and authority, nor that between the limitation and the necessity of reasonable discipline. His sense of the traditional coherence of Catholicism emerges strongly, but so does his sense of human perplexities which cannot be simply contained through any authoritarian response. When he speaks of the damage caused by Paul VI's hesitation in regard to Humanae Vitae (a hesitation which, he says, encouraged the illusion that traditional moral teaching could and would be changed), it is the question of authority which concerns him:

> What interests me is the intimate damage to the structure of religious authority, and in consequence to the automatic unwavering discipline of vast numbers of people whose morale was closely dependent on religious authority.[2]

Even this is not precisely a plea for authoritarian religion (though it could too easily be used to support such a plea). As he counters the argument that Catholics should "become adult" and make their own decisions about artificial contraception, McAuley returns to his preferred mythic framework: "it sounds very well so long as you are willing to ignore the supernatural character of religion and the fallen nature of man". [3] This leads to a conclusion which anticipates "Culture and Counter-culture":

> The real foundation of conservatism is the recognition that we don't run the world, but that we are called to act responsibly in the world, as best we can among unsatisfactory and often bewildering choices.[4]

Once more chaos is resisted - by discipline, and by a metaphysics which promises an ultimate (not an immediate) order.

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1. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", Quadrant, March-April, 1970, 40-43.
2. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42. Cf. also, "A Small Testament", p. 9. Here McAuley claims that the controversy has caused "a profound uncertainty about the binding character of the Church's 'ordinary' teaching authority.
3. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42.
4. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 43.

McAuley's position within Vatican II Catholicism emerges, then, as consistent with the imaginative pattern which we have seen working within his poetry. While he supports renewal, it is renewal within the principles of the tradition: natural law morality, religious authority and discipline, and the supremacy of the sacred and the personal. He opposed suggestions that divorce, abortion, homosexual acts and masturbation might, in principle, be moral and that "at least in North America, pre-marital intercourse was all right if it was a nice boy and you loved him".[1] He began to withdraw his support for liturgical renewal - mainly because the aesthetic demands of the new liturgy were much less rigorous than those he associated with an appreciaton of the sacred. He disapproved of the growing assumption that papal teaching was more a guideline than a norm. He maintained his opposition to Communism because its principles were fundamentally anti-religious and anti-personal. This may indeed appear to be a reactionary position to those who will not allow that his emphasis on tradition is, properly speaking, an emphasis on its conservative function, not its conformative function. He values authority, reason and "the Permanent Things" because such an emphasis accords with his metaphysical model of tradition and of the human person.

For all this, McAuley's position becomes less one of public argument and more one of withdrawn integrity and private devotion - somewhat as, in "Because", the question of social responsibility is displaced by the need to deal with personal judgment. He records:

> My own reaction has been to keep away from modern theology, to read no church newspapers or publications, to converse only with clergymen who happen to be personal friends. I believe in the

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1. "A Friend of the Permanent Things", p. 42.

> resurrection, I believe in the mass, though most parish masses are now unpleasant experiences, I reject no article of faith, though some remain dark to me; I retain a devotion to Mary, who has been rather unceremoniously demoted and relegated to the background . . . I am not saying that my retreat to a minimal position is a good and desirable thing. It is one person's reaction in a troublous time.[1]

This is a position very much like that finally assumed by the narrator of "A Leaf of Sage", as he urges the "hidden bird" to "sing mercy and relief/ To wanderers in the darkness of the heart" (CP, 80). Even so, McAuley does not close his own account in this state of withdrawal. Rather, he closes it with an anti-triumphalist recognition that "The visible body of the Church does not at all define the invisible body of those who in all ages can and will be saved by the free operation of the Holy Spirit" [2]; with a celebration of the "great development" in genuine ecumenism and universality, and with a rather wry realisation that the ways of God evade even the best of rational and traditional categories:

> We are indeed universally brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God, and God wills the salvation of all mankind while leaving man with the dignity and peril of his free will. It is, of course, Christian belief that it is by Christ alone that the mass of mankind are saved, whatever their formal relation to the visible Church. Pagans and unbelievers may regard it as an impertinence to be enlisted as honorary Catholics. I regard it as amusing, beautiful and consoling that the real Mystical Body of Christ would, if we could view it with God's eyes, look so different from the categories we employ and the lines of division we make.[3]

Here he has managed a shift from his more usual and more public model of the Church to one which is more mystical - it is a shift comparable to that which operates in his poetry between the discursive and the lyric modes.

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1. "A Small Testament", pp. 9-10.
2. "A Small Testament", p. 10.
3. "A Small Testament", pp. 10-11.

In describing the relationship between McAuley's Catholicism and his poetry, we need to respect a similar complexity. It would be easy to isolate the traditional ideas which his belief and art share and ground the relationship there. "A Letter to John Dryden" would provide a great deal of evidence: an opposition to relativism, positivism, Communism, divorce and abortion; a commitment to Christ as the supreme Reason and Truth; an apologetic emphasis on the rational motives for faith and the historicity of the gospels. In short, the poem would be seen to proclaim the Catholic tradition as the most powerful custodian of Western social and moral values. "Celebration of Divine Love" would confirm the traditional drama of Original Sin and Redemption, as well as the metaphysical symbolism still embodied in Catholic dogmas and liturgies. It would reinforce the Catholic commitment to natural law morality, and the belief that the natural order needs the elevating influence of divine grace. At the same time, "In the Twentieth Century" and "An Art of Poetry" would be read as arguing that Western modernity has betrayed the metaphysical tradition and abandoned the hierarchy of the sacred which alone can restore ultimate order and beauty. These poems would also disclose a preference for the vertical dimension of religious imagination - a preference which, depending on the prejudices of the reader, might be described as metaphysical, authoritarian or repressive. "At Penstock Lagoon", "Private Devotions" and "Parish Church" would then be summoned to verify McAuley's increasing disillusionment within the post-conciliar Church, his sense that the Church was betraying its own tradition, and his tendency to find in private faith whatever comfort and honour might be managed.

All this might be true, but it is seriously inadequate: it is privileging the ideological dimension of McAuley's Catholic

imagination. At the risk of some repetition, I want now to return to some of these poems and give them a slightly different focus. In particular, I want to consider how their models of authority, Christ, and church clarify the ways in which the poetry is "Catholic".

When it wants to authorise its religious position, McAuley's poetry sometimes invokes the public, objective tradition of Catholicism, and at other times withdraws and makes more tentative claims on the basis of private (often dark) experience. At all times, its structure of authority is fundamentally hierarchical, but also self-consciously limited. Where it invokes the authority of divine revelation, it is aware that this is no guarantee of human perfection. Where it asserts the primacy of human reason, it does so in order to guarantee hope, not certitude. Certainly, the overall pattern of McAuley's poetry demonstrates an increasing privatisation of religious authority: the poetry of his conversion period, arguing for natural law, universal symbolism, and the Christian moral tradition, contrasts with the later poetry where the affairs of the institutional Church provide a faint, even troublesome, background as personal faith - itself a structure of outlines - contests the authority of death. However, a similar pattern can be seen even in the discursive, Catholic pieces. Furthermore, the late lyrics are not simply replacing a dogmatic mode with an experiential one: they are still using reasoned will to construct and authorise a landscape which, if it is not always consoling, is at least corroborative.

In McAuley's discursive poems, such as "A Letter to John Dryden" and "An Art of Poetry", the ultimate structure of authority is hierarchical: reason is obedient to the created order which is itself fully authorised only in the revealed order. This establishes at once

the relationship between secular and sacred authority and the primacy of the sacred. The emphasis is on order. Order is ultimately an expression of the divine reason: whether it be the created order, where the propositions of natural law image God's perfect understanding and absolute truth-in-being, or the redeemed order, where the teachings of the Church preserve the saving truths which Christ revealed. Accordingly, the poetry, at this point, embodies a Catholicism characterised by a hierarchical model of authority, a propositional model of reason, and a dogmatic model of revelation. We can see something of this operating in "An Art of Poetry":

> Let your speech be ordered wholly
> By an intellectual love;
> Elucidate the carnal maze
> With clear light from above. (CP, 70)

While some authority is given to the secular realm - "Give every image space and air/ To grow" - the ultimate authority of any such image is that it has been informed by Christ's revelation or, at least, by the intellect's communion with the eternal order of things.

Even so, we have to be careful: this is not the only authority-structure operating in the poem. It also authorises itself from two experiences of loss. The first experience is the loss of metaphysical symbolism - and this empowers the poem by providing it with an alternative authority, an almost demonic authority it can reject in order to define its own Christian and hierarchical position:

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

It also empowers the poem because it is not easily overthrown: it persists in the anxiety about "self-expressive art" and in the power struggle operating between transparency and opaqueness, pride and simplicity, as modes of mystery. The other experience of loss, which

functions as the poem's final authority, is that of spiritual abandonment, "that loss/ By which the spirit gains". In one sense this shifts the poem's basis of authority: from knowledge of the real to belief in the paradoxical, from reason to faith, from dogma to mysticism. In another sense, it reaffirms Christ's authority over the world, his ultimate and determining reality, since the reference to this positive loss establishes an ironic contrast with the opening and reinforces the negativity of "Since all our keys are lost or broken".

Similarly, "In the Twentieth Century" (CP, 198) is empowered as much by loss as by gain. It argues that the authority of modern poetry is severely undermined, that it lacks the authoritative presence and "living voice" of Christ. Yet it is less hierarchical. Its reference to Christ's resurrection is within a community of immediate and personal images (which yet preserve a biblical resonance): bread, honey, yolk, and water. Still, its preference is clear: these very natural, nourishing images represent the genuine reality of Christ, which challenges the foam-rubber processes, plastic feel and chemical waste of modern experience and language. This preference is somewhat qualified with "I don't reject our days". However, the qualification has little positive authority. Once more, experience empowers the poetry by the negative authority of loss:

> And yet we dream of song
> Like parables of joy.
> There's something deeply wrong.
>
> Like shades we must drink blood
> To find the living voice
> That flesh once understood. (CP, 198)

In this sense, the ultimate authority of concrete experience and immediate history is that it validates the myth operating behind the dogma and reason. That myth is, of course, the story of a world fallen from innocence and perfection, the story of redeeming blood.

This is the story which, in a more formal and dogmatic manner, informs and authorises "Celebration of Divine Love" (CP, 73-76). This poem involves different kinds of authority. There is the covert authority of its subtextual, personal narrative. Although this is analogous to the notion of a personal authority, it is hard to say what effect the poem's symbolism has on it - whether it integrates or intimidates it. The poem may well represent a Catholic dilemma about individual and traditional power. There is also the dogmatic authority of the great Christian symbols: the poem certainly intends to celebrate these as signs of divine love. They exercise an abstract and universal meaning, confirm "angelic hierarchies", and command the mind to contemplate the "Unmeasured measure of immensity". Yet, there is another authority, that of the "bowed darkness", where one person speaks to another of spiritual desire, pain, and promised reward. Here the model of authority is more properly charismatic, just as the model of Church is more mystical and communal than institutional. This personal mysticism itself derives power, not only from the tradition, but also from the local landscape.

While it does address the "Incarnate Word", "A Letter to John Dryden" (CP, 85-95) is not quite so incarnational in its imaginative manner. It is determinedly hierarchical as it defends reason and metaphysics. Even its appeal to Christian faith reinforces this: although faith claims an authority beyond the rational, and establishes itself in a realm "where all signs (are) reversed", its relationship to metaphysical reason is always confirmative, and never arbitrary. At

the same time, the poem does use other authorities, and these contribute a tension and complexity which are often missed. It appeals to the heart - though it does so on the assumption that the heart's "inmost tendencies . . ./ Contain the ground-plan of the Christian law" (CP, 94). And what authority is exercised by the final stanza? Its self-regarding irony comes close to deconstructing all the "angelic hierarchies", since it makes the poem's furious propositions unimportant when they are confronted with death's reticence. Finally, the Christian world which the poem proposes as an alternative to "this vacant sly/ Neurotic modern world" (CP, 85) has, in an important and somewhat subversive sense, no immediate and achieved authority. It is a

> World undistorted, world unsimplified,
> So long by me desired, so long denied, (CP, 95)

and it cannot yet overthrow the Fall.

McAuley's later lyrics seem, at first, to favour a different model of authority. They rarely appeal to dogmatic symbols. Even when they do, these occupy a more democratic position within the general community of images. Such is the case, for example, with the references to resurrection in "Private Devotions", to eucharist in "Morning Voluntary", to judgment in "Because", to Mass in "World on Sunday", to crucifixion in "At Assisi", and to Christ's redemptive mission in "Parish Church". Inasmuch as these poems "use a language of sense-impressions to render aspects of a world"[1], they become less emblematic in their mode, less universal in their claims, and they learn to respect the power of particularity. In another sense, these poems do not so much change their authority-structure as shift its exercise from traditional to personal worlds. They never really

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1. James McAuley, A Map of Australian Verse, p. 204.

abandon their belief that, with proper discipline, "meaning comes at will".[1] It is this belief which, whether it is operating publicly or privately, is the foundation for McAuley's sense of hierarchy. Therefore, the "language of sense-impressions" is never a frankly random performance. As well as being rhymed and end-stopped, McAuley's lines operate from a principle of selective stress. These together represent principles of restraint and coherence. In short, the later poetry still prefers the authority of reasoned will and, like the honeyeater of "Autumn in Hobart" (TG, 41), it is engaged in defining a world. Even if the heart is helpless, it can still manage to say, "hold and wait".[2]

Even as negative experience seems to assume a disproportionate authority in McAuley's later poetry and to legitimise despair, it is being constructed within the old hierarchy of reasoned will:

> A cry goes out from the exhausted will:
> Nightmares and angels roam the empty field.[3]

Here, where all authority but the demonic seems to be cast down, we are reading within a controlled landscape. The "exhausted will" is, through rhyme, balanced with the expectant, perhaps contemplative, power of "The air is still". Moreover, there is a strange sense in which observer and observed wrestle for final authority in the poem. While the "I" never explicitly appears in the poem (it is objectified in "the exhausted will"), there is ego-control, all the more powerful because it so firmly objectifies the landscape. As "The world

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1. "Book of Hours", Time Given, p. 38.
2. "Music Late At Night", Music Late at Night, p. 23.
3. "Nocturne", Music Late at Night, p. 5.

sinks out of sight", and "Nightmares and angels roam the empty field", there is a counteracting awareness that the will, however exhausted, does not go with the landscape. It remains a reasoning observer.

This effect - a kind of final reservation functioning within the intimate observation of selected detail - is fundamental to these last poems, revealing how McAuley's poetry retains its hierarchical authority. Sometimes authority is preserved at the expense of a dissociation between landscape and observer:

> Dying world and deadened sky,
> Traffic roars beyond control.
> What is left to make us try?[1].

If this seems momentarily to despair of order, it still assumes effort and discipline, so that tension is maintained between the world's confusion and the observer's will. At other times, the observer seems to follow the lead of the landscape:

> And the gentle nymph's blank eyes
> Seem to seek and see beyond
> The park, the city, and the skies.[2].

