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Building the Honeycomb: the true names of God. (VINCENT BUCKLEY)

John McLaren and John Nicholson

1. *Reader II*

> The finest theologian Australia has produced is, arguably if ironically, a poet and layman, Vincent Buckley.[1]

2. *Narrator*

When that comment appeared in a journal, the Australian Catholic Record, in 1981, it caused no little discussion; some ridicule, privately expressed, from professional theologians; some bewilderment, from those who knew neither his poetry nor his essays and some approval from those who did know his work—the work of a poet, a scholar, an academic—and theologian.

Vincent Buckley was bon in 1925 and died in 1988. In Encounter we look at his search for the divine—wherever that may have taken him.

FX Allegri's Miserere—and fade to

3. *Reader I*

> 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.

4. *Narrator*

God can be imagined as either transcendent or immanent. The transcendent God gives us our purpose, our laws and our meaning, but remains outside nature and beyond comprehension. This is the God of writing, who ordains the rules of the Biblical books of the law, and justifies His ways to man in Milton's great epic. He is the God we find in James McAuley's 'Celebration of Divine Love', where he is

5. *Reader II*

> The figure on Eternity's gold ground,
> ... Christ reigning on the cosmic tree,
> His blood its sap, his breath its respiration,
> In him are all things in perfection found,
> He is the bond and stay of his creation.

6. *Narrator*

And it was that same poet, James McAuley, who invited Buckley to consider—

7. *Reader II*

> 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?
> And universal meanings spring
> From what the proud pass by:
> Only the simplest forms can hold
> A vast complexity.

8. *Narrator*

The immanent God is a God of words, the spirit who is constantly revealing Himself in his creation as He redeems and perfects it. He is the God of Dante, who is not a judging God, but a God who reveals to us the truth about ourselves, and ultimately dwells like a rose in a blaze of light. He is the God of Greek discourse, the continuous organizing principle of the universe. The universe beats with His rhythms, which provide the standard by which we measure the fragmentation, the disruption and the disharmony of our human world.

Vincent Buckley gave his life to the search for this God immanent in the material world that had been sanctified through the incarnation of Christ. He sought this God through his own life, and through the meditation and prayers of a group formed in the University of Melbourne and known as the Lay Apostolate, or the Apostolate to the University, which he, along with friends like Bill Ginnane, had founded while they were still students. The

Apostolate believed in strengthening their own faith through prayer and meditation, and taking this strength to the wider community through their individual vocations. From an early age Buckley had known that his vocation was to be a poet, and his task would be to give 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.

9. *Reader I*

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.

10. *Narrator*

The poet names the landscape produced in time by man and nature working together. This landscape is not however just a piece of ground to be utilised for human purposes, but a "sign-system": that is, a message, a system of meanings. 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.

FX

Buckley's meditations on the Incarnation led him to see himself as a Christian humanist, in the company of Erasmus and Thomas More, completing the work of secular society, not opposing it with a different reality. This enables his work to speak to those of us who consider ourselves secular humanists, not recognising any source of authority or knowledge outside the material world. Religion must be recognised as a force within this material world, to be considered alongside science and the arts as a source of knowledge about humans and their place in the world. This is not syncretism, which seeks to cobble together a faith or belief from scraps of all religions. Rather it is a kind of critical realism that acknowledges that there is meaning

outside empirical rationalism. Buckley's poetry offers this logic. He recognizes the disjunction between human hopes and reality, but his rhythms show a pattern running through nature, a pattern that reconciles these opposites. For Buckley, this pattern was the imprint of the spirit. Like Boniface, he recognised in nature the footsteps of God.

Vincent 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.

11. *Reader I*

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.[2]

12. *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

13. *Reader I*

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

14. *Narrator*

and really—

15. *Reader I*

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.

16. Narrator

Here we have two of the three wars in Buckley's life: the war of the settlers on a land that remained alien, 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 imagination owed too much to each. Only in the third war, with the Church that made him and threatened to destroy him, did he approach any resolution. Yet paradoxically, he did not find this resolution in the Church itself, or in the doctrines it preached and the action it encouraged, but in the world of people and nature that he explored in his poetry. The rhythms of nature that he sought in his poems were the rhythms that Christ sanctified through his Incarnation. 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 heard the rhythms of the natural world, still calls on God, 'my Lord', to complete it. But God remains absent.

