Religious Models in Modern Australian Poetry*

James Tulip

I

Vincent Buckley's *Golden Builders* (1976) is an approach to Melbourne in terms that call for comparison with William Blake's imaginative sense of London. It is from Blake's poem "Jerusalem" that Buckley takes his title:

> What are those Golden Builders doing? Where was the burying place
> Of soft Ethinthus? near Tyburn's fatal tree? Is that
> Mild Zion's hill's most ancient promontory, near mournful
> Ever-weeping Paddington?

The question hovers in the air in both poems: how does the modern city compare with the visionary sense of the City of God? In the England of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century culture, Blake could see the emergence of charitable institutions — hospitals, schools and places of compassion — as signs of the constructive and sympathetic forces in society. These were his Golden Builders, the agencies which make the vision of a City of God conceivable but which in themselves do not lead to the renovation of that vision or the full awakening of man. When Buckley looks around in twentieth century Australia, he is aware of how much further these same "Golden Builders" have advanced in the service of humanity: but he also senses that the role they play has lost its religious rationale, and that like the

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secular city to which in spirit they now belong they are subject to age and the renovation of the jack-hammer. His vision seems grounded in inspiration, but it ends in irony.

Where is the sacred in this secular world? Buckley's poem asks the question in real anguish. He sees himself and his city both standing in need of salvation: himself in the acutely personal sense of lying in a hospital bed on the point of death; the city in the unlovely and unloving sense of the machine which must destroy in order to make things new.

> In gaps of lanes, in tingling
> shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines.
>
> O Cardigan, Queensbury, Elgin: names of their lordships.
> Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: Shall I find here my Lord's grave?

Both city and human body are in a love-hate relation with the world of the machine. "Golden Builders" records the tearing up of Melbourne's streets and the knocking down of buildings. Religion and its pastoral instincts are edged out from the centre: the "crying of the machines" takes over. There is pathos in the remnants of the Church and its faith that survive to bear witness in this world.

All that is true of the city is true of the human body. It is experiencing its own helplessness under the inexorable law of age and use. The two most moving poems in "Golden Builders" are meditations on the dying process. But something happens, as it were, for Buckley on the way into experiencing his own vulnerability. For in surrendering he survives. At a point of being aware of his every breath he experiences life with an almost sensuous force. The room, the hospital, the nearby university, the inner city suburbs, and even the rearing skyscrapers take on a containing and enfolding form for life. Forgiven himself, he forgives all. The world of the machine becomes strangely loved in the poem.

The thrust and tone of Buckley's "Golden Builders" is double edged. Unlike Blake who can see social institutions being taken up into some larger energizing vision of a new creation, Buckley gives off a world-weary, ironic, even acerbic sense of the way life is. But it is a sense that affirms through its human tone and wry humour that all is not lost. He has many of the dark qualities of T. S. Eliot and Robert Lowell in the way they imagine a city. Buckley's Melbourne, however, resists becoming a symbol of anything other than itself. The person humanises the environment for good or ill as we see in Buckley's lines on the municipal nerve centre of his city:

> God knows what it is about Town Halls.
> I've lived next door to three of them,
> in small crouched brick houses, like an admirer,
> beside their shadows, their arguments, their clocks,
> the Labor Party rooms, and the Police Station.

Once, night after night, I listened
to the rats flutter in the blank furnace,
"the old stove". The best place to build in.
They grew their family there as if the old stove
were a dry cave on a mountain.
Their nerves were strong as mine.
When I smoke them out and killed them
they backed up like Spartans until, cornered,
tails twitching at the locked door,
they came screaming at my knees.

Now I kill on a small scale.

It is like a petit bourgeois Inferno. The rats in "the old stove" meet with a judgment which while dreadful in itself somehow attests to the fallibility of the judge himself. A certain humour places the human agent as part of the world he is asked to resolve. The almost conversational and confiding tone of the writing is a confession of belonging to, and being responsible for, a world in need of salvation through judgment. The casual manner conceals a density of involvement.

So too with Melbourne's buildings. At first it seems a long way from the smithy of Blake's Los to the jackhammers and drills. As in Section 22:

The hammers are at rest in the manbuilt field.
White concrete stripes on black asphalt. Tyred wheels having commerce with flakes of ash. Taller than any buildings the crane leans, angling for its meat. One hammer is heard. Steel core rapped on steel core.
You are awake, brother. You look down, you see what you have made.

They mount their platform they lean on their shovels and sing
the hammer sound wavers across them or timber rapped on timber
in the arena forming. The world dreams at my eyes.