This poetry, therefore, reserves a discriminatory authority for the observer, who is called to "get it right" and "learn by looking".[3]. Although it now more generously and simply includes experiential truths, it has not abandoned its belief that authoritative truth resides, not in immediate experiences, but in ultimate ones.

Similarly, in its imagining of Christ, McAuley's poetry combines different models, though its final preference seems to be for a Christ whose Cross invites our participation in suffering and mystery - however much one might have expected his Christ to be pre-eminently

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1. "Winter Drive", Music Late at Night, p. 8.
2. "In the Gardens", Music Late at Night, p. 10.
3. "Book of Hours", Time Given, p. 38.

"the Word, the source of unity,/ The Reason of man's reason, and its Light".[1] This latter model is important to both "A Letter to John Dryden" and "Celebration of Divine Love", but in each case it is discarded in favour of a more mystical (and, indeed, more traditional) approach to Christ.

"A Letter to John Dryden" first presents a Christ who perfects the natural order, so that "By reason men may come to find their Reason" (CP, 92). This is a Christ imagined in the terms of Thomistic metaphysics. Christ, as the Word, perfectly expresses God's creative understanding; faith in him is, therefore, the confirmation and perfection of reason. This metaphysical model in turn converses with a political Christ amenable to the philosophy of the Movement, one who guarantees a liberal hierarchy.[2]

Despite this, the poem makes its ultimate appeal to a more mystical Christ, one discovered, above reason, in the paradoxes of sacrificial love, one who evokes "ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire". This reveals a shift from a public model of Christ to a more personal one - but one which is still deeply traditional since it appropriates the via negativa tradition of Christian spirituality, which has its origins in Christ's invitation to share his cross.[3] "Celebration of Divine Love" also shifts its basis from the public language of traditional Christian symbolism to the hidden signs of Christian love. At first, Christ is the eternal source of traditional symbols, who thereby guarantees the primacy of revelation and the victory of

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1. "A Letter to John Dryden", Collected Poems, p. 91.
2. Cf. "A Letter to John Dryden", Collected Poems, p. 92.
3. Cf. for example, Mark, 8:34.

angelic over demonic forces. Then he is the darkly apprehended figure, who offers a purifying fire and promises that all will be restored. Curiously, the ultimate hope he promises through this "hidden" fire remains tentative - "who knows what wanderer may turn . . .?" (CP, 76). In this sense, the poem corresponds to McAuley's belief that tradition guides our way as "we stand on a dimly-lighted present moment, and move forward into dark uncertainties".[1] Having established, through their Thomistic theology, that "Christ carries his credentials in his hand" (CP, 91), both these poems imagine Christ as a companion in dark uncertainty.

This tendency to associate Christ with uncertainty can be seen in the earlier poem, "Jesus" (CP, 20). While Christ can see our reality for what it is, our knowledge of him arrives at uncertainty, leaving him isolated. In "Explicit"[2], Christ is once more a figure associated with uncertainty. Indeed, McAuley and Christ seem to meet at the point where McAuley admits that he cannot communicate Christ's ways to the modern world - somewhat as Christ in "Jesus" tells people "nothing that they wished to know". While this Christ still consoles and redeems through the eucharist, he more surely draws McAuley into death, leaving him between the "cold" and the "gold", between the certainty of death and the possibility of eternal life.

This Christ is being used primarily to reinforce the discipline, not of philosophical and theological reason, but of via crucis spirituality. At this level, McAuley's Christ is both experienced

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1. James McAuley, "Culture and Counter-culture", Quadrant, September, 1976, 20.
2. Quadrant, December, 1976, 5.

and willed. This can be seen in "Pieta" (CP, 175). McAuley's image of Christ is disclosed more in the poem's structure than in the final reference to the "Cross". The final line is so delayed that its expression of faith both risks and restrains the poem's entire experience of pain. It also makes no claim to understanding, deepening the "dark uncertainties" which define the present and future Christ, even as it provides some conventional Christian consolation. In this way, it mimics McAuley's deepest sense of Christ: "Clean wounds, but terrible".

While it remains hierarchical, McAuley's image of church is nevertheless more spiritual than institutional. In "Celebration of Divine Love", for instance, the image of church shifts along with the image of Christ: it appears as the visible expression of Christ's saving truth and sacramental activity, but never becomes a closed institution. Instead, it invites believers into a mystical communion. In "Father, Mother, Son" (CP, 181), as McAuley hopes his father, a lapsed Catholic, may be saved without benefit of institutional reconciliation, it is this invisible church which is clearly preferred to one defined exclusively by its visible marks of identity. It is in this sense that McAuley's model of church is essentially spiritual: it is the context for a personal relationship with God. This relationship still uses the formal teaching and practices of Catholicism for their coherence and discipline, but it never reduces the Church to its institutional expression.

This seems to be true even of "At Penstock Lagoon" (CP, 216-217). Part IV derives very closely from the theological debates which arose (or intensified) soon after Vatican II, and it is possible to

reconstruct the image of church which McAuley is using as he attacks certain post-conciliar trends. His church has dogmas which are permanent truths - dogmas, that is, which transcend "language-games" and which must not surrender to any demands to be "Meaningful! relevant!". His church believes in miracles and in demonic evil - and it is being betrayed by priests who explain these away. His church has no doubts about its identity, which is divinely guaranteed, and so it does not recognise the "crisis of identity" language prevalent in the sixties. Nor does his church recognise a need to be more involved with humankind and to encourage "progress" in its thinking and acting - not because these are wrong, but because words like "involvement" and "progress" focus a conventional fear (particularly influential in the post-conciliar Church) that teachings will be relativised and that the (transcendent) sacred will cease to be the Church's first concern and responsibility.

However, "At Penstock Lagoon" also demonstrates the shift with which we have become familiar. Even as it parodies movements in the post-conciliar Church and indirectly acknowleges conflicting ecclesiologies, it is withdrawing to a privately-observed landscape which faintly mediates the mystical church, the one founded from Christ's wounded side:

> How alien all that seems
> Here at the lake-edge,
> Where, surprise, a platypus
> Flips into the water.
>
> "Leave rubbish at the tip."
> Your own life needs cleaning;
> Which suddenly seems easy
> As the native thrush calls
>
> "Duke, Duke Wellington";
> And in lieu of sunrise
> A perched robin displays
> One small bright patch of red. (CP, 217)

Further, the reference to his own life in need of cleaning, so reminiscent of "It's my own judgment day that I draw near" (CP, 201), locates both the Church affairs and his private meditation within a larger frame, the drama of redemption. The "small bright patch of red" also restrains and redeems, by its crucified hope, the despairing note which concludes Part III: "There's no new way to begin." The institutional church is, therefore, framed by the meditative landscape which is, in its turn, constructed and contained by the struggle between chaos and commitment.

In "Private Devotions" (MLN, 6) the landscape is even more intensely influencing our sense of church. Here the Catholic Church is represented, not as an inspired institution, but as a moment of prayer balanced between "care" and "despair". The only symbol it provides the wanderer/trespasser is the most discomforting of Catholic symbols: the empty tabernacle, representing the moment between resurrection and death. The lines,

> Beads held in reluctant fingers
> Guide the murmur of the breath,

embody the astringent hope, the via negativa temperament and spirituality, which characterise McAuley's deepest attachment to the Catholic Church. They also illustrate the relationship between that private discipline and the public, dogmatic tradition. When this was written, Marian devotions such as the rosary were in decline, so that McAuley is here deliberately presenting himself as a Catholic who privately respects Mary's place in the hierarchy - indeed who resists what he will later term "the disturbance of the traditional heavenly constellation".[1]

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1. James McAuley, "A Small Testament", Quadrant, December, 1976, 9.

Perhaps "Parish Church" (TG, 42) best exemplifies how McAuley finally imagines church. In the opening stanza, the stained-glass window calls the eye upward, as if to suggest the elevating power of supernatural grace. The eye is drawn to the redemptive truth of Christ, a central, transcendent truth which is visible because it is embodied in simple, transparent figures. While this coaxes and satisfies private devotion, it also celebrates the tradition of sacred art and places the ultimate meaning of the Catholic Church above and beyond the aisles and pews where its human community and history move and contemplate these "heavenly places". In the second stanza, we return to history, a troubled history in which days of promise fade into a moment of isolation. The line which closes the second stanza of "Parish Church" - "Now I'm the only one that ever comes" - is as much an indication of McAuley's own imaginative development as of his isolation with the post-conciliar Church. It is another variation on his basic model of church. It is, then, a line which brings him, in the last stanza, to his final image of church: the place where the forces of disorder - grief, sin, death - are held in order by self-discipline, prayer, and austere integrity.

These different models of authority, Christ and church do not indicate inconsistencies or contradictions - they are more like variations on a mystery. The mystery is approached through the dominant imaginative structure which informs them all: the myth of a fallen world which is continually being elevated by the reasoned will of humankind and the redemptive will of God. In the model of authority, the preference for reason's hierarchy is as much a response to and a restraint on middling, muddling humanity, as an attachment to verticalism. In the model of Christ, the Word of order is used to make the paradoxes of suffering more bearable, and there is always the sense that Christ

will be misunderstood and himself betrayed by voluntary and involuntary evil, but that he will still honour his destiny. In the model of church, the dogmatic tradition is used to support the spiritual tradition, and finally Catholicism itself becomes a victim of confusion and a companion before the darkness.

SECTION THREE

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: VINCENT BUCKLEY

Vincent Buckley's poetry has become less and less "Catholic". While the early "Eucharist" (TWF, 30) easily enters the Catholic world and calls the eucharist "this gathering of all space", and "In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom" (MI, 50-57) triumphantly declares that Christ "Lives in His Church", the later poetry refuses or ignores the language of formal belief. This could be interpreted simply as a movement from belief to scepticism. Instead, I have been suggesting that it is a development consistent with the anti-ideological stance of Buckley's imagination (itself expressive of an opposition between the institutional and the personal, as well as of a strange need to inhabit language as an expatriate) and with the poetry's growing preference for the "idiom of sensation" over the language of dogma. The process is like that coded in the image of how,

> Hardly thinking, in a strange church,
> A man, forgetting the common rubric, prayed
> "O God, make me worthy of the world",
> And felt his own silence sting his tongue.[1]

When Buckley constructs his account of the (Catholic) period surrounding this poem, "Places" - and it is the period of Vatican Council II - he constructs himself as a Catholic trying to escape the Church's "self-enclosing formalism".[2] In Cutting Green Hay he presents the founding of the ecumenical Catholic magazine, Prospect (1958), as involving a refusal of party-line Catholicism. "We would demonstrate the uselessness of the standard Catholic view by not applying it."[3] He contrasts the openness and pluralism of this

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1. "Places", Selected Poems, p. 79. Arcady and Other Places, p. 38.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 231.
3. Cutting Green Hay, p. 249.

endeavour with the wider Church's "slightly secretive, furtive" triumphalism.[1]. Referring to Vatican II itself, Buckley more definitely declares a movement away from institutional religion:

> The Vatican Council had started, full of plans for averting the organizational and psychic disasters which had already happened inside Christianity. Fine as it was in many ways, it produced too little too late. From my point of view, it was a time to wait and possess one's soul, to move back from institutional definitions of reality, to take an anthropological approach, as it were, to institution and self alike. What was the actual state of 'belief'? What did 'belief' mean? If belief was being abandoned, what in the human psyche was abandoning it? Something had failed deep in the Christian spirit, not to speak of other less formal spiritual traditions, in the way that something fails in the blood, or the womb, or the spinal column, and the failure needed to be realized in the deepest sense. Not many of my friends wanted to hear this dire message; most of them thought me wrong, and only a few wished to abandon sociology or theology in the interests of that mistress of guesswork and intuition, anthropology.[2].

This shift towards an anthropological appreciation of religion can be clearly discerned in Poetry and the Sacred (1968). Here Buckley is looking for a way of discussing poetry which, though not devotional, does evidence a religious impulse, and even for a way of broadening his approach to Christian poets like Hopkins, Eliot and Lowell. He distrusts the noun, "religion": it defines religion as something separable and static. Therefore, he conducts his discussion using more experiential, dynamic terms: "the religious" and "the sacred", rather than "the revealed" or "the dogmatic".[3]. Declaring that "poetry is an act both sacred and sacralising"[4]., he says that one can find in writers such as David Jones, W.H. Auden, A.D. Hope and Dylan Thomas the key difference: between "religion in poetry" and "poetry as a religious act" -

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1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 253.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 250.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 5.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 8.

> they are speaking not of religion in poetry but of poetry as a religious act; and that they are locating the religious nature of that act neither in some thesis about the autotelic status of poetry nor in some contention about the basic themes or subjects for poetry but in terms of how the poet is brought as a religious being, concerned with human life and an actor in its drama, to create works which themselves carry his religious being, fortify creation and exist as, in a sense, sacred spaces.[1]

Buckley is, therefore, wary of the term, "religious poetry", since it is too often taken to mean "the religion in poetry". On the other hand, he stresses "the strongly affirmative nature and extraordinary persistence" of the notion of poetry as a religious act.[2] In such poetry, doctrinal and devotional elements "will be religious forces only so long as they are seen as having a present relevance to questions of personal identity, meaningful action, and the inner structures of feeling".[3] Accordingly, in discussing medieval poetry, Buckley does not see as "religious" poetry which finds the world distasteful and looks for salvation beyond it. Rather, he nominates a work like "A Lyke-Wake Dirge", where he finds the poet's struggle "to sacralise himself in and through his 'profane' activities".[4] Spenser is most religious when least concerned to be devout.[5] Wordsworth gives little evidence of "a personal God in the traditional Christian sense", but does create his experience of "forces which made available to him an 'opening toward the transcendent'."[6] This does not imply a reduction of religious terms to personal ones: working from the studies of Mircea Eliade, Buckley shows that sacred objects and hierophanies exhibit "both a movement into the world of common experience and a movement within the common experience to transcend or complete itself".[7]

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1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 9.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 10.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 11.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 27.
5. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 30.
6. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 44.
7. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 15.

We see the imaginative structure of Buckley's earlier theology of Incarnation being extended and confirmed, as he cites Eliade: "it is 'supernature' that the religious man apprehends through the natural aspects of the world." [1.] Once more following Eliade, Buckley observes that the modern age has seen, not a complete failure of religion, "but a shift from the transcendent to the immanent, from person to process, in specifying the sacred". It is not only, he says, belief which has been impaired, but "certain central capacities of the psyche".[2.] The capacities are presumably those to do with discovering and uttering a rhythmic movement on the page and within the psyche, for Buckley continues:

> And in such a world, if it is strange that poetry survives, it is still stranger that poets should find in themselves the impulse and strength to go on defining their experience in such a way as to redefine God-acting-in-the-world: what we may even call the reappearance of God. [3.]

