MCLAREN-BOX VB2-DOC2

Buckley talk: Wakool. 31 July 05

BY JOHN MCLAREN

At the end of a sequence of political poems, Vincent Buckley in this poem turned back to his true work as a poet:

In day with its dry persistence
In night with the first star
Down the mid-night passages
Or in the small corners of silence
Or at the bedside hot with death
A restlessness clings and will not
Be rubbed off on paper.

Yet there are some tempos that prefer me,
Some twigs that burst with shaking
Blossom and dew, some lights that are constant,
Some movements of the earth that bring me
In constant pilgrimage to Genesis,
To the bright shapes and the true names,

Oh my Lord.

The poet Vincent Buckley gave his life to the search for this God immanent the material world that had been sanctified through the incarnation of Christ. From an early age Buckley had known that his vocation was to be a poet, giving true names to the bright shapes of God's world. Through his work of naming the poet joins with the farmer, the cultivator, in bringing the harmony of God's world into existence. He finds this harmony in the world around him, but it is only there because people have worked to bring it into existence:

Tomorrow they'll light fires in the stubble
To run forward a bit, double back, sparking
And tittering. You'll think they must have lighted upwind,
It burns so small . With no flame. And next morning
Then paddocks are ploughland, crudded brown, until,
By the straw light of evening
It is longstretched, wavering, beige with heat,
Full of jays, combed but un broken;

The whole sign-system changed;
And more leaves have slid down by the ivy
On the wet ground. In a few more days
The owl will start being seen in the upland,
Floating his own dark patch of air behind him,
And the god of the boundaries
Begins to walk the mearing of the ditch
Between clodland and pelting grass.

I think that poem was written in England, but most of it could apply equally well to the Victorian countryside he knew. Its landscape is produced in time by man and nature working together. It is not however just a piece of ground to be utilised for human purposes, but a a system of signs of human purpose. The ditch is not just a way of draining the land, but a boundary, a border between the human, the ploughed "clodland', and the natural or wild, the "pelting grass' that follows its own laws. This border is patrolled by Hermes, the pagan god of boundaries who is at once divine and a product of human culture, of storytelling. The poet both reveals the divine and makes it.

Buckley had grown up before the second world war in the traditional Irish-Australian community of Romsey, a country town about forty miles north of Melbourne. Here he saw the effect of the Great Depression, as the weary unemployed sought alms to keep their families alive as they tramped along the roads in search of work. His own father lost his job, but the family never wanted for food. His mother found work to support them, while his father suffered the shame of unemployment, except for occasional labouring jobs. When he eventually he found a job as mail contractor, he had to bear the imperial coat-of arms on the back of his delivery cart. But on this mail-run father and son eventually found some fellowship.

The tall wheels grate into the miles
The jinker takes to Cherokee.
I sit perched on a stumble; he
Pretends a song, or quaintly smiles;
Our minds, unmeeting, still agree
To mark each other's loving wiles.[1]

~~*Narrator*~~

Between father and son still lies family friction, and beyond this the tensions between Catholic and Protestant, the green and the orange, that divided that little country town, and indeed the whole of Australia. In the poem, the young Buckley takes the side of the green, complaining that

"It's black Orangemen own these farms
Crushing us with their pious arms."

They're no worse ever than our own,
Who'd strip you to the shuddering bone
And then use that to fertilize
The sullen land beyond the rise
Making their life a bloody war.

Here we have two of the three wars in Buckley's life: the war of the settlers on a land that they have not yet made fully their own; and the sectarian war the settlers had brought from the old lands. But Buckley's poetry is about a third war, the war between his Catholic faith and his Catholic church. The war between settlers and aliens became a conflict between his Australian identity and his Irish ancestry. He tried to displace the war between orange and green on to the continuing war between the English and the Irish. He never succeeded, because his own

[1] 'Father and Son', *Selected*, p. 60.

imagination owed to much to each. Only in the third war, with the Church that made him and threatened to destroy him, did he approach any resolution. The 'day with its dry persistence' and the 'night warm with the first star' are both ways that may allow us to hear this rhythm. Yet the poem at its end, having hear the rhythms of the natural world, still calls on God, 'my Lord', to complete it. But God remains absent. Buckley found a vision of Him in the church, especially in its liturgy, which he loved. But he chafed under the authority of the church, which tried to determine what he should think, rather than find his own way to the truth.

His poetry moves towards this truth, which he identified with God Who is always immanent yet unrevealed. He was supported in his search by the Lay Apostolate, a group of Catholic students who rejected the two modes of Catholicism that prevailed in postwar Australia: personal pietism and disciplined political action. They saw themselves rather as bringing God to complete the humanist work of the university, and so of society as a whole.

He himself explained that they were about helping the Church to live fully, and so to manifest the meaning and dimension of her life in a society which is based largely on non-Christian premises, and fed by a current of energy which claims to be secular. But, in the dimension of the Incarnation, for the Church to manifest her life fully in a secular society means to live at the centre of that society's problems and values. The state of the world must be answered through a Christian humanism that raises up works of art and ideas in which that state can be both shown and exceeded. The engagement of this humanism with the world makes it deeply political.