Tell me there, brother, do you have information re the New Order?
Is that the word of life you tap on the steel core?
Is it the salt sea you bring tingling with each irregular stroke?
Are these platforms you stand on mounts for a new sermon?
In the sun, in the storm's eye, is the future Christ crouched?
Tell me with your mouth that speaks nothing but street whistles.

Irony and idealism commingle in these lines. The secular city through its spokesman, the solitary builder, is challenged for its vision, its revelation. But the challenge and the whole exercise seem rhetorical. The moment of heroism lapses. In its place comes the more human Buckley, the one who simply observes and absorbs the lesson of the wreckers.

Again it seems a saving lesson. The destruction is stripping him of his Australian ego and taking him back to his humble Irish earth, to a sense of place where his soul — inherited from ancestors — had known a home.

They crush the sides of bluestone. The great ball
cancels the windowside. The press of towers
crumples over the stairs. Will I find my soul here,
my Irish soul, as in my schooldays? or, as the stripped air
shows its few buildings, will the builders find
there in the courtyard, or under the last
cornerstone nickel silver raw iron seeds of copper
or find that airsmell
preserved in and preserving earth
the malt glowing, a slight burn in the air,
yeast seeping free of stone,
and the juices running on the street
as they carried the hops off. We used to feel it
through every window
seeming to enter us through the green earth.

Buckley finds in these understated images a growing point for his imagination as his most recent poems on Ireland make clear. But what seems true about this quasi-Edenic scene of the green earth, the malt juices and the airsmell is that the sense of Creation they carry has arisen in a peculiarly modern way out of an experience of Uncreation. We may not understand the processes of how the world came to be the way it is, but we are aware now of how the world is coming not to be the way it was: it is the via negativa of the secular twentieth century.

Buckley matters as a poet because he goes with the processes of the secular city to the point where he can speak with its voice and yet interpret it as a state of loss. When, for instance, in Section XXV he tackles "Telephones, Muzak", his poetry takes on an interestingly new and muffled interiority:

Whenever it rains,
water seeps into the root-voices,
the sound creaks with damp. Or

a voice comes
gristly over miles of wire
asking or telling of life-damage.

On the telephone everybody poses.
He lets the darkness carefully into his voice
lets his head tilt over his knuckles
or broods on the handset like a crooner
or pauses, listens, lets
his breathing hang on the wire
tangible as rain.

There is a withdrawing passivity of stance in these lines which is itself a discovered spiritual state. Intimations of "life-damage" over "miles of wire", the telephone is there as a prayer stool — almost a confessional. He wills his own passivity inside this environment of technology: he lets . . . lets . . . lets".

Repeating this word sets up a motif for Buckley which is central to the poems of "Golden Builders".

In two poems "Practicing Not Dying" (III and VI) it is his own machine, the body, that is letting him down. He retreats as far inside himself as possible: to where "the environment is inside me". He finds a certain place of composure here. Things settle for him. "The fine cool air settles, and moves." Or in a more sustained image of this interior experience Buckley writes his finest lines:

One knee crooked on the other
As if no more could happen

To you, already stone, with a limewhite
Skin — your mouth
An unslaked taste. Waiting, knowing
Anything can happen.

The rasp of water running somewhere.
You go to splash it on your face
Coils of browned tap-thick water
Settle over your hands. You don't

Dry them, you lie back again.
Two or three small house-flies
Settle, flaying at your mouth.
Your hand bumps on your cheekbone

As you go to flick them off.

If you lie long enough
Who knows what will settle
On your face or hand:

Buckley may have begun "Golden Builders" with some hope of mythologizing Melbourne. Clearly, his honesty and humanity has led him away from such pretentious folly. The structures of church and society in their collapse have shown him the way forward, and his own body in its vulnerability has given him the crisis and climax of a new awareness. The rediscovery of passivities is the dimension he moves into and finds a style and a voice for: "an unslaked taste", of not knowing "what will settle on your face or hand", these are aspects of a spiritual stance found through the language and experience of retreat peculiar to our time.

II

James McAuley and Les Murray are two poets who while having contrasting temperaments have tended to lean — as converts to Catholicism — more heavily on the doctrinal and sacramental supports of the Church than

does Buckley. McAuley is known for the conservative stand he took on cultural matters right up to the time of his recent death. But if what he stood for amounted to an ideological commitment to the Right his poetry nevertheless found a finely urbane style for itself. Indeed, the texture of his poems with their orderly cadenced lines and interplay of modern thought and feeling has made for a natural religious style, which may be seen to advantage in the recently published Australian Hymn Book where McAuley's contributions are a model of good taste and devotion. His position is an almost central one in terms of religious experience that sees itself conserving what is good in church and society: where it is limited is in the way it cannot entertain much that is new. His poem "In the Twentieth Century" is normative for the strengths and weaknesses of this conservative stand:

Christ, you walked on the sea
But cannot walk in a poem,
Not in our century.