It is noticeable that while poetry is set the task of recovering the world's source or centre, the poet still betrays an uneasiness, a sense of the world's disconnected rhythms.

This informs Buckley's comment on Dylan Thomas as a religious poet. Thomas, he says, combines an almost magical view of language with a sacramental one; Thomas implies that if a world of innocence may be renewed in poetry, then poetry may reveal that even the modern world hides things which have sympathy with that innocence. [4.] Christian poets (Eliot, Hopkins, Auden) do not celebrate the world as Thomas does: they see the world, not as radiant facts, but as shaped by

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1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 16. The reference is to Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, Harper Torchbook Edition (New York, 1961), p. 118.
2. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
3. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 58.
4. Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 60-63.

salvation and they "do not believe that poems can be innocent in the common world".[1] If Poetry and the Sacred records Buckley's concern with how to be a religious poet, he clearly prefers experiencing profane spaces till they show themselves and are made holy.

By the time Late Winter Child and The Pattern are published (1979), Buckley has, as we have seen, declared that he no longer feels any allegiance towards Catholicism as an organisation and that all dogmatic definitions are inadequate before mystery.[2] In Cutting Green Hay, Buckley gives other reasons for the distant stance he assumes within Catholicism. These strengthen the picture of one dissatisfied with ideological positions: it is largely an unrestrained ideological and institutional impulse within Catholicism which changes morality into moralism, turns priestly service towards priestly dominance, and sets an opposition between "aprioristic thinking" and "existential speculation".[3] To appreciate how far Buckley has travelled within his Catholic context, we need to linger over a comment made in his interview with Jim Davidson:

> I should add that I'm not an ex-Catholic who hates Catholicism, or who wants to reject it or anything of that sort at all. In fact, I would go to Mass sometimes, but I am a non-believer in any sense that would be meaningful to the great majority of Catholics. On the other hand, I think that the Catholic mystical tradition and the Catholic sacramental tradition are magnificent historical developments.[4]

While this seems conciliatory, Buckley, a skilled theologian, has quietly discarded the majority view by referring to the sacraments

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1. Poetry and the Sacred, pp. 63-64.
2. Cf. Elizabeth Booth, "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27-32. Jim Davidson, "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 443-458.
3. Cf. Cutting Green Hay, pp. 231ff.
4. Davidson, p. 450.

as "historical developments", thus emphasising their temporal and changing character. Conventional Catholic theology would not give such an emphasis without qualifying it, by affirming that the sacraments are, in their origin and efficacy, of the supernatural order.

At one level, this shift in Buckley's position occurs because of his anthropological exploration of religion. At another level, it is the expression of an imaginative need. Buckley himself is aware of this: while applauding the theological renewal of Vatican II, he notes that it may still be irrelevant to "the needs of those whose imagination cannot entertain the presence of God".[1] There has been, he argues, over the past two centuries, a weakening of the sense of the prophetic power, the sense of nature as hierophanous, and the sense of "the sacral possibilities in human relationships".[2] Catholic theology continues to emphasise its "sacraments", but fails to appreciate this "divorce in sensibility": great emphasis is placed on the cultic and liturgical celebration of the sacraments, but very little on the sacramental context, the sense of Christ's sacramental presence beyond the official enactment.[3] In other words, the Catholic Church has nurtured its theology of the sacrament, but neglected that sacramental imagination which is needed if the rituals are to sacralise the heart, the subconscious, and the ordinary object. Buckley, then, names the contemporary religious crisis as one of imagination and says that Vatican II failed to address it:

> The council has in turn expressed a rather vague perception of the problem by seeking to make 'the sacraments' more accessible to the church's members at the same time as it makes her members

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1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
2. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
3. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.

> more open to dialogue with non-Catholics. The attempt is a gallant one and must be praised unreservedly. But there is a sense in which it comes a hundred years too late; it comes into a de-sacralized world and to de-sacralized imaginations. The effect of it may well be both to encourage indifferentism and to weaken the sense of the sacramental power, unless a great effort is made to widen the scope of the sacramental action, and to rejoin what we call 'the sacraments' to the sacramental qualities of the word, of nature, and of loving relationships, from which, as I say, they have been too readily divorced.[1]

Buckley's emphasis is all the more compelling if we recall that, for him, the sacralising imagination uncovers and utters the world at its moment of "deepest realisation", and if we relate this to his concern to deepen the natural rhythm of language - a rhythm he closely associates with the very pattern and pace of perception and sensation.[2] This emphasis on the almost sacred particularity of sensate objects and on language incarnate with "the idiom of sensation" has obviously taken Buckley in a very different direction from that proposed in "An Art of Poetry" (dedicated to Buckley), where McAuley directs him to "the Word" as the true source of language and as the guarantee of "universal meanings".

The paucity of Christian reference in Buckley's later poetry is all the more significant if we consider that the experiences at the heart of this poetry - death, birth, love, and source-country - are liminal experiences which, in the earlier poetry, might have invited a more theological treatment. For instance, "Ceol-Beag for James McAuley" (TP, 45) makes no mention of their shared Catholicism. Admittedly, Buckley and McAuley embody different styles within Catholicism. Still, one of McAuley's very last poems - "Explicit" - shows him still engaged with the theology of eternal life, still believing in the sacrament of the eucharist. Buckley's poem ends with the speaker in

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1. Cutting Green Hay, p. 292.
2. Cf. Vincent Buckley, "Ease of American Language", The American Model, ed., J. Kirkby, pp. 137-159.

Ireland, recalling how his friend (now dead) once said, "I'm terrified of the Ireland inside me", and using the Irish landscape to mediate an atmosphere of ultimate redemption:

> Her light stands in the chestnut trees: vase-shaped:
> the peony leans backward, open-sided, tall, the true crimson.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Buckley ought to have written a "Catholic poem", merely indicating that his imagination has considerably shifted from the theology, in "Impromptu For Francis Webb" (MI, 44-47), that the poet's world "will be glorified". Again, "November 15th" (SP, 5) deals with his mother's death, but does not invoke the language of passover and resurrection which distinguished "Stroke" (AOP, 3-9). Indeed as it tries to link this death with "the pulse of leaf under the snow", the poem actually moves away from theological language and towards the language of the senses:

> Useless, quite useless now, to turn back
> to the grave's rectangle, and pursue you,
> spirit shall I call you, or memory,
> or bird, or bright ribbon,
> with my sense of smell, blackness, anger. (SP, 6)

Late Winter Child tells of birth and love. Here, though, love does not receive the heraldic treatment afforded it in "Prothalamion For a Christian Marriage" (TWF, 12), nor does the woman become a Christ-figure as in "Movement and Stillness" (MI, 48). Similarly, Buckley never says of the new and late child that he has "seen/ God work in her" - a belief expressed in "A Prayer for Brigid" (TWF, 16). While we cannot conclude that sacral possibilities are not sounded in these poems, we can say that when Buckley now wants to name the sacred, he uses a language which no longer needs to include the vocabulary of his Catholic tradition.

There is evidence that, while it may have abandoned a great deal of Catholicism, Buckley's work has maintained some belief in the

sacralising role of poetry. In "Imagination's Home", speaking of Brennan, Buckley links "linguistic feeling" and "religious range" and suggests that, in a poet of substance, religious feeling and poetic feeling tend to be the same.[1] It is clear that his concern for natural language is a development of such a belief. In his interview with Elizabeth Booth, he speaks of his own strong rhythmic sense of life and tells how his feeling for "the wonder of the world" started, when he was very young, "to express itself in miniscule rhythms and with perceptions which (he) now take(s) to have been poetic".[2] Having suggested that poetry at its best matches the vibrations of nature with the inner vibrations of the human person, Buckley affirms the interdependence of rational, intuitive and telepathic modes of communication, then remarks: "I think this is the key religious act: to try to experience, to understand and sometimes extend what Freud called the 'oceanic feeling'."[3] In his interview with Jim Davidson, he observes that, with Golden Builders, he was looking for a "locally mimetic" poetry, showing an intimate relation between the world outside the self and the language which the self has learned.[4] When he calls Ireland a "source-country" it is because it represents a religious sense of the relationship between person and place.[5] In a more recent interview, Buckley's position is even less dogmatic.[6] Responding to questions about Poetry and the Sacred, he seems to retain that book's emphasis on the psychic and rhythmic nature of poetry, but to avoid any too confident reassertion of the

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1. "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 28.
2. "Vincent Buckley: An Interview with Elizabeth Booth", Quadrant, August, 1976, 27.
3. Booth, p. 30.
4. "Interview: Vincent Buckley", Meanjin, 4, 1979, 454.
5. Davidson, p. 444.
6. Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch, "Scored for the Voice: An Interview with Vincent Buckley", Southerly, 3, 1987, 249-266.

sacralising nature of the poetic act. Speaking of Poetry and the Sacred, and his attempt to break with Catholic restraints on the imagination, Buckley is concerned less with "the sacred" and more with his own anti-ideological stance:

> I agree with Eliade that everybody specifies places, people, and occasions in a way that makes them sacred. I think that sacred means pretty much the same, no matter how the thing is done. But all this had an unfortunate effect, because the so-called Cold War Years had been succeeded by the so-called Vietnam Years, and I was supposed to be a right-winger in both decades. Anything I wrote was supposed to be supporting a Catholic hegemony, and helping Jim McAuley tie up the Commies . . . I was writing Poetry and the Sacred in order to broaden my thinking, but a lot of readers took it to be a different version of sectarianism - or a denominationalism without the determination - so I was getting my Catholic point across without using Catholic language. But I was not doing that at all. I was trying to do the opposite. I was trying to keep my Catholic base, but extend the meaning of everything I was thinking so that it did not have to have any reference at all to institutional ties.[1]

If this seems to reduce the sacred to a psychic product, Buckley later agrees that his poetry is concerned with "the paradisal possibilities of life"[2] and proposes that only poetry can "use all the processes of language to create either the depth and intensity, or the transparency, of experience".[3]

This pattern is very clearly demonstrated in Buckley's later poetry. In one sense, this poetry becomes more deeply a sacralising act, because it more transparently embodies the deepest rhythms of sensation and language. In this sense it becomes more "religious" by becoming more "human"; it completes one of the directions in Buckley's early metaphor of incarnation. Yet there is clearly much less religion in this poetry. Catholic references have almost entirely disappeared. Where they do occur, they do not so much represent

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1. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 262.
2. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 263.
3. Kavanagh and Kuch, p. 265.

Catholic belief as refer to Catholicism as a cultural phenomenon. As we have seen, this creates a difficulty in evaluating the religious imagination which informs the later poetry. It is possible to say it is "more religious": this poetry realises the interest in rhythms and holy spaces which always determined its appropriation of dogma. It is possible to say it is "less religious": compared to the preceding volumes, Late Winter Child and The Pattern have suffered something like a loss of memory. A religious tradition, if it realises its creative influence, can be more than an ideological system; it can be a kind of memory in which dogmas, stories and metaphors become themselves holy spaces. Buckley's anti-ideological imagination is so strong, however, that he sees ideology only in its institutionalised form and begins to create his holy spaces in such a way that Catholicism contributes a cultural and historical meaning, but not a dogmatic and theological one. The later poetry enacts the failure of imagination which Buckley perceives in Catholicism itself.

There is a moment in "Two Half-Languages" (SP, 12) which registers this:

> But thoughts never stop. In the stark night
> I lie awake, inside the crackling traffic,
> insomnia, like language,
> an eighth sense, knowing
> I've lost it all, the sound
> of their blood, the nose-pitch of their voices,
> the rustle of their God, the music
> inside me, once steady as a millwheel. (SP, 13)

This represents some loss of "God", but refers more to the God of culture than the God of personal belief. "God" is lost because the source's sense of interconnected and inherited rhythms is lost. The poem suggests that this loss has been suffered in the journey from the Irish language to the Australian situation. This is seen in the grandfather, whose Australian context does not quite banish the

language of his source-country:

> Above Deep Creek my grandfather,
> his pupils dark, blinking like ash,
> turns his head, rapidly,
> from side to side, to all of them
> who will steal your secret. Each eye
> is a half-spoken language
> stuttering "Friends. A chairde,"
> to the bent tussocks that do not even
> hold his dead. (SP, 12)

Buckley has recorded how his grandfather, wanting to stress his Australianness, denied his Irishness.[1] He has also argued that where connections with a source-country have been severed, there may persist "the traces in emotion of a language",[2] just as he here indicates those traces:

> If
> they walked towards us now,
> we'd never recognise the stride,
> the nasal speech, the moisture-heavy faces;
> of whom we know nothing, except
> that each had a "beautiful head of hair"
> and stayed up all night dancing (SP, 13)

The poem's speaker, then, finds language divided between its source and its present situation and cannot achieve the unifying pattern, here imaged by personal relationships:

> Whom can you touch, or love,
> in two half-languages? (SP, 12)

Whiskey provides the solution - through its embodiment of some reciprocal rhythm or music. Throughout the poem the lost language has shown its traces, even in the dancing where the music of Ireland's psyche still expresses itself. These, however, have been traces. They have not had the sense of completion. Whiskey does. As the poem opens we are told that whiskey has a stillness "like a land's stillness", "a fume of light/ we have no language for". As the poem

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1. Cf. Cutting Green Hay, p. 11.
2. "Imagination's Home", Quadrant, March, 1979, 25.

closes, the whiskey is turned and turning like music:

> You hand me the whiskey, turn it
> ice-bright as the light
> in a mirror: turn it
> like music, and look into
> the amber smokiness, turning me like music. (SP, 13)

The music between the speaker and the whiskey is reciprocal: it is a ritual of recognition and union. Rather than conclude that God has here given way to whiskey, it might be better to consider whether Buckley's poetry is now more firmly taking up a new direction: searching for the "mythic substratum" of his Irish identity, which might deepen his imaginative (and religious) life in its "psychological substance". These are terms Buckley uses when he describes the effect of exile on his ancestors:

> What was obviously missing from their lives was the mythic substratum of the Irish religion in which they took such a psychological interest. Because the Irish past, the reality of Irish imaginative experience, had been snipped away from their beliefs, they lived a foreshortened religious life, often intense and sometimes generous, but lacking in psychological substance. Further, they lacked all sense of themselves as having a defined and important family history, for they were the inheritors of Anonymous Man.[1]

The poems about Ireland, as we have seen, attempt to recover precisely this "mythic substratum" and "psychological substance".

"An Easy Death"[2] is not so confident of finding the "mythic substratum". Here there is no sense of relationship between person and place - indeed, one character, who is to deliver a message, is shown as aimless and quite mistaken in his natural faith:

> He takes the note, wanders
> diagonally down Main Street,
> gawking, stupid as a leaf,
> his eyes all hair and cheekbones,
> believing in the world
> that bears him up. That will go soon.
> Even as he goes his messages.

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1. Cutting Green Hay, pp. 11-12.
2. Meanjin, 2, 1984, 218-221.