In 1938 Buckley started his secondary schooling at St Patrick's College, East Melbourne. Most of the Jesuits who taught him had been born in Ireland, but their interests were European. They believed in the Church Militant: indeed, the Church Triumphant. This was the year that General Franco instigated civil war against the Spanish Republic. The Rector of the College, Father T O'Dwyer, noted this in his address to the annual speech night:

7. Reader III

We remember tonight those thousands who have died in Spain as martyrs to their loyalty to Catholic principles. Teachers, parents, children have been massacred in cold blood; other thousands under the leadership of General Franco have been fighting for and continue to fight for our common Christian civilisation.

18. Narrator

Buckley's father was a strong republican who would never have tolerated this sympathy for Franco and the Falangists, but Vincent took with him a sympathy for those who became martyrs in the cause of justice, as well as a hatred for tyranny in all its forms. This is expressed in one of his early poems, 'In Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom'. While 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, 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:

19. Reader I

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.

20. Reader II

The movement in Buckley's poetry is towards a God Who is always immanent yet unrevealed. He came to this idea during his time as a student at Melbourne University, where he became involved in a movement known as the Lay Apostolate. This movement rejected the two modes of Catholicism that were dominant in postwar Australia: personal pietism and disciplined political action. The members of the Apostolate saw themselves rather as bringing God to complete the humanist work of the university, and so of society as a whole. Rather than talking about their duties to their church, and the means of personal atonement, they meditated on the effect of the Incarnation in sanctifying the material and human worlds. As Catholics, they saw their vocation as bringing Christ into the daily life of the world. As a poet, Buckley saw his work as showing forth a God who was immanent in the whole of his creation. This feeling for harmony lies behind his invocations of the bloody history of Ireland, the silencing of the songs of Australian Aborigines, the daily destruction he finds in city streets. It shows particularly in his depictions of children and home:

21. Reader I

No place was like your father's house. I followed
you round and round, grinning,
nervy with pleasure, even when,
bedded down, fatigued with ancestry,
kneeing the blankets, I hear their
soft laughter rustling the kitchen
and over the orchard's dung smells
the apple-trees made their furred sound
of green moving ...

A first, frail paradise, where the dream
let down like tendrils ...[3]

22. *Narrator*

Buckley's vision was by no means uncontested. The kind of disciplined Catholic Action represented in Australia by BA Santamaria's Movement was at the furthest remove from Buckley's sense of waiting on God to reveal Himself in the world. Yet he by no means rejected politics, and indeed the most bitter conflicts of his life were with those he believed did not carry through their religious or philosophical convictions through into political action for a just world. But, with other members of the Apostolate, he rejected a politics directed by the authority of the Church. Instead, the Apostolate tried to live as Christians formed by their church and its community, working at the heart of a secular society and its politics. They would have agreed with the American Jesuit John Courteney Murray:

23. *Reader I*

In 800 AD Pope Leo III had a right to crown Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans; but this was because it was 800 AD. If there were a Christendom tomorrow—the Pope, for all the fullness of his apostolic authority, would not have the slightest shadow of a right to 'crown' so much as a third-class postmaster.

24. *Narrator*

Buckley believed the role of the Church was to redeem the world, not to rule it. The task of the Christian was to help 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 [it must] to live at the centre of that society's problems and values. [This must also be said] of the Church's relation to the University, and hence of her action in it. That action will not be central and effective, will not be fully Christian, unless it takes place at the heart of whatever validly interests the University. When the Church lives fully, she lives at the heart of the milieu conceived as a natural growth. Consequently, if we are to have an intellectual Apostolate at all growing in one place, it must begin with theology ... The world is not seen truly unless it is seen in the full perspective of faith.

If Christ's life elevated all things, it did not complete the process. That has been left to us who have signified our willingness to become Apostles; it has been left to the Church, to ourselves in the Church, and to the Church existing in us. We must all consent to have the union of the supernatural and the natural restored in us as agents, as Christ wills, in restoring the world. The recognition of the misery of the world must be a recognition of Christ striving to be made actual in the world, and needing our consent before He will do so. Yet we must also know ourselves to the pitch of being horrified by contrast to the self which God wills for me.

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.

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25. Narrator

The dilemma seems inescapable—to glimpse Christ's face and embrace love leads only to a madness where we 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 that suggests itself to Buckley is 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 his commitment to justice here and now. The "careful wrong of tyranny" and "the movements that amend "Only a little of the average pain" are warrants of death, drenching the just in evil blood.

26. Reader I

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.