From an early age Buckley hated tyranny in all its forms. He expresses this in one of his early poems, 'In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom'. This poem expresses his admiration for the firmness of Josef Mindszenty, the Cardinal Archbishop of Budapest who in his trial and imprisonment became the symbol of the suffering Church resisting Communism, but the poem is no simple manifesto. It shows instead how Communism itself originates in love of justice and pity for the suffering, but is turned to evil by the flaw in human nature, the Fall that exiles us from Eden and condemns us to a Hell of our own making:

Reader

The schism in each man, dividing all
The structure of creation by a crime
Done in the name of mercy or of gain.
Mystery is all. They glimpse your Face
And are turned sharply from their pain;
Whatever hunger drives, love can embrace.
It seems we have come, for very justice' sake,
To a private madness burning up all men,
Some equinox of nations, when they shake
Their splendour off, and murder Christ again.

The dilemma seems inescapable—to glimpse Christ's face and embrace love leads people to a madness where they murder Christ again. The message applies as much to Christians as it does to the Communists who are the apparent enemy in this poem. The only answer appears to be that given in the next segment, to retreat to the upper room where we may see "the renewing rose" of

Christ's rule, and "seek love, not wrong" until Christ Himself appears. But such quietism is alien to Buckley's commitment to justice here and now.

No agony may restore our innocence,
That purity in the core of bud or man,
Save this shrewd present burning of the sense,
The ache of contact with the dishonoured plan;
...
So god shall fill the hollows of our eyes
With tears unfailing to His burning face.

The poet finds God's plan, the order at the heart of things, preserved in the Church, which gives its members the strength to endure wrong and suffering without inflicting it. But this gives him only momentary comfort to the poet, for he must still live in a world where wars

Have wrenched the poor body from its earth,
And set our rich and mortal star
Swaying in the embrace of death.

He cannot take refuge from this world in his own peace, and yet he has learned that any action he takes to redress wrong is so corrupted by sin that it brings only further death. So he turns to martyrs like Mindszenty, whose passive acts of sacrificing their own lives rather than yield to evil give strength to those who keep vigil for them:

Their souls
That tremble are His amnesty for all
The shattered conscience of the world.
... These are the lovers
He has called to failure; the brokers; those He has struck
With a soft peace, burned with His woollen robes.
Now by the distant rumbling of the trams,
By daily shops and factories wherein
Man occupies his darkening life, I wait
The thunder and resurrection of the dead.

~~*Narrator*~~

Yet while this resolution may correct the poet's need for action, it scarcely answer it. It leaves the Christian, as much as the secular humanist, waiting to know what is to be done in the here and now. For a while he turns to politics, but he finds there only "hard-faced men, who beat the drum / To call me to this Cause or that," who can't see that his task, the task of the full human being, is a sweeter one, "the building of the honeycomb."

The task of building the honeycomb requires first seeing the world as it really is, and of finding within it the brighter names of God. He does this in his early poem, "Borrowing of Trees', where he remembers the trees that surrounded his house when he was growing up: (p. 58)

The trees are the natural world that keep him safe and lend him wisdom. He needs all this wisdom when he has to confront the illness and death of his father. He had not gone on with his father, and now, in these last days, he has to try to speak to him alm ost for the first time, to learn who he really is: (I, p. 71)

I;

In these circumstances he returns to his memory of the trees: (II, pp. 73-74)

These patterns of nature that he remembers from his childhood are a comfort to him at the moment of intense personal sorrow, but they are of little help to him in the daily round of the city where he live and works. This is the subject of his long sequence of poems, 'Golden builders', in which he wanders the streets of Carlton, the contemplating images of death and destruction that make up modern life, searching for signs of God but finding only the disregarded text, 'Feed my lambs' on a neglected church. Yet the text is a reminder of the duty he still owes to his fellow beings, and reminds him that the builders who are tearing down the old are also building the new which we can still make into the city of God: (part 1, pp. 111-12).

After the Golden builders Buckley returned repeatedly with his family to Ireland, where he wrote some beautiful poems for the school his children attended:

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

The angles of the light
And the blackbirds in their coursing
They fall away together
To the wide strand of Ardmore.

He hoped to find in Ireland the source of his own traditions, and a peace that always eluded him in Australia. But the Ireland he now found was stained not only with the violence of its history, but with the continuing violence in the north. His sympathies were with the IRA, but he could not accept the terrorism they inflicted on their neighbours. Instead, he found their true spirit of independence embodied in Bobby Ands and his comrades who chose to starve themselves tol death in the Maze prison rather than yield to authority. Their martyrdom linked them to Cardinal Mindszenty, but also to the true warrior, who, driven by love,

Makes war, but with no weapons but the sticks of his forearms,
The electric pain of his body in his cell, away from the air
His family breathes ...(LP, p. 50)

Just as the poet makes himself one with nature by observing it, listening to it, so the martyrs make themselves one with humanity by sharing the suffering of their people. The ordering principle of the world becomes manifest both in nature and in humanity. This gives him the only heaven he

can find, a heaven that exists here on earth and among the people whose lives it completes: (LP, pp. 95-97)

> Heaven (the name so lovely,
> the idea so distant)
> lies about us, yes,
> but where? From the first light
> into which the town clicks open, and the tussocks
> purple like wildflowers, to the last
> red tincture in the sunsetting wave.
> ...
> So Christ, when he outfaced them,
> or when he harried his own
> with quick asperities: *You know not*
> *the day nor the hour,*
> meant: you have not come up to it,
> or have dreamed past it ...
>
> And you and I go on, mazed
> when all we wanted
> was some place in the story.

That is what Buckley offers us—a place in his story, which redeems violence and suffering in a universal order that embraces the whole of humanity and nature. But the little bit of the story we know will always fall short of this fulness. All we can do is, like his golden builders, work with the people we know and love on the task at hand.