Nature is not kind. It provides very bleak images, such as "the crow's picked bones", "dead breast bones", and "stupid as a leaf". Where it does seem to have regard for the human figure, to disprove Rilke's 'Nature knows nothing of us', it is represented by a pregnant mare "mooning by the electric pole,/ tricked by her hormones", and by a gamebird who knows the speaker well enough to keep out of his way. This refutation of Rilke turns into a dark irony, since Nature knows only the immediate sensate moment, and has no remembrance of time past, no concept of personal existence, absurd or otherwise:

> It is Rilke they know nothing of,
> and nothing of Proust, either, or Sartre.

The one point where Nature and speaker harmonise is at the very beginning, where a torn wing vibrates to the rhythm of a faltering heart:

> Death makes its sweep over the grass,
> wind rolled in leaves, a torn wing.
> An answering fickle beat
> flaps at the ribcage.

Nor do personal relationships provide continuity or comfort. Thomas Hardy is told that when he is dead people will not be thinking of him, as he supposed. He is advised to think of his name "as something/ burnt up in a moth-flight". Another figure finds that "Poetry, Vertu, Soul, are all/ feats of the body" and makes friends with the telephone. The speaker himself is tired of the world of personal relationships, wants to forget it all - the loves, the half-finished work, the poverty and injustice -

> and care for nothing
> but the sun on this brass ring,
> those dead breast bones.
> But I've been down so deep
> there's no strength to wish
> anything, even that blankness;

This overall atmosphere of disorientation and disintegrating relationships finds its focus in a final stanza where the speaker

watches his heart being removed and left to turn black and shrink under the light. It encourages, too, a ritual of loss: in the opening stanza the speaker is preparing for death by disposing of his possessions. When, in this context, he invokes his Catholic background, the sacrament of the sick (once called extreme unction), operates in the poem more as a lost ritual than as a deeper ritual of loss:

> Catholics, we were trained for it,
> the maze of words, the candles
> unrolled from years of tissue paper
> for this moment, the petite firm
> forward-leaning priestly movements,
> necessary as the dying itself;
> trained to compose the soul
> for all crises: death, cancer, waste of summer,
> insolence, neglect, humiliation,
> the drying-out of friends,
> the uncouth stroke of money,
> the ordeal of homegoing,
> the rising mist of time,
> this priest packing his cold oils.

This detached catalogue does more than recall a lost Catholic world where sacramental ritual provided a pattern for death. The last line places the priest among the crises for which the soul has to compose itself. By using "cold", it also implies that the sacralising oils are indifferent to the suffering, perhaps impotent before them, and so it opens a gap between the world of private suffering and that of official ritual. It incorporates, therefore, the very criticism Buckley makes of Catholicism: its failure to develop a sacralising imagination as the enlivening context for the sacraments themselves. While it presents itself as an intimate, sensory memory, this perception is informed by that sense of distance and displacement which, in "Stroke", is so closely associated with the perception of death.

If "An Easy Death" thus registers some failure in Catholicism's

sacralising life, "Purgatory" (TP, 31) registers the profound shifts which have occurred in dogmatic and theological areas. In conventional theology, purgatory, imagined as a temporary fire, represents a process of purification which some souls - those marred by "venial sins" - must undergo before entering heaven. In the poem, purgatory becomes little more than a projection of the puritanical heart. The father is praying the rosary and imagining the fires of purgatory. However, the real fires are within him, inherited from his own father's fierceness, his "drooping" mother and "his gangrened brother". Here Buckley is returning to the territory of "Stroke", where his ancestors subdue the land with "the spirit hot in their bodies" (AOP, 6).

He is concerned with a fierceness which destroys spiritual and emotional sensitivities. "Purgatory" finds the father unable to mature and journey towards his own happiness (a kind of "heaven") because he is so trapped by his ancestry:

> he listened
> to them as to flames, bowing
> his muttering face before them; there
> he was 'the boy' still,
> still to go on his journeying.

In contrast to this interior imprisonment fashioned by so puritanical a form of Irish-Catholicism, the natural world is represented as glowing with new existence and freedom:

> Outside, a rising wind; objects
> in the night paddock
> lay free, gaining their new existence
> away from him: axle, hubcap, milk-can
> abandoned in the tussocks,
> in the rusty grass, glowed with moisture.

Here, as in the poetry generally, the impulse to observe details of this world breaks free of a dogmatically-expressed concern with the next world. Once again, facts are found to have a radiance - and

their "moisture" gently rebukes the fires, whether of puritanism or purgatory.

With "Your Father's House" (TP, 28), it is paradise that makes a faint appearance: paradise, though, as a place within sensation where the rhythms of various noticings combine to hover "on the edge of outcry". It is the paradise of a childhood memory - "A first, frail paradise", a dream appreciated only in later life. It is also a lost paradise, since his mother "lived thereafter/ in the unlike house". Within this paradise of unified sensation, there is one perception with a specifically Catholic significance: "Behind the door/ the pale blue Child-of-Mary cape". This momentarily conjures a time when Catholic culture offered a secure source of identity and ritual. The "Children of Mary" sodality was a group for unmarried women, whose members wore a blue cloak and white veil, colours of the Blessed Virgin. On the third Sunday of each month, wearing their regalia, they sat together during Mass in pews marked by the sodality's banner and standards. On the same Sunday they attended Benediction and held their own meeting. Their blue and white presence also graced processions, such as those of Corpus Christi and Holy Thursday. Clearly, this reinforced a model of church which was concerned to establish visible identity, and which, while it also provided a degree of excitement and difference, gave women a virgin symbol. Buckley's reference is, however, quite dispassionate: the blue cape is simply one sensation among others, including spittle and pipe smell, which create the moment. He is not mourning the loss of such a Catholic world. He is not offering any critique of the "Children of Mary" symbolism. He is remembering and celebrating his own early, pre-poetic "idiom of sensation", where the pace of breathing matches the pace of noticing:

No place was like your father's house. I followed
you round and round, grinning,
nervy with your pleasure; even when,
bedded down, fatigued with ancestry,
kneeing the blankets, I heard their
soft laughter rustling the kitchen
and over the orchard's dung smells
the apple trees made their furred sound
of green moving
it was as though
I lay along the buds
of my mother's body
so close to sleep I felt
the farm sliding in water, myself
growing crafty as a farmer, all of it
hovered on the edge of outcry.

Catholicism, then, stays in Buckley's imagination as one of the idioms of sensation. Where its colours, smells, and patterned movements contribute a sense of the immanent sacred, a sense of identity and origins, Catholicism keeps a place within his structures of feeling and language. Even so, that place is on the edge of sensation. Although they are recreated with a sense of intimacy, the sensory elements of Catholicism are refused a certain immediacy: they belong almost to "another" self, since they are identified with the self-as-object, the self being almost clinically observed by a consciousness which sees them only as historical and cultural moments. The doctrinal elements of Catholicism have lost their force and relevance for "questions of personal identity, meaningful action, and the inner structures of feeling".[1] While it may be legitimate to explain this as a failure within Catholicism, or as a shift from transcendent to immanent models of the sacred, it is also an expression of the anti-ideological impulse in Buckley's imagination, and the manner in which his poetry has come to privilege the language

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1. Poetry and the Sacred, p. 11.

which the self has learned and forget the language which tradition teaches.

In fact, Buckley's imagination has always constructed "God" as something of an exile. "In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom" has God voyaging between the heroism of Mindszenty in Europe and the professed cowardice of the speaker in Melbourne. "The World Awaiting Redemption" is self-consciously aware that its image of the God of the Galilean nose is distant from conventional Catholic expectations of that period. Similarly, "The Strange Personality of Christ" rejects images of Christ which are seen as too familiar, and prefers to see him as an hierophany. "Stroke" is searching for God in the dry distances of the land and the heart. "Golden Builders" locates its God somewhere between the city and the grave, and we do not even know if the grave is meant to be empty or inhabited. "God", then, is structured in a way which corresponds to the poetry's own central concerns and strategies - as, for example, the relationship between estrangement and belonging which characterises Buckley's treatment of Australia and Ireland, the relationship between intimacy and distance which lies beneath his evocation of love, and the liminality of a language which wants to enter deeply into sensate experience and break through to moments of deeper realisation, transparency, even innocence. What the later poetry shows is the later stage of this process, whereby traditional symbols of God, Christ, and church, are more and more incorporated into Buckley's expatriating imagination.

SECTION FOUR

CATHOLICS IMAGINING: FRANCIS WEBB

In focusing on the style of Catholicism implicit in Webb's poetry, I want simply to return to one aspect of his poetry: the way it can express a very conventional piety, yet also assume, as its model, a church of the poor, which gives power and authority to the weak, placing its wounded Christ on the margins of respectability.

Webb's poetry can be interpreted as an expression of devout Catholicism (even if this does somewhat sanitise it). It incorporates central dogmas about Christ, Mary and the eucharist. It reverences martyrdom, believes in the eternal triumph of the Church, and celebrates Catholic devotions such as "The Angelus" and "The Stations of the Cross". In "Five Days Old" (CP, 150), Christ is the redeemer, the divine child who incarnates "All the fullness of Heaven" and makes danger and sin "Faint and remote". If we momentarily overlook the poem's tensions, its iconography is markedly conventional: the stable and its straw, the gifts of the magi, the inn, the manger, and the kneeling figures. "Canobolas" (CP, 197) presents Mary very much as Mother of God, with her mediatory powers and her consoling breasts. She is also the fount of wisdom, since humanity can "learn from her the True Form" of nature perfected in Christ. In "Our Lady's Birthday" (CP, 200) she is Immaculate Conception, Mother of Sorrows, and mediator. In both poems Mary is treated with an abstract transcendence, although this is qualified by a search for an immediate, if obscure, consolation (a search which risks sentimentalism). Webb's poetry constantly reveals its fascination with the eucharist, the wounded centre of all love, but "Song of Hunger" (CP, 212) offers a particularly fervent expression:

So carouse with charity, hurry to this place,
My splayed eternity for your embrace:
Hold up the anna's fiery Host, and call,
See life's spotless calligraphies crease my face
While rickety skeletal shanks work up above
Canvas, space-platitude, race
To His tiny stall.

O my love, O my love! (CP, 213)

This has an intensity comparable to that experienced by Maria Goretti, who, in "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262) was often "in tears at Mass before the Communion". While "The Stations" (CP, 94) confronts a busy, educated and cynical world with the foolish sign of the cross, "Beeston Regis" (CP, 145) affirms the supreme power of prayer and the eternal nature of the invisible Church.

Yet, as we have seen, Webb's poetry is so deeply touched by his characteristic model of suffering, that it cannot represent the power and glory of this dogmatic and devotional tradition in so simple and straightforward a manner. Even as The Canticle creates its traditional Francis, with his poverty, song and stigmata, and honours his restoration of the Church, it challenges the boundaries of polite devotion by having the leper confront the Church's self-serving charity. In one sense, this expresses a traditional notion: if Christians really believe in the eucharist they will imitate its communion in their lives. In another sense, this comes very close to a radical critique: it sympathises with the leper when he reverses devotional logic, arguing that, if he does not experience communion in the Church, then the Church does not really believe in the eucharist. If this grants an unusual religious authority to the leper (and not to the "scampering priest"), "The Stations" (CP, 94) and "Derelict Church" (CP, 220) discover Webb's preferred model of church, not in the cathedral, the high achievement of Catholic culture, but in the

"threadbare room" where love is "the moment", and in the "gaping wreck" and "crippled church", where "The Cross slopes down to jackboot and grimy truck" as Christ's redemptive presence enters the terror and toil of human history. Christ, in "Harry" (CP, 224), identified, not with McAuley's image of the Word, but with a language which breaks the categories of reason. Christ, in "Poet" (CP, 152), is identified with the sinner, confronts the established language of righteousness, and establishes instead a language, not of stones, but of desert winds and sands - a scoured word of forgiveness. In other words, while Webb's poetry does employ Catholic symbols of transcendence, such as the eucharist and the cross, it does not use a transcendent mode. Its models of authority, Christ, and church are fundamentally and consistently communal.

While this does not mean that his poetry becomes automatically and simply anti-institutional, it does mean that it incorporates a Catholicism very much in accordance with "the will of the poem". Without any further recapitulation, I want to illustrate how Webb's poetry makes Catholicism in its own image and to suggest how it also embodies a subversive potential.

One of the ways in which Christ is seen to fulfil the Suffering Servant prophecies is in his kenosis or self-emptying.

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

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1. Philippians, 2:6-11.

In the way it emphasises the humiliation and glory at the heart of Christ's mystery, this Pauline text appeals to Webb's kind of imagination and lies behind a poem like "Back Street in Calcutta". (CP, 220)

For the poem endures its own kenosis. The language prepares for it: "I have walked among you sorriest skeletons". The initial assurance gives way as the detached observer quickly finds himself thrust into the midst of sorriest humanity, as the focus moves from "I" to "you". This signals the pattern of the poem, which works on a power shift: initially from being a self-contained observer of Calcutta's hunger, the speaker becomes one of the starving, an importunate mouth begging salvation from the tormented one (who represents the body of Christ).

Pain is first of all a "vacuum" - no meaning, just fact: "nothing good,/ Crevasses in the flesh, emergence of bones". Having seen this, the speaker next partakes of an anti-eucharist: he eats alone - there is no identification, no fellowship operating. He feels guilty - as much because he lacks suffering, as because others have it. Searching for consolation in music (Bruckner) and philosophy ("dim sad concepts of order"), he seems to see the others' pain unexpectedly increased, until it becomes a devil/cross on their backs:

> A little guiltily I shall take my food,
> I shall sit playing Bruckner, have his tones
> Awaken some pain and anger, then relax,
> Or dim sad concepts of order fill my veins:
> Of beauty I'll sing to you silent on your backs. (CP, 220-221)

This is marvellously ambiguous: is it the complacent singer who is the burden on their backs, or is it some form of "beauty"?

The final stanza gives the answer, by moving out from the submerged image of the cross, "silent on (their) backs", as the sufferers become

Christ's tormented flesh (his eucharistic body). Meanwhile, the speaker, heir to Bruckner and Aquinas, becomes the guilty one who must make confession and ask absolution, not in the official sacrament of the Church, but in the back streets of civilisation. Here the poem fulfils the promise of its first line, as the enclosed ego is emptied out and finds itself within a humbled address to those who, previously objects of his pity, are now the potential agents of his salvation:

> In all your agonies O spare compassion
> For me, the well lined and articulate fool
> Who knows he tears you, stretched so still, to live.
> Tormented flesh that is my flesh, forgive!
> And lap around my deathbed like a pool
> That starving I may make a true, final confession. (CP, 221)

This poem incorporates Catholic elements in a way which confirms the more horizontal character of Webb's religious imagination. It is based in a conventional meditation on the Last Judgment, where the Son of Man, having rewarded those who helped him among the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, and imprisoned, then turns to the wicked and says, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me."[1]. While it was quite usual for this passage to be given, in sermons and devotional reading, a moral interpretation (an exhortation to perform works of charity), Webb sharpens and shapes it into a parable of Christian perception and involvement. A moral reading easily allows a certain detachment, as the sufferers can remain "objects" of charity. Webb's poem breaks down that detachment. The poem shifts from an objective power-base to an intersubjective one - and this suggests an imagination pushing at the walls of conventional Catholic thought, which is highly objective.