27. Narrator

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

28. Reader I

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

29. Narrator

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 Cardinal Mindszenty, whose passive acts of sacrificing their own lives, rather than yielding to evil, give strength to those who keep vigil for them:

30. Reader I

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.

31. Narrator

Yet while this resolution may correct the poet's need for action, it scarcely answers 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 Buckley, the immediate political answer was to oppose the renewal of Soviet tyranny in Hungary after the invasion of 1956, and to work against Communist manipulation of the 1959 Australian International Congress for Peace and Disarmament. Buckley, in concert with various Labor dissidents and former Communists, worked to have the conference respond to an appeal from the Hungarian author, Tibor Meray, to call for all governments to grant freedom of expression to their writers. Despite strong support from other writers, the organisers had his motion deleted from the official resolutions of the Congress. However, his action gained wide publicity, and served to discredit the Congress itself.

His efforts on behalf of writers in the Soviet block brought Buckley into contact with the notorious anti-Communist Frank Knopfelmacher, as well as bringing about his complete disillusion with the faction then controlling the Victorian ALP. As a result, for several years his political activity was directed more towards combating what he saw as Communist manipulation of university teaching, student affairs and literary magazines than to positive attempts to promote community.

As a poet, Buckley's answer to the human predicament was to write about it, to find the images and rhythms that would make manifest the God Who would bring reconciliation and fulfillment. But as an intellectual and citizen he found himself continually diverted from this task of 'building the honeycomb' to more direct thought and action.

In an essay on intellectuals in Peter Coleman's 1962 collection, Australian Civilization, Buckley endorsed Augustine's injunction to 'love intelligence greatly'. This was exactly the guiding principle of the Apostolate, which had been designed to be intellectual, inquiring, communal and independent. One cannot imagine Buckley or his colleagues involved in the superstitions of Catholic practice: three Hail Marys and another soul is released from Purgatory. They welcomed the beginnings made by the Vatican Council to free the Church from these habits:

32. Reader I

Some Catholic intellectuals have no reservations about recent developments; they are frankly delighted. To them, the Church seemed for a long time like Dr Johnson's lady preacher: the marvel was not that she lived in the modern world so well, but that she lived in it at all.[4]

33. *Narrator*

There is a danger here, in this sanctification of the intellectual—isolationism and superiority. But there was a job to be done. Again, Buckley would have agreed with the American Jesuit John Courteney Murray.

34. *Reader III*

For some 300 years the intellect has been engaged in a great divorce operation. It has progressively effected the divorce of religion and theology from all the other things that men think about—morality, philosophy, politics, economics, science, psychiatry, art, creative imagination, poetry, drama. But the suspicion has lately arisen that it is time to re-unite these kinds of knowledge in some manner of lawful wedlock. The new feeling is that the divorce of religion from the reason of man in its varied activities has injured both parties.

35. *Narrator*

For many years, Buckley sought to overcome this divorce of religion and public affairs by his work for the Catholic Worker, a publication designed to bring a Catholic dimension to politics rather than to impose a Church direction on them. But although he found some kindred spirits among those who ran the paper, as a group he found them frustrating.

36. *Reader I*

...while in one sense it was a lively and exhilarating group, in another sense it was moribund, for its goal was a self-image, and a self-image is easily reached ... The trouble was that the ... members were not intellectuals in the required sense. The lawyers were legal, the schoolmasters were scholastic, the public servants were concerned with proper form ... Several of them were highly intelligent, but even they spent very little of their time and energy on that radical critique which ... is the minimal business of the intellectual ...[5]

37. *Narrator*

The root of the problem was the deference of the group to the authority of the Church as represented by the Bishops. This meant that they delayed far too long than they should have in campaigning against Santamaria and the Movement. Buckley shared the fierce opposition to Communism and the vehement support of a Church educational mission that were the chief planks of Santamaria's Movement.

38. *Reader I*

There was a Cold War, which involved mass violence from its very inception and exerted constant pressure on everyone's nervous system from 1945 onwards. Australians were not protected by distance from this pressure ...[6]

I want my children educated to an awareness of that supernatural order which is after all, very close to the lives of us all, and I want them brought to awareness among children who are themselves aware of it. This desire would remain for me ... if every Bishop dropped dead tomorrow. The issue is not what the Bishops want as what we want.

39. Narrator

Buckley believed that Santamaria was using the pressures of the Cold War to enforce a particular line on Australian politics, to compel Catholics to adopt a single, institutionally political orthodoxy imposed by inchoate loyalty to what was presented as the will of the bishops. Buckley believed that this activity diverted the Church from its proper pastoral and educational functions.