There's something deeply wrong
Either with us, or with you.
Our bright loud world is strong

And better in some ways
Than the old haunting kingdoms:
I don't reject our days.

But in you I taste bread,
Freshness, the honey of being,
And rising from the dead.

Like yolk in a warm shell —
Simplicities of power,
And water from a well.

We live like diagrams
Moving on a screen.
Somewhere a door slams

Shut, and emptiness spreads.

The poem sets up this dichotomy between a dehumanised modern world and a benignly imagined Christ. But just what is the "emptiness" of which he complains? And for a poet to say "our speech is . . . chemical waste" is its own contradiction. Do we in fact "dream of song / Like parables of joy?" The poem in all is an appeal to a stasis of sensibility, beautiful in itself and located in liturgy and eloquence. It does not in fact have much to say about real human experience and religious truth and mystery. When, may we ask, did Christ walk in a poem? And if ever, why not now?

The issue appears in a different way in Les Murray's poem "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow". The world is not taken back to some ideal Christ for

judgment; Christ, if that is who the figure in Murray's poem could be said to be, comes into the world and confronts the secular with the sacred.

There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk
and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the backstreets
which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing:
There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even
sob very loudly — yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Is it a figure of Christ in this poem? Murray does not say so, and deliberately makes a point of holding back and resisting any such meaning in the poem's conclusion: "Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street." The point is clear. Murray feels that the figure should be unnamed and unknown. It enables him to locate a space — a phenomenological space — between the mysterious and the "absolutely ordinary" where the encounter of sacred and secular may take place. The poem is a serious but provocative game. Religious experience is disclosed at the heart of the secular city in a quasi-parable of weeping. It is a gift in him and a need in them which come together as a happening: religious activity as such is released as a shared experience. It is not explained, it is not dramatised, it does not lead anywhere: it is simply itself, and narrated as such. Murray uses the naive candour of a child and its capacity for wonder at a rainbow to image the hidden capacity of adults and citizen to respond to the demonstration of feeling in the weeping man. In this way Murray is suggesting a model of the religious in the world of the "absolutely ordinary".

Murray can come to such a position by virtue of his own barely hidden strengths of commitment. His career, which is still actively growing, is built on a radical conservatism. He defends the Australian countryside in a positive and new way: it is cow culture, a realised world of passivity, as close as the white-anglosaxon-protestant style can come to Hindu experience. He rejects the urban-liberal-avantgarde world; he writes "poems against economics"; he fights against a presence he calls "the Action" in metropolitan society as if it were a kind of Anti-Christ figure.

We have spoken of the Action,
the believer-in-death, maker of tests and failures.

It is through the Action
that the quiet homes empty, and barrack beds fill up, and cities
that are cover from God.
The Action, continual breakthrough,
cannot abide slow speech. It invented Yokels,
it invented the Proles, who are difficult/noble/raffish,
it invented, in short, brave Us and the awful Others.
The smiling Action
makes all things new: its rites are father killing,
sketching of pyramid plans, and the defence of Circles.

Much the same animus also lies behind Murray's recent attack in a review for the Sydney Morning Herald of the controversial book *The Myth of God Incarnate.* It was not a scholarly review: indeed, it was anti-intellectual — but intelligently so. The game of playing round with Jesus-as-historical-object offends Murray for whom religion, the Christian faith in particular, is a "happening" here and now in life, and for whom the Church has provided the structure and community for making the faith efficacious. Murray's conservatism, therefore, is fighting to preserve religious belief as a natural element in life. His recourse to the Australian countryside stands out as a search for the sacramental in nature. His originality lies in treating nature not as a romantic object or as a source of easy transcendentalism but as the indigenous *given* of Australian experience. He is pushing this insight further than anyone in Australian cultural history has so far done; and in modelling his "Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" on the Arnhem Land Wonguri-Mandjikai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone (a process he describes in *Meanjin* 4/1977) he is claiming a common logic between white man and black man in their experience of leisure as a basis of culture. He feels Australia needs to rediscover this spiritual truth for its well-being today.