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1. Matthew, 25:31-46.

The last moment also recalls a typically Catholic concern: the chance of "final confession". Again, however, Webb is shifting power: the speaker is not praying to a priest, but to a derelict; he is moving power from the Sacrament of the Church to the sacrament of the poor. Webb's conventional devotion includes, then, a de-formalising instinct to find Christ in unexpected places.

This poem also recalls the Catholic practice of "The Stations of the Cross", where the faithful were reminded that their neglect had nailed Christ to his Cross, and where they imagined the physical aspects of his suffering. The poem follows this pattern: the speaker reprimands himself for his indifference, concentrates on the "tormented flesh", acknowledges his guilt, and then prays for forgiveness. Yet, this final prayer, as well as confessing indifference before suffering, completes the poem's own underlying confession of faith: that the weakness of the speaker and the sufferers is their common glory. This imaginative tension between the two connotations of "confession" - acknowledging sin and giving voice to faith - gives the poem its toughness, and saves it from that sentimental stance which too smoothly sees Christ in the sufferer and which responds, not really to mystery, but to its own self-conscious and paternalistic charity.

As many a holy card can testify, Maria Goretti has suffered more from the sentimental intentions of believers than she ever suffered from the seductive intentions of her assailant. Webb's "Lament for St Maria Goretti" (CP, 262) manages, however, to break the subject free of such associations.

Maria Goretti is a saint whose holiness might have gone unnoticed, had she not, at the age of twelve, been stabbed to death for refusing the

sexual advances of a young man. She then became, in popular Catholic devotion, a patron saint for (female) purity. Working from this context, Webb instinctively touches the ambiguities beneath the story's clean surface. His first image shows this: "The virginal belly of a screen/ Winces before the blade, the evening wind". (CP, 262) A white screen beside Maria's hospital bed flinches from the wind as her body had before the knife (and the penis). The image, then, does more than recall a pure girl's martyrdom. It makes the woman vulnerable before the male thrust, which expresses itself not just in attempted rape, but also in the lewd fascination with virginity which is the darker side of the cult of Maria Goretti. It is almost as if Webb here encodes a critique of the very devotion to which he is himself committed.

Certainly, Webb is not concerned to celebrate univocally the ultimate victory of the virgin-martyr, as popular devotion does (often sanitising the surrounding brutality and obscenity). He is searching the "wash of space" between her death and her sanctity, hoping to centre them both in the one moment. In the first stanza he makes Maria - wounded, dying - the poem's own questing centre. We are thereafter either focused on the meaning of her face, or moving with the currents of her chloroformed mind. In this way the poem makes her, not an elevated icon for devotion, but rather a dramatic centre, shifting between objective and subjective perspectives, drifting almost involuntarily towards the disintegration which may take her into glory. With its shifting perspectives, the poem explores and enacts the ambiguity within Maria's Christian heroism. It asks us to consider how much she is victim, how much agent of her sanctity. This is effected through the tensions within and between the two voices, Maria's and the commentator's, which together provide the poem's

dramatic base.

If we follow first the commentator's voice, which frames the poem, what we have is a searching of "this child's face", a searching which moves more deeply into ambiguity even as it moves more deeply into peace. In the first stanza, the commentator moves from a fascination with the obscene aspects of Maria's death, through a wounded sense of transcendence in which a weakened star "Twitches like a puddle on scoured hygienic stone" towards a rather tentative suggestion that Maria may act as some kind of reconciliatory symbol for the wreckage of historical, cosmic, and even apocalyptic wars. The suggestion is kept tentative by the way Maria's role remains passive, and by the way the wreckage is left drifting in "the wash of space" which seems to be something of a neutral, not to say "exhausted", zone "Round the pretty bays of this child's face". Here too one of the main dramatic tensions is seen: the almost saccharine "pretty" sits with difficulty in the same stanza as the blade, the twitching star, the cruel war and the "toothless broken ships", just as the child's face seems suddenly small before all the suffering which circles it. She may be too weak to bear the mystery. There is no clear sense of her actively and voluntarily incorporating these destructive forces into her suffering, making it vicarious. That is an issue which the poem seems to leave drifting in the space between the two voices.

In the third stanza the commentator speaks again. Maria's face is now a "thirsting wilderness", a desert of pain desperate for water. That the water is Christ is implied by the way Webb likens the "Aves" of the Angelus to buckets of water "passed in a slow time/ Up to a thirsting land". (Eventually, Maria's voice will take up this reference to water, making its Christian reference explicit.) In the

fifth stanza the commentator names Maria's desolation by speaking of Ferriere, the place where her much-loved father died and she and the family endured great poverty. This is the place of Maria's own deepest doubts and emptinesses. Yet with its final moment, the commentator's voice has achieved a real, though ambiguous, peace:

> Six o'clock. And the Miserere. Final Grace.
> And Death and the Woman, strangely at one, will place
> Ambiguous fingers on all of this child's face.

The first line operates from a devotional context. Six o'clock is the hour at which the Angelus is prayed and Christ's incarnation and redemptive mission are recalled. During the Angelus, in the repeated "Aves", believers also ask Mary, mediatrix of grace, to "pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death". "The Miserere" is one of the penitential psalms, Psalm Fifty One, and was often said to prepare for death. Its relevance can be indicated with two verses:

> Save me from death, God my saviour,
> and my tongue will acclaim your righteousness . . . (v.14)

> My sacrifice is this broken spirit,
> you will not scorn this crushed and broken heart . . . (v.17)

"Final Grace" refers to what was commonly called the "final grace of a happy and a holy death". The signs for Maria are all positive, but Webb reintroduces a strong note of ambiguity when he has the Woman (whom I take to represent Mary) "strangely at one" with Death.

The commentator's is a voice which is emblematic, and anxious for some general pattern of meaning. Maria's voice is more immediate and personal. The commentator wants to speak of the larger, outer world, to name the mystery of things, while Maria's is a small voice, struggling in much simpler language to name her own dying. It is also a voice which is holding and breaking under chloroform, while the commentator's is firmly located between the hour of prayer and Christ's mystery ("Six o'clock.") and "this child's face", the

particular and immediate humanity. The interplay between these two voices creates an effect similar to that in A Drum For Ben Boyd, where truth is most present in the empty spaces between different voices.

Maria's voice is addressed to her friend, Teresa, who sat beside her death-bed (although what she says has the feel and force of an interior monologue, since it explores her own consciousness and makes only very faint connections with the outer world). She begins as one finding some relief from pain, though even the chloroform resembles a blade, coming "Like a stiletto to our gasping void". The chloroform comes to represent the tension between unravelling and remoulding, holding and dissolving, which is central to Webb's religio-poetic structure, as well as to Maria's spiritual struggle:

> Sometimes you look lovely swimming there beside me
> While chloroform unravels the holy lines of your face,
> I would take you into my hands to remould you, shape you,
> But the pain, the pain . . .

There is a strong feeling here that "the pain" refers as much to what Teresa would feel under creative remoulding as to what Maria feels from her wounds (her remoulding). By imagining herself as Teresa's reshaper, Maria actually creates a fellowship of suffering between herself and her friend. This means that although the pain is a stronger presence in these lines - stronger than "the holy lines of your face" which unravel - it is not a pain which can be simply described as negative. There is companionship. "And pure, honest companionship may implicitly carry comfort within itself, neutralizing the often frightening sense of solitude in our affairs."[1].

Teresa's companionship is not, however, an absolute comfort. In the next moment, Maria is a frightened little girl wanting her dead

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1. Webb, introducing the selection of his poems in 12 Poets, 1950-1970, ed., A. Craig, p. 20.

father. He seems to rise, but does not come through the chloroform drifts and into reality (perhaps because his rising would represent some escape from her suffering). Webb makes this moment of tenuous communion very poignant with the image, "a flight of birds hangs like a rosary". Maria said the rosary daily for her dead father. Yet "flight" also connotes a passing moment - and so it is: "he is smiling, but the chloroform will dissolve him."

Maria wants to be comforted, yet expresses deep faith in Christ's real presence in the Mass. She recalls how, at the moment of Communion, she "seemed to see Him there, heaving up to Golgotha,/ And rising and falling." This is, of course, the suffering Christ - "heaving" - and it is interesting that Webb here places the "falling", not the "rising", last: indicating again his suspicion of easy transcendence. And Maria is falling: through her guilt about stealing "two spoonfuls of Angelino's polenta", into the last notes of the Angelus, into the chloroform, then into the disintegration of her own conscious ego. It is in this final void that Christ is first heard to speak: "Take up your cross". This is a fragmentary reference, but it incorporates into the text not only Maria's vocation to suffer, but also the paradox which follows immediately in the original text:

> Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.'[1].

The fragment, then, is full of promise. It does not, though, keep Maria unafraid of suffering's dreadful solitude, and she calls, "Touch me. Teresa, quickly . . ." She is holding on to the outer world as a way of holding the boundaries of herself together.

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1. Matthew, 16:24f.

In Maria's final speech, she is torn between Ferriere, the place of death, and Corinaldo, the place "Where I was born". Corinaldo seems to win - and it seems to win because of the companionship between Maria and Teresa which brings "words of water". Maria says:

> Teresa, I can still see you: Ferriere is closing in:
> The chloroform works at you. Be dainty Corinaldo
> Where I was born. I can hardly read or write:
> But your breast is our little pet hill, your hair like shadows
> Of clouds on our grain, your mouth like a watercourse.
> Have you spoken? have words of water been truly uttered
> To my thirst - it's this drumming, drumming in my ears.

As the place of birth becomes the place of water, Webb makes a clear reference to Christ. Maria here confirms the commentator's words: that her face was a "thirsting wilderness" and that prayer was bringing it water.

Still, Maria does not escape the terrifying disintegration and absolute displacement of death. Her voice ends as her words lose their shape and identity, becoming scrawl. (Something of Webb's concern for the poet's broken eloquence sharpens this moment.) Yet she seems to let herself be named, written in a way that gives her representative status: "All life writing me on earth". Her surrender is her way to attain the ultimate fellowship, once more signalled by Webb's use of "all".

This, however, is not the last word. That belongs to the commentator, as we have seen. Coming back to those words, we find their ambiguity enriched rather than simplified by Maria's status as a Christ-figure. "Ambiguous" retains its stressed position at the beginning of the last line. There is, however, one change to the commentator's framing device which is highly significant. His words have, throughout, been uttered between "Six o'clock" and "this child's face", the former referring to the hour the Angelus is prayed and Christ's mystery

remembered, the latter referring to one particular and suffering face. This frame quietly insists on the problem of faith: whether in this immediate and dying face it is possible to see Christ. At the very end, Webb breaks the pattern and affirms Maria's representative and transcendent status: he writes, "all of this child's face".

Since it never seriously questions Maria Goretti's status as a representative and Christ-like figure, Webb's poem still situates itself securely, if innovatively, within conventional hagiography. It never, for instance, entertains the possibilities exploited by Amanda Lohrey when she recalls going, in the very early sixties, on a convent school excursion to see a film on Maria Goretti and to learn that "Death is better than defilement." This is not the message she receives:

> This film was a gross and unforgiveable miscalculation. To us, all Italian boys were handsome. Brooding. Sensual. And dark. The archetype of the demon lover already well established in the romantic trash we read. As Alessandro brooded over Maria we tightened in our seats, suppressing an uncomfortable excitement . . . This film did little for purity. For female masochistic impulses, yes. For rape fantasies, yes. For purity, not a lot.
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> The obliviousness of the nuns and the Catholic hierarchy to the potent message of the sub-text and the subversive hermeneutic of the unconscious is no better illustrated than in the widespread practice of the Maria Goretti cult.[1].

Compared with this critique, Webb's poem remains an exercise in innocence. The same cannot be said of "Homosexual" (CP, 227-229). Here we see how Webb's model of church-Christ, so privileging the authority of suffering, can release subversive possibilities.[2].

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1. Amanda Lohrey, "Work-in-Progress or A Writer's Lament", Sweet Mothers, Sweet Maids, p. 226.
2. This reading of "Homosexual" once prompted an angry reaction from a Catholic devotee of Webb's, who thought I was arguing that Webb disagreed with official teaching on this matter. I am, therefore, prompted to repeat the obvious: my concern is to follow the imaginative directions of the poem, not to guess at Webb's personal moral theology.

"Homosexual" says that the rejected homosexual embodies Christ's love more deeply than do his virtuous judges. It could, of course, be argued that the poem represents a "spiritual" or "pastoral" position, as distinct from a "moral" one. (Official Catholicism has long maintained a distinction between the objective moral order and the subjective moral state of the individual). Such an argument would, however, have to ignore the highly significant fact that the official response to homosexuality and the poem's response to the homosexual emerge from different imaginative assumptions.

The official position has been (and remains) that, in the objective order, homosexual actions are sinful because intrinsically disordered, but that, in the subjective order, a prudent assessment should be made in regard to the degree of freedom - and hence the degree of moral responsibility - involved in such actions. This distinction between objective and subjective morality has been used to create a space between moral and pastoral approaches to homosexuality. What is important here, though, is the imaginative structure of the official teaching. It imagines moral truth in objective terms: truth resides in the natural law and in Christ's revelation (preserved in the Church). Truth, therefore, has an immutable character and a transcendent authority because it expresses the will of God. It also imagines moral truth as metaphysical and, therefore, independent of or at least more important than such truths as those propounded by psychology. It further imagines its own authority as binding, indeed as divinely approved: Cardinal Ratzinger, reasserting the Church's conventional condemnation of homosexual activity, claims that the role of Catholic <u>magisterium</u> is to protect the truth of Scripture and Tradition, and that its teaching cannot be interpreted "only as if

it were an optional source for the formation of one's conscience".[1]

Ratzinger also argues that those who condone homosexual activity "reflect, even if not entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual".[2] This assumes a metaphysical, even vertical model of personhood[3]: the genuine truth of each person is without, in the realm of the absolute; it can be apprehended by reason (enlightened by revealed truth); the will, should, therefore, follow reason (and the magisterium). Here too the goal of moral life is imagined after a model of "perfection" - as distinct, say, from a model of "wholeness" which is more democratic in its implications.