The fruit of these years of political conflict appears in 1966 in the eleven 'political poems' he published in Arcady and other Places. These give devastating portraits of such moments and actors on the political stage as the election speech, the fellow traveller, and the Christian gentlemen who are not unaware of the world but are deafened by its noise and blind to its corpses as

40. Reader I

Their public speeches dwell on private morals,
Neither hating nor approving great evils.
Surprised in attitudes of prayer
They struggle to remember which they chose,
A scorched earth policy or
The laying-on of hands.

41. Narrator

But if in their search for private morals and public good they bring about public evil, their sin is not as heavy as that of the neutralist, the man who refuses choice:

42. *Reader I*

The acid of violence is not for him.
Other men may faint under the waves
Of blood, or history, or self. He swims
A canting backstroke near to shore.

Only the ebb-tide makes him flap and sweat.
His great ambition: not to be swept out
From the soft uplifting swell to where the net
The bones break in the living roar.

43. *Narrator*

These poems preserve in aspic some of the hedgers and qualifiers he had met at the Peace Congress. Buckley was always one to dwell where the waves roar, where choices have to be made. His greatest scorn however was reserved for the Secret Policeman, the man who chooses evil:

44. *Reader I*

Pity me: from a world ruddy with flame
I am tugged in dreams to the first cave again,
And in that humid soil and atmosphere
Lie down each night beside the murdered men.

The dead eyes point the way I go,
The dead hands presage me in air.
I run on shifting pavements, by fired walls
Falling, and weighted lamp-posts everywhere.

45. *Narrator*

Although this poem understands what makes the political killer, it is not about the moment of choice but about the consequences of the Fall. Like the characters in Dante's Inferno, the Policeman is judged in the moment when he discovers the death he has brought upon himself. This vision of death in turn leads to the death-in-life of the people's paradise, where, after the statesmen are "booted upstairs to their plinths", the "priests shot down across their altars or / formed into unions," Culture is organised like "A monastery kitchen", "The intellectuals bored into concurrence," poetry can at last be honoured as only "our most respected corpse".

46. *Reader I*

He lies, embalmed with popular sentiments,
His features modelled in the shape of power,
...

... millions file past,
Bread, circuses, piety. Of course no one
Will smash the glass and touch the waxen flesh
To life, till the limbs twitch, and the eyes blaze.
One soldier at the feet, one at the head.

47. Narrator

Yet it is precisely to this task that Buckley dedicates himself when in the last two poems of this highly political sequence he seems to turn away from politics. As he contemplates the ills and evils of the public world that "crowd in nightmares to my side" he complains that these

48. Reader I

... hard-faced men, who beat the drum
To call me to this Cause or that,
Those heirs of someone else's tomb,
Can't see the sweeter world I'm at,
The building of the honeycomb.

49. Narrator

The final poem of this sequence shows that the nature of this task will be found in attention to this world until he finds in it the "bright shapes and the true names" of his God. His turning away from politics is in fact highly political, for his work as a poet is to discover the truths, the rhythms, by which all politics will be judged. In setting himself this task of discovery, a task for imagination grounded in reason but moving beyond the merely reasonable, Buckley was also setting himself against the literary fashion that insists that the writer—historian, novelist, poet—imposes his meanings on the world he observes.

50. Reader II

What is 'imaginary' about any narrative ... is the illusion of a centred consciousness looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and representing itself to itself as having the coherency of narrative. But this is to mistake a 'meaning' (which is always constituted or found) for 'reality'(which is always found rather than constituted.[7]

51. Narrator

Buckley worked in the opposite direction. Meaning for him was not imposed but discovered in the order of being. Although his consciousness had been formed by Catholic teaching, he tried to cast this aside as he sought the spirit of God in the rhythms of nature. He believed that these rhythms would allow meaning to come to him, rather than be imposed by him. The workings and reworkings of his poems show how he constantly sought this rhythm from outside. This impulse, in itself romantic, brought Buckley's vocation as a poet to the service of his search for an immanent God Whose work of salvation would be performed in the poetry, the world, and the poet's own life.

But if he looked for a God outside the poetry, he did not invoke any outside authority to guarantee the presence of God. On the contrary, he believed that poetry must invoke its own standard of truth. The task of the poet is to hold and use the shifting references of language to express spiritual experience. The expression of our experience is an affirmation of life.