III

We have so far looked at three figures from modern Australian Catholic experience: Buckley in part overshoots the mark with myth; Murray tends to undersell himself as a believer; and McAuley responds to a loss of faith in modern culture by creating firm artistic structures through, and for, his faith. Behind these three figures lie two others — Francis Webb and Christopher Brennan — from the same religious tradition but in whom the issues of religious belief and experience are even more sharply polarised. Webb is known for the imaginative intensity with which he affirmed his faith; Brennan is famous for the equally intense way he made up imaginatively for the rejection of that same faith.

In Francis Webb's poem called "Poet" there is a beautiful crystallisation of the figure of the poet in specifically religious terms. What is remarkable here is the way the Biblical world of Palestine is interchangeable with Australia:

I'm from the desert country — O, it's a holy land
With a thousand warm humming stinging virtues.

Poet/singers, as well as prophets, come from the desert: Webb sees the poet as a lonely figure who has listened to the music of the camel trains as they waken the "dozing miles" of desert journeys. But when this lonely figure steps into the city, he is caught up in dilemmas of a moral and social kind which he cannot handle. Law and order offer security but they also seduce the poet, the singer and the saint from his strange and difficult role in life. Webb imagines the poet as an actor in the situations where Jesus once stood. Would he cast the first stone at the woman taken in adultery? The encounter with this situation is overwhelming to the poet. He knows that he shares with Christ some radical sympathy for those who suffer and fail in life. Webb sees a likeness between the phenomenon of Christ and the imaginativeness of the poet. Love and beauty are linked in Webb's mind. Christ is the full union of the two experiences, but the poet can only come close to understanding the mystery of it all by being true to his desert world and what it teaches him of suffering and sympathy.

My narrow clever desert eyes
Peer back over my shoulder. They are strangely together,
A grave broad light in the temple. Breast upon knees,
The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday
Beat earthward. From the two together a train of camels.
She has given her love — but Paradise, what is His love?—
To a hundred of us. Again she will love, may tempt me;
But can ever this stone fly into the face of beauty
While the wind, as his delicate burning finger,
Gives a Word to the Sand?

Much of Webb's writing is formal in this way. A kind of piety encloses the imagination. But there is no denying that in spite of this, and even because of this, Webb names some of the deepest images of Australian experience where spirituality and imagination flow into each other. A quality of love is felt in the loneliness Webb celebrates in deserts, open spaces and distances; a music peculiar to dry empty landscapes is heard in his lines; and the sheer strangeness of finding Biblical experience absorbed into Australian experience is a stunning, though difficult, phenomenon to encounter.

When we go back in history beyond Webb to Brennan we find a similar weight and power collecting round the archetypal experiences of personal aloneness and of love found through woman. Brennan had by 1890 given up the intense Catholic faith of his upbringing. Yet he was obsessed with the myth of Eden; and as his poetry grew he came to tell it again and again but with the change of making it into the story of Lilith. It was a vision of a world without patriarchal presence and with man recollecting partly in guilt and partly in need the loss of Lilith, the primal woman figure or Adam's first wife according to Rabbinic legend. Brennan's insight outstripped his capacity to utter this vision adequately in poetry; and it was the failure of support from the religious and imaginative traditions he was using that made his poems pulsate with the intense force of his own personal loneliness and yearning.

The mother-deep, wise, yearning, bound

I feel it press beneath my heart,
the deep where I were free and crown'd
o'er mine own realm, alone, apart.

It haunts, a grey unlit abysm,
thro' solitary eyelit-slits
pierced in the mean inflicted schism
where day deludes my purblind wits.

But mighty hands have lock'd the keep
and flung the key, long ages past:
there lies no way into the deep
that is myself, alone, aghast.

This is Brennan's voice from "The Twilight of Disquietude".

When in the full night poetry later of "Lilith" he imagines the scene dramatically, it is as if he (or Adam) is in the possession of some immense female power which he feels destined to announce and affirm:

O mother thou or sister or my bride
inevitable, whom this hour in me declares,
were thine of old such rhythmic pangs that bore
my shivering soul, wind-waif upon the shore
that is a wavering twilight, thence astray
beneath the empty plainness of the day?

Such lines as these suggest that the isolation of Australia and the loneliness that belongs to it have forced a radical experience upon its poets and made them come closest of all to being the nation's prophets and holy men. What is found in all this emptying and emptiness of self are certain deep emotions to do with the absence of love. Yet the love that is missing is of the kind that can only be learnt by man from woman in her experience — after the pattern of Lilith — of need and primal power. An irony attaches to the absence of this love: for it is, indeed, a great love that is missing if Brennan's is the archetypal insight to go by.