This hierarchial imagination is summarised in Ratzinger's assertion that "the Catholic moral viewpoint is founded on human reason illumined by faith and is consciously motivated by the desire to do the will of God our Father".[4] In this kind of imagining, "will of God" language becomes less metaphorical and more categorical - indeed, Ratzinger's letter continually suppresses the multivalence of metaphorical language when it interprets "the creative wisdom of God", the "Way" of Christ, and the Genesis myth of creation (which he uses to establish that heterosexual marriage is the moral norm). In

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1. Joseph Ratzinger, "The pastoral care of homosexuals", issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, The Tablet, 8 November, 1986, 1214. This letter reaffirms the Congregation's earlier, "Declaration on Certain Problems of Sexual Ethics" (Cf. Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents, Vol 2, pp. 486-499.)
2. Ratzinger, p. 1213.
3. It also assumes that it is not using a model at all.
4. Ratzinger, p. 1212.

accordance with such an imagination, the objective moral status of homosexual activity is declared:

> It is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good. A person engaging in homosexual behaviour therefore acts immorally.
>
> To choose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator's sexual design. Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life; and so it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living . . .
>
> As in every moral disorder, homosexual activity prevents one's own fulfilment and happiness by acting contrary to the creative wisdom of God. The Church, in rejecting erroneous opinions regarding homosexuality, does not limit but rather defends personal freedom and dignity realistically and authentically understood.[1].

Nor does the argument end there. The distinctions between object and intersubjective moral states, and between moral and pastoral concerns are themselves regularised. In a further display of its hierarchical imagination, the letter goes on to argue that no pastoral response to homosexual women and men is valid which does not take its ultimate authority and starting point from the Church's objective teaching:

> But we wish to make it clear that departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral. Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral.[2].

Webb's poem takes as its starting point:

> To watch may be deadly. There is no judgment, compulsion,
> And the object becomes ourselves. That is the terror:
> (CP, 227)

By subtly parodying tones of intimacy and moral concern, this discursive opening has a powerfully confrontative impact. We are immediately situated within the poem's central drama: the choice - and it is made "our" choice - between the security of righteousness and the risk of compassion. As detached, disapproving observation more

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1. Ratzinger, p. 1213.
2. Ratzinger, p. 1214.

and more surrenders to sympathetic engagement, it becomes clearer that the poem is displacing the conventional, objective model of truth in favour of an intersubjective one.

Nor is it any intersubjective model; once again it is the fellowship of suffering which reveals the truth, as it reveals Christ's love

and, in different style, "the will of God". Therefore the poem only briefly indicates the homosexual's innocent joy (which he loses through the fault of others), and constructs instead a figure who cannot find himself reflected in love's eyes, only in "Pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment", who is imprisoned in pharisaic language since there "remain to him only/ The words of sin, escape, which is becoming all of life". Yet, as this language more and more tries to contain and reject him, the poem is continually beating at its walls so that "the object" is always becoming "ourselves". This procedure signifies the redemptive character of his suffering. The one denied love sits in judgment over us. An added irony is achieved here: we are identified as "one of the Twelve Tribes", and this gospel text concludes with the promise that "Many who are first will be last, and the last, first."[1]. Those who rejected the homosexual are condemned or saved by his suffering. They are saved, as the speaker is, if they understand that his movement, his thought, his being, his dying, even his sin, are no longer "his", but "ours" (since "ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried"[2].). They are condemned if they fail to see this - that is, they are ironically excluded by the "objective" wall they have themselves constructed, by their fear of sympathetic imagination. As the poem communicates

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1. Cf. Matthew, 19:27-30.
2. Isaiah, 53:4.

this visionary and redemptive theme, it also includes a great deal of discursive poetry which confronts us with its realism - though that realism is compassionate rather than detached.

Once the choice between detachment and compassion has been introduced in the opening lines, the poem elaborates our "terror" at the prospect that "the object becomes ourselves". What is terrifying is the radical, simple process whereby our/his movement, thought and being are given over to mortality. This terror may support the walls of detached observation, or it may shake them and expose the common, human moment: the moment when existence may be "simply given". Once more the impoverished moment becomes the universal one as we are urged to "disentangle the disgust and indifference" and "Be all a thin hurried magnanimity". While he acknowledges "Popular magazines, digests, psychoanalysts", the speaker achieves understanding through sympathetic imagination: "I shall only watch."

Watching becomes a kind of participative awareness as, having indicated "the lighted house, the security, the Beginning", the speaker sees the homosexual's terror:

> Now the God,
> The Beginning, the joy, give way to boots and footmarks.
> Pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment
> Embody him; and words and arbitrary laws.
> He is embodied, he weeps - and all mankind,
> Which is the face, the glass even, weeps with him.

In its Catholic context, this is more subversive than we might at first realise. The poem is so informed by its vision of the broken one revealing God, that it is not only affording the dying homosexual a representative and radical humanity, and arguing that he may be specially loved by God, but also arguing that repressive and righteous attitudes have not, as would presumably be intended, preserved God.

They have actually expelled him (or her). Further, it says that the actuality and sympathy of experience is replaced by pharisaic "words" and that personal freedom is destroyed by "arbitrary laws". This position is not precisely a theological one (except inasmuch as this imagination might anticipate and attract a theology consistent with its meaning-intention). What we see here is the degree to which Webb's vision is directed more by metaphor than by doctrine.

The participative awareness which encourages the speaker to believe that the homosexual is "all mankind" is not as confrontative as that which enables him to shift the focus from "his" sin to "our sin" - and the context clearly indicates that "our sin" is his:

> The first window broken. Something nameless as yet
> Resists embodiment. Something, the perennial rebel,
> Will not rest. And this, his grandest element,
> Becomes his terror, because of the footsteps, us.
>
> I shall not consider sin beginning, our sin,
> The images, furtive actions. All is a secret
> But to us all is known as on the day of our birth
> He will differ, must differ among all the pale glass faces,
> The single face contorted in hate or merriment.

This use of "our sin" confronts the public and walled mentality with its disrespect for human difference and its need to oppress "the perennial rebel"; it asks such a mentality to surrender power and share the homosexual's suffering. In this way it initiates process which will reverse the irony whereby "his grandest element,/ Becomes his terror", and will make that reversal a pattern of redemption. These lines have both an obvious and a secret irony. The obvious irony is that it is the homosexual's capacity for love ("his grandest element") which attracts such hatred. At another level, the "grandest element", the "Something nameless" and restless, not yet embodied, is precisely the vision embodied by the time suffering and poem end: the Christ within his suffering. That is, his grandest element is

precisely the element which is repulsive to the footstepping mentality.

It is the Christian direction within this irony which is followed as the final stanza opens:

> And now he is here. We had him conveyed to this place
> Because our pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment
> Left only sin as flesh, the concrete, the demanded.
> He does not speak or hear - perhaps the pox.

The reference to someone "conveyed to this place" remembers Christ being taken to the place of the skull - and it once more identifies the oppressive mentality with pharisaism. Similarly, "He does not speak" recalls:

> Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly,
> he never opened his mouth,
> like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house,
> like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers
> never opening its mouth. [1].

Given the poem's emphasis on the redemptive irony in the homosexual's suffering, its refusal of oppressive language, and its struggle for a compassionate, intersubjective reality, these bits of memory are enough to authorise the poem's final belief:

> Again I am tempted, with the Great,
> To see in ugliness and agony a way to God:
> Worse, I am tempted to say he has found God
> Because we cannot contort our faces in merriment,
> And we are one of the Twelve Tribes - he our king.
> He has dictated silence, a kind of peace
> To all within these four unambiguous walls,
> Almost I can say with no answering scuffle of rejection,
> He is loving us now, he is loving all.

The impact of this is fully appreciated only if we realise that, whereas Cardinal Ratzinger assures homosexuals that celibacy is their part in the Cross of Christ and that they can learn this from the Church, this poem is saying that Christ is crucified in the

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1. Isaiah, 53:7.

homosexual's suffering and oppression, and that the church of the poor must learn from him. If the speaker uses "Almost", it is not because he is unsure of what he says; it is because what he says must keep its own shape close to suffering.

SECTION FIVE

GIVES A WORD TO THE SAND?

If, within its Catholic context, Webb's poetry can be subversive, it can also be innovative. Implicitly, but none the less profoundly, it challenges the assumption that any one model can dominate religious language and life and can so ignore its imaginative origins as to present itself simply as a closed metaphysical system. Because of its richly metaphoric character, Webb's poetry dislocates that propositional mode of theological language which had become institutionalised within Catholicism, and renews the language of belief by holding a conversation between symbols and metaphors of the Christian tradition and those of the modern-Australian culture and experience.

Another, and more fundamental, way of describing Vatican II Catholicism is to speak of a shift from a dominant, propositional mode of theological language and towards a range of metaphorical and symbolic modes. Avery Dulles describes how, from about 1850 to about 1950, a neo-Scholastic theology became all but universally dominant within Catholic theology. Neo-Scholasticism argues that supernatural revelation transmits conceptual knowledge by means of words, and its model of speech is objective and rational. Dulles cites Dieckmann, who claims that supernatural revelation in speech "has truths as its object and cannot be perceived by man except through the intellect, although perhaps it may be proposed to him by means of certain images".[1] This reflects a widespread neo-Scholastic suspicion that the imagination was unreliably emotive and ambiguous. Dulles also

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1. Avery Dulles, Models of Revelation, p. 42.

cites the Anti-Modernist Oath (1910) which asserts that faith is "a genuine assent of the intellect to truth externally communicated by hearing, whereby, on the authority of the all-truthful God, we believe as true what has been said, attested and revealed to us by the personal God who is our Creator and Lord".[1] Whereas revelation has an active sense - the process of prophecy, inspiration and teaching by Jesus which builds up "the deposit of faith" - it is this "deposit of faith" which constitutes objective revelation: "the body of propositional truth contained in Scripture and apostolic tradition".[2] This in turn leads to a particular image of Catholic dogma:

> One must therefore believe the dogmas as though they were uttered by Christ himself. In equating the dogmas of the Church with divine revelation the neo-Scholastics are faithful to their propositional understanding of revelation. The concept of a dogma as a divinely revealed truth serves in turn to reinforce the propositional view of revelation.[3]

It also reinforces an hierarchical view of authority, since it is the magisterium which is "the proximate and universal norm for determining what is of revelation".[4] Further, it encourages a propositional mode of tradition, inasmuch as tradition becomes a preserved collection of revealed truths.

While this propositional model has certain advantages - it is coherent and methodical; it fosters a sense of unity and loyalty, mission and identity - Dulles notes that it is now in decline. Its image of the Bible as a collection of propositions has been displaced by more recent biblical criticism, which has demonstrated the great variety of literary forms and conventions within the sacred text.

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1. Dulles, p. 43.
2. Dulles, p. 44.
3. Dulles, p. 44.
4. Dulles, p. 44.

Its objectifying theory of knowledge and speech is unacceptable to modern theories, which include emphases on the contextual and inter-personal nature of such processes. Its rather static notion of tradition has been replaced by a more dynamic notion. Moreover, by suppressing its own metaphorical character, this model encourages a separation of revelation from human imagination and experience. Dulles observes:

> Further objections to the propositional model are made under the heading of its inadequacy to experience. The model is a highly authoritarian one, requiring submission to concepts and statements that have come out of situations radically different from those of the contemporary believer. The propositions in the Bible and in the Church's tradition are held to be revelation, irrespective of whether they actually illuminate the believer's own situation. In this approach, little appeal is made to the evocative power of the biblical images and symbols; little motivation is given to seek signs of God's presence in one's own life and experience; little allowance is made for the kind of faith that probes and questions.[1]

John Coulson makes the same point. The general argument of his Religion and Imagination is

> that the real assent we make to the primary forms of religious faith (expressed in metaphor, symbol and story) is of the same kind as the imaginative assent we make to the primary forms of literature. In the articulation of this assent the theologian and the literary critic share what I have referred to as a common grammar, if by grammar is understood that underlying form or structure which is revealed as we learn and use a language.[2]

When he discusses theological inhibitions which prevent us discovering and using this common grammar, Coulson argues that theology has neglected its imaginative character. Having acknowledged that theologians may sometimes find it pastorally prudent to believe the old things in the old ways, he remarks that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was polemical, not pastoral, considerations which encouraged theologians "to show an overweening confidence in their theological explanations - at the cost of imaginative

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1. Dulles, p. 50.
2. John Coulson, Religion and Imagination, p. 145.

responsiveness".[1] In the nineteenth century "the difficulty was to bring the dogmatic, or rudimentary, forms of religious belief into accord with the experience of what seemed to be a uniquely modern way of life."[2] However, Coulson continues, the papacy was more concerned with safeguarding dogmas (and, for that reason, with centralising and asserting its own authority). Contemporary experience presents an even more difficult challenge to imagination and religion:

> The most serious source of theological inhibition, however, arises when the language of religion appears to be no longer that of the secular culture, and when its words, as they fall out of general use, become meaningless - the sentiments they stand for fading with them. The common grammar may then seem plausible only within a vanished culture. The Great War, for example, intensified what the Industrial Revolution had revealed. While the degree of obedience which enabled men to die in the mud of Passchendaele testified to the strength of their moral and religious convictions, as the war dragged on, so the language of such convictions was felt to be a rhetoric without power to affect the motive for social and political action, and the common grammar seemed to be that of a dead language.[3]

A disconnection between "beliefs" and "the primary forms of faith" has lead to a situation where "the language of religion ceases to nourish the hitherto common language of church and society".[4]

This awareness is shared by a number of other theologians. Ian Ramsey argues that religious language displays a logical impropriety and thereby evokes the religious situation (which Ramsey describes as a combination of odd discernment and total commitment). It is not a straightforward language, but a language created from its own characteristic combination of models and qualifiers. The description of God as "infinitely wise", for example, combines an empirical, concrete image with a conceptual qualifier ("infinitely") which

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1. Coulson, p. 147.
2. Coulson, p. 147.
3. Coulson, pp. 147-148.
4. Coulson, p. 82

protects the model from anthropomorphism and idolatry. In this way religious language can at once retain its familiarity with immediate experience and preserve its strangeness or mystery.[1] Edward Schillebeeckx relates the contemporary crisis in religious language to what he terms the "two-language approach": the assumption that the Church as described by the language of faith is different from the Church as described by sociology and history. In his view "it is most important not to forget that it is the same reality that is approached and interpreted, although from different points of view and with different questions".[2] Since the language of faith is historically conditioned, and since this historicity is an integral part of its hermeneutic, "The linguistic event should not . . . be raised to the level of 'timeless' categories."[3] He continues:

> Speaking in the language of faith, then, is essentially an historical and hermeneutical undertaking. Anyone who denies the historicity of the Christian faith and its language and therefore denies the necessity of this hermeneutical undertaking will inevitably - but mistakenly - believe that a crisis in the language of faith is a crisis of faith as such and, by polarization, force a state of crisis in the Church.[4]

The language of faith is not a ghetto-language; it becomes meaningless "if it does not contain a recognizable reference to man's experience in the world".[5] Langdon Gilkey, arguing that theological and liturgical symbols must express the sacred quality of the secular if they are to be meaningful, makes much the same point: "Religious symbols lose their reality if they are separated entirely from the life-world; yet they lose their integrity if they are simply

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1. Ian Ramsey, Religious Language.
2. Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Crisis in the Language of Faith as a Hermeneutical Problem", Concilium, May, 1973, 37.
3. Schillebeeckx, p. 32.
4. Schillebeeckx, p. 33.
5. Schillebeeckx, p. 35.

identified with the social symbols that structure that world."[1].