52. Reader III

Great literature transcends the individual consciousness. Its universal character is religious in kind. It answers the question: how are we to triumph over the pains of living in such a way as to affirm life? It creates new values in the face of life.

53. Narrator

But Buckley saw that literature is not its own sanction. We respond to it in terms of our prior response to reality, our view of the truth and health of what we read. But this response is itself created by what we have read, as well as by our own experience of life. So literature does not replace religion, but develops and corrects and modifies the religious understanding we bring to it. But if our religion is already settled into dogma, we will not hear what the poet has to say.

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As his ideas developed, the church became less central and community more important. But, like nature, the harmony of the community is ruptured by the fallen nature of its people. He had seen this in his meditations on the fate of Cardinal Mindszenty. The Communism that makes the Cardinal a martyr represents the corruption of a great ideal of community. But the Cardinal also represents a church that has become corrupt, that has forgotten its mission to the poor and the weak. It is only as it looses its power that it again finds its truth, in the steadfastness of the Cardinal facing his persecutors and the devotion of the nuns who continue to serve him in his suffering.

The countryside suggests one possible source for the harmony Buckley seeks. In 'Autumn Landscape', he goes back to memories of his childhood as he watches a man at work in the order of nature.

54. Reader I

See the flames balancing the leaves
The old man piles, until they cloud and choke
Under the musty top, where the green
Crisps to blackness. There, the air-channels stop
Their running light. Above, is sweetness lodged
In dens of smoke more sweet than honey-cells.

And from distant quarters how the bird
Gathers its song! ...

55. Narrator

But even in this world the speaker is aware of darkness, where

56. Reader I

... passing wheels
clamp sound to fire—the sparks that wince from stone
as though my hands had ambushed their flame:
dark cells I touch, beyond the bounds of earth.

57. Narrator

Human effort does not complete nature, so much as bring discordance to it, and reveal a threatening mystery beyond its reach. In his long series of poems, *The Golden Builders*, Buckley directly confronts this mystery, where work brings destruction, and people are divided against each other and individuals within themselves. The rhythm that knits together the streets of this world is not the rhythm of God, but the sound of the hammers tearing down the suburb of Carlton in his home city of Melbourne. Yet as the poet wanders through these streets in search of the Holy City, he finds in the midst of death and destruction signs and memories of the Holy City that Blake saw in London, and that is implicit in all human construction. The builders of the poem who are tearing down these signs and memories are making them new. Even in the opening lines of the sequence, the hammers create a new resonance, a new meaning:

58. Reader I

The hammers of iron glow down Faraday.
Lygon and Drummond shift under their resonance.
Saws and hammers drawn under the bending air
shuttling lie a bow; the saw trembles
the hammers are molten, they flow with quick light
striking; the flush spreads an d deepens on the stone.
The drills call the streets together ...

59. Narrator

These lines are filled with the rhythms and excitement of human creation, but as the poet wanders the streets he notices discordant signs. Propped up amidst the destruction is the foundation stone of an old Sabbath School, with its injunction, Feed My Lambs. The colours of the sunset are only a half-glow of death suspended in the brickdust, the mouth and muscles arm themselves against it, the stone cornices gasp into it, the green lawn of a garden is fearful, not joyous, with its memories of sex. The sound of the builders machines becomes a crying, a lament for the streets and their dead imperial names:

60. Reader I

In gaps of lanes, in tingling
Shabby squares, I hear the crying of machines.

Cardigan, Queensberry, Elgin: names of their lordships.
Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: Shall I find here my Lord's grave?

61. Narrator

The merely human vitality with which the poem opened has run out into sterility. Yet the question and image of my Lord's grave is both an admission that the modern city is the antithesis of the City of God, and a suggestion that it is this city of destruction that Christ died for. But the poet still has many streets to walk through, houses to live in, before he finds any possibility of redemption.

First, he turns from the hammering of the builders to his own guilty pleasure in killing. This takes place in the shadow of Town Halls, themselves symbols of dead hopes, with their arguments, their Labor Party rooms and Police Stations. It is next to one of these that he listens night after night as rats flutter in the blank stone furnace, growing their family as if the old stove were a dry cave on a mountain.

62. Reader I

Their nerves were strong as mine.
When I smoked them out and killed them
they backed up like Spartans until cornered,
tails twitching at the locked door,
they came screaming at my knees.