Gilkey's thesis is that if Catholicism is to become more creative in the modern situation, it must relinquish its absolutism and recognise "the new world of relativity - the relativity of its institutional structures, of its ecclesiastical hierarchy, its dogmatic formulations, its canon law, its liturgical forms".[2]. This, he claims, will deepen and widen - not diminish - the Church's sacramental character: not only because "secular reality" will be found more revelatory, but also because the interaction of religious and social symbolism will be empowered.

> If Catholicism, or Protestantism, is to achieve this task of mediating the divine grounding, the divine judgment, and the divine possibility to our entire secular existence, it must widen the scope of both word and sacrament far beyond their present religious, ecclesiastical, dogmatic and merely "redemptive" limits. . . The proclaimed word must intersect, in judgment and approbation, in critical analysis and deep support, the whole realm of social symbolism and of social behaviour . . ., a relation of deep and dangerously potential idolatry on the one hand, but on the other the necessary condition for creative human life, since we humans cannot be at all, especially, in a divine kingdom, without a symbolic social structure.[3].

Another important contribution to this shift in Catholic imagination has come from David Tracy, who thinks that the task of theology is not to "repeat the shop-worn conclusions of the tradition", but to risk a genuinely hermeneutical position. To repeat the "fundamentals" is not to interpret the tradition: hermeneutics is a mediation of past and present, "a translation carried on within the effective history of a

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1. Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence", Theological Studies, June, 1974, 252.
2. Gilkey, p. 264. Ian Barbour makes substantially the same point when he remarks that "the theologian should be cautious about identifying religious beliefs with any closed metaphysical system". (Myths, Models and Paradigms, p. 170.)
3. Gilkey, p. 265.

tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings".[1] Tracy agrees that theological language is derived from and retains imaginative elements: it is "a second-order, reflective language that claims fidelity to the originating religious languages of image, metaphor, symbol, myth and ritual expressive of the religious sensibility".[2] What he understands by "the religious sensibility" becomes clearer as he continually authorises religious language by relating it back to liminal experience rather than closed metaphysics:

> In either the limit-situations of the everyday or in the limit-questions of moral and scientific inquiry, a dimension limiting (as limit-to) and grounding (as limit-of) the ordinary is disclosed. For that basic dimension to our lives a language re-presentative of the basic faith disclosed in moments of crisis and of ecstasy seems appropriate. That basic faith in the worthwhileness of existence, in the final graciousness of our lives even in the midst of absurdity, may be named the religious dimension of our existence. The meaningfulness of both religious language and of the form of life it re-presents is grounded in the experience of a basic faith and is mediated cognitively by reflection upon limit-situations and limit-questions.[3]

As Tracy himself acknowledges, his position developed in close collaboration with the biblical critic, Norman Perrin, and the philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. In their joint study of New Testament language, they shaped an hypothesis that:

> the New Testament consistently modifies the traditional use of the language of proverbs, eschatological sayings and parables through such procedures as intensification, transgression, and "going to the limits" of language; these modifications allow the interpreter to propose that the sense of this language should be described as a limit-language of a genuinely religious character.[4]

It is not surprising, then, that when Ricoeur wants to consider the notion of revelation, he carries it back to what he describes as "its

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1. David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, p. 99.
2. David Tracy, "The Analogical Imagination in Catholic Theology", in David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr., Talking About God, p. 18.
3. David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order, p. 119.
4. David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order, p. 124, and also p. 138, n. 25.

most originary level", which he terms "the discourse of faith". This, he argues, is the origin of theological discourse, and, if interpretation of "revelation" makes this return, it avoids "a monolithic concept of revelation" based on propositions and encounters instead "a concept of revelation that is pluralistic, polysemic, and at most analogical in form".[1]

Following the general direction of such thinking, I would, therefore, argue that Vatican II Catholicism is best described as an attempt to recover the imaginative possibilities of religious and theological language, to reconnect dogmatic symbols with their mythic and linguistic counterparts, with social and personal symbolism.

One of the most influential formulations of this position is John Shea's Stories of God. Borrowing from Eliade, Shea declares: "Sacramental consciousness does not desert the concrete, historical world but turns it to symbol. It is sensitive to every experience for all human interaction is capable of becoming revelatory."[2] He then proposes that stories of God should be grounded in fundamental religious experience, which he describes as an awareness of Mystery generated by experiences such as contingency, communion, collapse, moral ambiguity, and disenchantment.[3] In discussing how disenchantment can be a religious experience, Shea refers directly to recent Catholic experience. After stating that "the Catholic world of the immediate past" betrayed "a tendency to merge the symbols of sacrality with the Sacred itself", he argues that this faulty

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1. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed., Lewis Mudge, p. 75.
2. John Shea, Stories of God, p. 21.
3. Shea, pp. 16-33.

understanding of the Church was then exposed during the sixties, leaving many Catholics angry, bitter and disenchanted. This disenchantment he sees reflected in an almost self-conscious emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the Church. Further, this disenchantment discloses negative and positive aspects. Negatively, it represents the pain of loss and disillusionment, inasmuch as humankind's relationship to God "has been guided by an understanding of Church that claimed too much". More importantly and positively, when a symbol has become an idol and is then broken open again, this process engenders a double freedom:

> Disenchantment is an experience of Mystery reasserting itself. Whenever a person mistakenly equates Mystery with finite reality, he creates an idol. An idol is not a symbol of Mystery but the pretension to be Mystery itself. . . In this setting the process of disenchantment is also a process of disengagement, a double freeing. Mystery is freed from the idol's exclusive hold and the idol is freed from its false identity. Mystery is restored to its status as genuine Mystery and finite reality, previously idolatrous, now has the possibility of being appropriated as a symbol, not the usurper of the sacred but one of its mediators.[1]

Such a description of Catholicism may seem remarkably remote from Webb's poetry. However, an important correspondence begins to emerge if we recall the tension between familiarity and strangeness which has distinguished this appreciation of religious language. If it is true that religious language is fundamentally metaphorical, the task of appropriating or re-enacting religious language will itself be determined by a tensive structure. Not only must religious language avoid becoming idolatrous, but it must also avoid becoming irrelevant.[2] If it is to remain relevant, and creative, religious language must be continually initiating a conversation between traditional symbols and immediate experience - in such a way that it respects both the sometimes strange, sometimes familiar integrity

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1. Shea, pp. 35-36.1.
2. Cf. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, p. 3.

and independence of religious language (as oddly logical) and the sometimes strange, sometimes familiar integrity and independence of human experience (as liminal). In such an enterprise (or hope) it is crucial that certain tensions are creatively pursued: between theological, and personal symbols, between dogmatic and historical perspectives, and particularly the tension, so characteristic of metaphor, between dislocation and renewal of meaning.[1] Of the three poetries being considered here, Webb's is the one which best reveals this process. In this sense, it is Webb's poetry which most deeply engages Vatican II Catholicism.

In McAuley's poetry, religious language is grounded in tradition. Tradition relates most positively and authoritatively to the past; it has a limited and essentially redemptive relationship to the present. Tradition also embodies a lost age of metaphysical wisdom. McAuley's poetry, then, is always locating the origin and object of religious language beyond the present moment, turning from modernity's confusion of individual, arbitrary and self-expressive tongues and willing itself back to the Word. This is true even of the more immediate style of symbolism employed in the later poems. There symbols such as resurrection and eucharist, although they are mediated in a very immediate fashion, are nevertheless associated with a landscape or situation which confronts the controlling observer with the heart's wandering darkness or the world's persistent despair. In other words, the symbols seem to be close to him, but they actually confirm the distance between his historical moment and his transcendent ideals. They call - ultimately and preferentially - from beyond.

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1. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", On Metaphor, ed., Sheldon Shacks, pp. 141-157.

Even though Buckley names the contemporary religious crisis as one of imagination,[1] his poetry attempts to recover an innocent and original language in the patterns of its own sensations and perceptions. It refuses to maintain any tension between transcendent and immanent modes of the sacred, and simply shifts its allegiance to the immanent mode. Eventually it refuses to maintain any tension between traditional and individual directions within religious language, and either expatriates the language of Catholicism or uses it to signify an historical culture. In this way, fulfilling its own anti-ideological and egocentric stance, Buckley's poetry is finally haunted by the absence of a traditional and transcendent God. It opts only for the immanent direction within religious language and comes to exemplify the line of argument followed by J. Hillis Miller:

> If any spiritual power can exist for the new poetry it must be an immanent presence. There can be for many writers no return to the traditional conception of God as the highest existence, creator of all other existences, transcending his creation as well as dwelling within it. If there is to be a God in the new world it must be a presence within things and not beyond them.[2]

In contrast to both of these, Webb's poetry searches for a religious language in which the sacred enters history, shares in the community of suffering, yet challenges the established power- structures of experience and language - not with divinity's supreme power, but with Christ's supreme woundedness. This is Webb's central metaphor for a love descended into humanity and raised beyond it. His language, therefore, indicates the sacred neither in terms of Absolute Truth and Being, nor in terms of a depth-dimension or ultimacy within psychological experience, but in the attempt to "Mould those dismantled words about the Cross".[3] Like the effect of any profound metaphor, Christ's presence in Webb's poetry guarantees only that

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1. Cf. Vincent Buckley, Cutting Green Hay, p. 256, pp. 291-293.
2. John Hillis Miller, "The Poetry of Reality", Literature and Religion, ed., Giles Gunn, p. 185.
3. "Good Friday, Norfolk", Collected Poems, p. 210.

meaning will be continually wounded, and continually healed.

As a way of bringing this study to something like a conclusion, I want, therefore, to give a particular reading of Webb's Eyre All Alone (CP, 181-192). This reading is, in Paul Ricoeur's terms, not "a hermeneutics of the text", but "a hermeneutics based on the problematics of the text".[1] It stands, as it were, in front of the text and reads the possibilities projected by the text - in this case, possibilities related to the renewal of religious language within Australian Catholicism.

One approach to Eyre All Alone is to read it as representing a search for the way of religious language, and to see how Webb's poetry identifies the authority of such language not with positions of power and grandeur, but with moments of humility. While it is obviously possible to establish an overreaching correspondence between Eyre's historical expedition and the biblical Exodus, this is an interpretative process somewhat out of tune with the poem's own. The poem does not invoke biblical language as the authoritative way of naming the religious quality in Australian history and experience. Its authority structure is not quite so vertical and hierarchical. Traditional religious symbols are not allowed any privileged status in the text: they must engage with Australian symbols as neighbours; they may even be re-named by Australian experience. They must, along with their neighbours, enter the poem's dominant metaphor and so share a journey which humbles them, teaching them a simplified and suffered tongue.

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1. Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical hermeneutics and theology", Theology Digest, Summer, 1976, 155.

As Webb begins his search, he takes Eyre into alienation - an alienation which he does not temper with any dogmas of communion. In this, Webb's imagination is acknowledging its creative need to contact religious forces in Australian landscape and history, as well as its more peculiar need to enter the desolate centre. Eyre is first situated in an exile which is deeply historical: isolation from England and from Perth, alienation from the landscape (the town seems to be a sacrifice to the land), a tenuous thread of communication (the whaler). There is even an image of convictism, implying a world more savagely absurd than tragic:

> We are isolated. Is man man?
> He shrugs among guffaws, transports of old jailbird dayshine
> Riotous in the stocks, and drooling. (CP, 181)

We need to add, from beyond the text, that Eyre is alienated from his own ambition, having just failed to discover the inland sea.

Alienation breeds its own kind of dreaming. It may be a Webbean irony that, when the hope of the isolated settlers is expressed, the movement is towards the direction of the setting sun:

> So we dream of the stock-route, east to homely west,
> To Perth, and the Sound, and the river of elder swans:
> Now a huge cable of winged sheep and bullocks
> Whirls through vast fords, milky ways, lies coiled
> Upon fat pastures. Man to man. Which is sometimes
> God to man, under all seven stars, westward. (CP, 181)

In this dream, which blends echoes of biblical mythology, Aboriginal mythology, and Australian idiom, it is noticeable that the reference to the Incarnation, though highlighted by placement, is momentary, inconclusive, and swiftly incorporated into the general movement "westward". It is not a consolation: as the refrain says, the journey leads "Past bitter waters, sands of Exodus". Similarly, in "Water", the poem's line of argument is declared: "thirst is the logician, thirst" (CP, 182). Eyre does not deny that water, "essential

sweetness beneath (his) tableland", will restore his "mind's blank deserted tableland"; he does not deny the possible allusion to St John's water of eternal life.[1] Indeed, he cries out for grace:

> Water, drown the current lies of refraction,
> Drown the shrill theories of thirst. (CP, 182)

But then we move further into alienation as Eyre's companions and journey "Lay open the bight of (his) soul to a groping beauty" (CP, 182). Like Leichhardt, Eyre will "explore/ Time after time this death's-head continent" (CP, 44).

At first Eyre's own "skull is of rebellion and is frightened" (CP, 183). He would prefer the soft-edged community he describes as he watches Baxter and the "three gentiles" sleeping. This language of oneness incorporates a reference to the eucharistic communion of the early Church: "We are one mind, one body even."[2] As if suggesting that such unitary aspirations in language may well be illusions, Webb snaps the rhythms and tones of "fluid sleep", replacing them with a world of sudden fact and confused significance as Eyre tries to comprehend that Baxter is dead and two aborigines have fled. Even as he tries to face the facts, he is reaching for their higher meaning, invoking, in a dramatically jumbled manner, the desert and the moon. From the bewilderment and pain, language and vision emerge simplified:

> That game left foot will always somehow limp,
> My friend, lie spotless there and very simple.
> Your pain and your great patience in the dream
> Are working oddly over the Bight and gleaming.

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1. Cf. John, 4:5-42.
2. Collected Poems, p. 182. Cf. Acts, 2:42-47, 4:32-35.

> Transfixed in fear and loneliness I burn.
> Maimed my brain, maimed my limbs. And a journey -
> Daybreak, snigger of dawn. I am alone. (CP, 183)

Here, very simply, a language is found which is authoritatively and integratedly religious. In one sense, it is centred in Webb's own imaginative structure, focusing on the moment of weakness, discovering there a vision of crucifixion. In another sense, it is opening out the path of religious imagination generally, since it integrates so many dimensions. It casts the experience of death and isolation as a tension between the absence of human consolation and the presence of an inscrutable universe. This gives the moment a shape in keeping with the way "raw experience" is often given religious interpretation (the sense of the sacred constituting at once an alienating and identifying moment). It hints at an identification of Eyre, one of Australia's failed explorers, with the crucified Christ; it even manages, with the "snigger of dawn", to have that "Christ" mocked by an Australian sense of the sardonic universe. The language is not that of sure belief: it is itself "Transfixed in fear and loneliness", and it burns.