63. Narrator

Now, he tells us, he kills only on a small scale—small creatures like centipedes, whose cries are only an unvoiced shriek. Yet his killing involves him, unlike the "unforgiving and compassionate young", in the central horrors of his time. Similar images of death, and our

unavoidable complicity in it, run through the remainder of the sequence, until the poet, still seeking his Lord's grave, flies from the city to the countryside of his birth.

Four themes run through the Golden Builders.

First is the opposition, which goes back to Augustine, between the City of Man and the City of God. The builders of Buckley's poem are engaged in the destruction of an older city of man, but despite themselves they are bathed in the golden light of the holy city whose remnants they discover in the memorials of the old churches, their repeated injunction to feed my lambs, and the narrator's continuing search for his Lord's grave.

Second is the struggle of the individual to come to terms with his own death. We see this in the two poems where the speaker is both patient and observer in a hospital, where he is 'Practising not Dying'. He faces it in his own person as, drifting to sleep under the influence of Seconal pills, he dreams of a murder and wakes as he does every morning, as from a séance, lost again in his city:

64. *Reader I*

to the choke of white bread
the rubbed taste in your mouth

eyes staring backward
into the skull, trying to recall it,

65. *Narrator*

and hears only

66. *Reader I*

the chop and change of the machines.

67. *Narrator*

The machines, the instruments of divinity, are also an interruption to the individual human process of living and dying.

The third theme is the violent lives and deaths of others. These include the rats he kills in the stove, the dogs suffering in the microbiology labs, the friends uprooted from the violence of Europe only to live in proud defiance or die by accident or suicide in Melbourne, and the girl coming to the abortionist amidst the unrevealed light of the streets:

68. *Reader I*

She comes, five minutes early,

brushing the cold brick of each house
with her fingertips. Fluttered into a head-back
confidence. The child like a bolt in her womb.
Inside the small terrace house, she waits
on linoleum. The abortionist
has the skill of an engineer
his eyes brood like a pilot's. His hand is steady
as he lifts it away from the sweaty legs.

69. Narrator

This portrayal of an abortion has no element of theology or moral judgement. The image of the child as a bolt in the womb is ambiguous, suggesting both an achievement of new life and a disaster. The speaker admires the skill of the abortionist, yet everything around him—the cold bricks, the linoleum—is an image of sterility contradicting the life of the girl, brushing with her fingertips, fluttering with confidence, and of the child within her that is neutered as he 'lifts it away'.

These contradictory themes of life and death are brought together in the fourth, the idea of pilgrimage or quest. This begins in the first poem, where the speaker embarks on a search for his Lord's grave. It takes him through hospitals, hotels, cafes, the life of the streets, the cemetery where the young make love among the graves, the mazes of streets and garden and high-rise and wires of sound until he leaves for his home country, still searching. The reader who follows him on this quest is left with a montage of imagery of vitality and pain shot through with glimpses of a God living in the midst of destruction, yet still to be discovered. It is very much an image of a world still living in the aftermath of the War and the Holocaust, still shadowed by the threat of the Bomb and by the monstrous tyrannies that turn human creativity to destruction. But, unlike Augustine's City of God, which is opposed to the City of Man, the Holy City that is the object of Buckley's quest exists in fragments within the actual city built by men. The task of the poet, or the pilgrim, is to redeem the human city by finding within these fragments the immanent God who will redeem them by making them whole. The task of the citizen of the City of Man is not to rebuild it in the shape of his own idea of truth, but to oppose those who would destroy its humanity and to keep alive within it those places and those moments of love and friendship that may allow God to manifest Himself.
The Golden Builders is Vincent Buckley's most complete and complex exploration of the search for a God Who is at once immanent in His creation, including the cities of man, and a hidden God awaiting His completion through the redemption of a created but fallen world. In his later poetry Buckley takes up the themes of personal fulfilment through family and national fulfilment through a reconciliation of Australia's Irish and English legacies. This reconciliation will only occur through the recognition of two bloody histories. 'Golden Builders' remains as a demonstration of how such histories are implicated in every moment of our personal and professional lives, awaiting a community that will be open to God rather than believing He offers any answers to our immediate problems. Buckley's poetry is the honeycojmb that God will fill with His honey.

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1 Gerard Windsor, 'Australian Literature and Catholicism', *Australian Catholic Record*, April, 1981.
2 'Father and Son', *Selected*, p. 60.
3 'Your Father's House', *The Pattern*, p. 28.
4 *The Bulletin*, 14.3.64.
5 *CGH* pp. 101, 103.
6 *CGH* p. 121.
7 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997, p. 36.