Eyre must now more deeply name his own failure, and, as he does so, the poem dramatises his growth in language. Grovelling on hands and knees through a land which does not own him, Eyre describes Wylie's relationship to the land in language which is very "external" and cliched, showing how far he has to travel if he wants to reach the more unified consciousness of the aboriginal. (He even refers to Wylie's "boomerang-shaped smile".) He is humbled by his failure to reach the Centre since

> Desert, big stick, or inland sea
> Were all the Promised Land to me. (CP, 184)

Yet his failure is edging him towards a less literal reading of "Promised Land". His approach to metaphoric vision is, however, quickly tested: he must resist the metaphor of the sea, so tempting and transcendent with its blue essence and grave, pure language, and continue the journey. He must, as in "Aboriginals" (CP, 186), allow his biblical notion of divine omnipresence to enter the Aboriginal sense of the land's spiritual presence. He must find the banksia: a very concrete image, coming from the local earth, but able to contain and release the struggled meaning of the poem's Exodus-like refrain. Even so, he must continue to "Cape Arid" (CP, 187), whose landscape appears to confirm his paradoxical progress: it has a "dogmatic forehead" which can resist heretical erosions, yet Eyre says,

> An outline quotes me God
> On my pilgrimage. (CP, 188)

Still the journey continues. The whaler, "Mississippi", is found to be "the gracious sacramental barque" (a standard image of the Church), where Eyre is given rest, food, and memories of a "holy family" childhood. He cannot dream with the rest: "But one fool in their midst will slump awake." He is drawn back to "creation's very edge":

> That same white grace beyond the window-ledge
> Lures me again into old disconsolate lands.
> The Ridings, green fare of boyhood, can take form
> Only it seems at creation's very edge.
> I quench the lantern with my own two hands
> And stare out gingerly into the storm. (CP, 189-190)

With grocery-list language, Eyre then sets off towards Jericho (where, we might expect, the walls of language will once more collapse) and, in a moment of strange fusion, the barque becomes Eyre's donkey (and Christ's Palm Sunday donkey?). Here too the war between France and England is resolved in a small image of peace - the handshake between Rossiter and Eyre - and tested in the gospel command to love the enemy:

Lord, who is my neighbour
On the long road to the Sound? (CP, 190)

Even when he reaches "The Sound" (CP, 191), Eyre anticipates rather than accomplishes the end of his search. He is "truly alone" as Wylie is welcomed home by his land - and his language has become more sympathetic: Wylie "is unbound geometries of the good soil". Eyre's perspective is scourged "with grey straight lines of rain", as if "A geometry ruling without angle or curve" is destructive of vision. Yet he does not pretend that the mountains and hills, curved as they are to the "Shape of the breast", would offer more illumination: "These would pick expedient pockets of eyeball and sound." Eyre moves with the rainfall and, so close to home, experiences the summit of his isolation. In this world of "straight grey lines" the doors are closed; inside are the "golden faces, pure voices", outside:

My torn stinking shirt, my boots,
And hair a tangle of scrub; the long knotted absurd beard
That is my conscience grown in the desert country.
How shall I face their golden faces, pure voices?
O my expedition: Baxter, Wylie! (CP, 192)

In the language of "straight grey lines", the doors will not be opened, and the expedition will be a failure. "But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves." If this is the Christ of Emmaus, we must travel between the poem and the gospel[1] to say so, and we must not change the "Someone" into "Christ". That would close the relationship which the poem, as a drama of recognition, leaves open-ended. It would shift the balance of authority back towards the familiar ground of religious language, whereas the poem has been reclaiming its strangeness. It would also privilege the biblical story, whereas the poem's religious symbolism is not a process of imposition, even invocation, but more of interaction.

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1. Luke, 24:13-35.

This interaction is more than a thematic principle - it is a structural one. What gives such extraordinary power to Webb's writing is that, as well as seeing language within a religious process, he is seeing religion within a linguistic process. It is not as if Webb creates Eyre as metaphor for Exodus. Rather, he recreates Exodus in recreating Eyre. The metaphoric process rules the religious one. In order to illustrate this, it is helpful to return to two points already mentioned: how, in the conversation between symbols, it is not possible to make easy transfers of meaning which privilege belief; how, in that same conversation, the integrating power seems so often to come from a kind of "earthing" process. Biblical stories and symbols (Exodus, Jericho, Emmaus, fire, bread, Christ) are not allowed to speak, as it were, from on high. Even if revelatory, they are no more so than the banksia - and, like it, they emerge as moments in the dry-tongued landscape.

Meaning cannot be transferred quickly and securely from the biblical world to the historical, Australian world. The clearest sign of this is the open-ended last line, where the reader must travel the distance between the poem and the gospel, and yet meet "Someone". There are other indications. The "Walk, walk" refrain itself trudges through the poem, trying to secure the symbolism of Exodus. When it first appears, it follows and seems to extend the faint reference to the Incarnation. Yet it is itself followed by a very Australian reference:

> Prickly ethics of scrub and dwarf tea-tree:
> My mind's blank deserted tableland
> Has, therefore, root and action. (CP, 181)

This puts the Exodus reference back into the Australian experience and prevents any hasty hope. The Exodus theme will not save the poem from

its own suffering. Next, the refrain, somewhat abstract in mode, is located between Eyre's deeply realised and simple response to Baxter's death and his highly superficial rendering of Wylie's "boomerang-shaped smile", the former written from within experience, the latter from without. To find the meaning of the refrain here, the reader must consider the distance between the two - but it is the imaginative issue which centres the biblical reference. Just before the third refrain, Eyre admits his distance from the Aboriginal sense of land, yet, even as he does so, he is surrounded by words which convey a spacious sense of divine presence. Webb here changes the last line of the refrain: "Past bitter waters, sands of experience" becomes "Through bitter waters, sands of Exodus". Having followed the aboriginals to water, Eyre then crosses "through" the refrain to a densely metaphorical text where history is a "wasted and decadent pack-horse" trudging with him through the desert. Out of such a densely metaphorical moment comes the simple moment of the banksia. It is then that the Exodus is renamed by the Australian flower:

> Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer
> Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground. (CP, 187)

To cross the final refrain, Eyre asks about his neighbour, then sees the "Promised Land", though it seems at first he may not be able to enter. The language establishes an intermediate zone: an historical account of the meeting with Rossiter, officially an "enemy", (and an echo of the Good Samaritan loving his enemy); the dense language of the close where Eyre, land and rain are precisely observed but merged into an almost apocalyptic confrontation between the derelict and the gold; the sudden reversal to a simple, factual level of language - "But the rain has stopped"; then another simple statement which unlocks the doors of meaning: "On the main road Someone moves." Webb uses both the Good Samaritan and Emmaus references to open more than

close meaning.

Something similar occurs in "Aboriginals" (CP, 186). At its primary level, this section records Eyre's sense of the pervasive presence of the aboriginals - a presence which assumes the character of the land, and which, heightening his feelings of isolation and vulnerability, directs him back to the metaphor of brokenness:

> Innumerable times the great expedition of my thought
> Has gone to pieces,
> Frightened horses galloping in all directions.
>
> You are everywhere at once. (CP, 186)

At another level, the omnipresence of the aboriginals suggests the omnipresence of God. The language, however, controls the suggestion, refusing to go the way of simple transcendence, placing its sense of God between intimacy and distance:

> You are beyond me - and so often
> Dangerously close, it seems. (CP, 186)

This is supported by the narrative structure, where Eyre is frightened of the aboriginals, yet gratefully follows their footsteps to find water. It is this structure of over-reaching presence and individual isolation which, in certain lines, strikes a biblical resonance. As the poem opens -

> All my days and all my nights
> You haunt me (CP, 186)

we may recall Psalm 139, Job's sense of God as oppressor and redeemer, and that Catholic favourite, Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven". However, these resonances are not sufficiently explicit and dogmatic to justify a conclusion that "You" is God. Rather, they return to the primitive imaginative structures from which the notion of an omnipresent God is derived: the relationship between "all" and "me", the sense of an enormously close presence behind the veil of history.

Significantly, Eyre reacts to this sense of God - ambivalent, even arbitrary - by reasserting, in purposeful language, his love for the wholly familiar and controlled world:

> My instinct is to shudder away from you.
> Love? It is for dry bread like a stone in my mouth,
> For petty concentric days stemming from me,
> For stars all white abroad in my fame,
> For sleep crawling solicitously towards me,
> For myself at all ages since I began walking. (CP, 186)

While the poem very clearly shows that Eyre's attitude is too egocentric to receive the divine ambivalence, it also implies that so large a sense of "God" is lacking in focus and needs a centre of attention. Eyre All Alone could be read as arguing that the ambivalences of the sacred, which theological language can too easily neutralise, can be more dynamically expressed through well-earthed symbols. The image of the "game left foot", mentioned earlier, seems to be a coda for this. This moment occurs not simply because Webb's belief in redemptive suffering leads his imagination to value such a broken moment. It also occurs because Webb's imagination leads his belief: his is an imagination which locates transcendence immanently, which assumes that the poverty of words is their paradoxical power, and which, in turn, revitalises its utterance as it resimplifies its focus and draws "from earth a power". If this echoes Christ's descending and ascending pattern, it is, again, not simply because the imagination is led by belief, but more because the imagination leads into belief.

In this context, I would read out from "The Sea" (CP, 185) and "Banksia" (CP, 187) an argument about the way to word transcendence. The sea tempts Eyre with her consolation and "her witching falseness". [1] He passes through the "Barriers of knighthood" - the

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1. "The Room", Leichhardt in Theatre, Collected Poems, p. 44.

sea's two jealously attentive lovers, moon and sun - and joins with her in an eternal moment. Webb's sea is not usually so beguiling, but here it tangles Eyre's Exodus feet:

I

Find a rocky pass down to your place of hiding,
And join the thousand other lovesick fools.
Man's feet and horse's flounder in your bedding,
I learn your brackish lips, my honour reels
Under the cynical halloos of the gulls. (CP, 185)

The sea is seductive, the gulls mocking, and the explorer victim of a very soft form of oppression: "Beauty is walled in freedom". Webb now makes the question - and the temptation - of language quite explicit. Language is not dedicated to the preserved and protected beauty. Eyre senses this, but doubts he has the sanctity for desert words, and stays for the moment with the blue language of the transcendent essences.

Beauty is walled in freedom: eyes of the serf
Pester her keyhole; hardly an actual kiss.
East to west no elegant rivers, pools.
Outcrops of thought mope on in sulkiness.
Pens buzz for honey - but could the whitest souls
Absorb these vespers, counterpoint of gulls?

Therefore I walk squinting at chaste blue,
Unwashed, in a corona of rotten clothing,
Over marvellous flagstones in her sacred halls.
Blue is the Sound, form, essence out of nothing;
Blue is Today harnessed, nodding at my heels;
Blue is the grave pure language of the gulls. (CP, 185)

We have to remember that the gulls, counterpoint to waterless words, were earlier mouthing "cynical halloos" and watching the sun roll in his blood. It is beautiful language: it appeals strongly, if subtextually, to a Catholic imagination with its Thomistic formulae, "form, essence out of nothing", and its chaste blue words (which summon the shadow of the Virgin Mary). But Eyre does not have Mary's crown - he has a "corona of rotten clothing". Moreover, when he faces the "chaste blue", he is caught squinting. The Mary-like sea offers only false community - and Webb's counterpointing reinstates his way

of the wound:

> Innumerable times the great Expedition of my thought
> Has gone to pieces,
> Frightened horses galloping in all directions.
>
> You are everywhere at once. (CP, 186)

As the mind loses its spatial and temporal categories, it is broken open to the symbol of presence found in the aboriginal land.

"Banksia" represents an alternative way of words. Though it too opens with a densely metaphorical moment, the metaphor is centred in the interaction between weakness and tenderness. History becomes a burdened pack-horse, wasted by the drying up of "national motives" and still "Girt with rusted iron" - but it trudges "so tenderly". From this first stanza, following as it were the will of the poem, there emerges a line which registers waste and tenderness, and which also simplifies: "Baxter is dead. Wylie, can you hear the Sound?" It is important that this line represents a return to broken fact and to fellowship. Still, the journey is mocked by the "large agnostic ribaldries of ocean", then caught once more in dense language - though the state of weakness is here abused by symbols of brutal power:

> But suns will rock in my sleep, maul the moth-eaten pockets
> Of memory for a few counterfeit coppers
> To thump on the counters of stalls in a looted market.
> (CP, 187)

While this presents weakness, it shows that the powerful, oppressive stance of the language is out of sympathy with that weakness. The poem then turns back to the tiny language of fellowship and fact. In that turning, it begins to receive and reveal:

> Wylie, what can you see?
> I see a flower.
>
> Turn the horses loose. Out of earth a power:
> Banksia, honeysuckle, forked-lightning-fruit of pain.
> (CP, 187)

Once again, it is not just that the revelation determines the

perception, but that the language shapes its revelation. With "forked-lightning-fruit of pain", we are returned to Webb's root metaphor, which directs our reading out from the text.

The banksia next revitalises the traditional religious symbols:

> Swimming oversea, underfoot, the brawny light
> Sings saviour of this unique approaching night.
> Stolid elation of a single star.
> Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer
> Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground. (CP, 187)

Yet Webb's imagination seems again to draw back from this crypto-liturgical mode of religious language. As the poem ends, its language turns back to fellowship and simple fact:

> Wylie, what do you hear?
> I hear the Sound. (CP, 187)

This is a very open ending: because the "Sound" gives equal authority to its factual and its symbolic meaning. It can operate effectively as a religious symbol because it is so firmly located as a fact.

If it is valid to perform such a criticism - criticism as imaginative variation - and explore the implied relation between this poem and its Catholic culture, then Webb's poem can be said to have shifted the foundation of authority: when Australian and Christian stories meet, they do so in a way which is very open-ended. Each is equally determined by the ruling metaphor. This engages us in its own (religious) hermeneutic, exercised by way of the narrative frame of this journey through isolation, the strange and familiar presence apprehended in "Aboriginals", the tender movement of bedraggled history. It is, however, a hermeneutic most powerfully exercised through those marvellous and simple moments: the game left foot and the banksia.

Eyre All Alone respects the intersubjective character of symbols and the interactive dynamic of their interpretation. It challenges that style of Catholicism which chastely prefers "objective truth", suspects the imagination of being an unreliable faculty, privileges the propositional mode of revelation and theology, and regards its own centralised authority as the believer's best and sure guide to the will of God. The poem follows its own will. In rejecting the chaste blue language of the sea, it implies that the task of religious language is not to protect the truth, but to suffer it. It lets itself be crucified by "The moody nails of the sun" (CP, 181). Entering Exodus, it becomes itself the "sandy tongue-tied barren ground" (CP, 187) over which the fire is carried. Surrendering the "castle walls" and "sacred halls" of sea-language, it goes down to the earth and the banksia. If this kenosis is a religious process, it is also, and for the same reason, an imaginative one.