

READING VINCENT BUCKLEY'S – BURNING THE EFFECTS AND FELLOW TRAVELLERS

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ABSTRACT

Vincent Thomas Buckley was one of the earliest poets and critics who visibly created his niche and influential work from his profound understanding of Australian literature icons- Judith Wright, A.D.Hope and James McAuley. He was noted for his first two collections of poems, which he surprisingly hated- The World's Flesh of 1954 and Masters in Israel of 1961. although his quantum leap was the publication of Arcady and Other Poems in 1966. This collection of poems made a ladder of initial success for Buckley as a poet, which he kept climbing after this collection. His achievement thereafter was not about his publications, but about his content driven and nostalgic themes, his representation of geographical and topographical elements of Australia beautifully woven into his emotions of abandonment, family, politics and nature. This paper attempts to look closely at two of his poems- Burning The Effects and Fellow Travellers. The paper also briefly covers his biography, lifetime work, achievements, literary and familial background as well his poetic and political ambitions.

Keywords- Buckley, poetic, father, political, family, Australian Literature.

Vincent Thomas Buckley (1925- 1988), born in Romsey, Victoria, Australia, was a celebrated poet, teacher, editor (The Bulletin 1961-1963, Prospect 1958-1963), critic, essayist, reviewer, Catholic intellectual, Professor of English at Melbourne University, member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and a founder of the Committee for Civil Rights in Ireland. He was considered a poet of high merit and was awarded The Christopher Brennan Award, established in 1976. This award is given in Australia for lifetime achievement in poetry. He attended St. Patricks College in East Melbourne. He also received the Red Earth Poetry Award. In 1942, his first job was as a clerk in the Commonwealth Department of Supply and Shipping for eight months. Next, he joined The Royal Australian Air Force during the second world war and worked as a recorder. In 1946, he joined the University of Melbourne, and in 1947, he married Edna Jean Forbes. He had two daughters with Edna, and they divorced after a while.

Buckley completed his graduation in 1950 from the University and started teaching in the successive year 1951. He post-graduated from the same University. He was the first to become a Lockie fellow for creative writing at the University of Melbourne. This step laid the foundation of his journey as a pioneer in Australian Literature. He taught English at the University, and his bitter-sweet teaching experience is captured in the poem *Late Tutorial*. His contributions were published with some other young *Avante gardist* writers of *Angry Penguins* descents. His poetry made a light impression, and the streamlined flow in his work gave way to better literary pieces in his career. His essay '*Ease of American Language*' published in *New Poetry Collection* (1979), shows his writing flow intact yet improving in the most exemplary manner. From 1955-to 57, *the Mannix Scholarship* gave him a chance to study at The University of Cambridge. He utilised this scholarship to study the moral criticism of Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot. His research was later published as *Poetry and Morality* in 1959. He had Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and A. S. Byatt as his contemporaries at the University of Cambridge. He also took trips to Ireland in those days and

built upon his Irish ancestry. He was fascinated by Irish culture. Buckley's poetic substance also drew from Irish culture and history. He believed that Ireland bloomed his imagination. Every poet has a place that they imagine for the flow of ideas and mental peace that allows them to pen down poems. For Buckley, it was Ireland, and he remembered scenes, places, nature, myths, folklore, and people. He used all of them as a muse. He stayed for specific periods in Ireland, from 1967 to 1979. His diligent working practices and remarkable literary work inspired the establishment of the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize by the University of Melbourne, initially funded by Buckley's family and friends, in 1992. Today it stands as a very prestigious award. It is a biennial award that welcomes an Irish poet to Melbourne and an Australian poet to Ireland. This award is to commemorate the life and work of Vincent Buckley by reflecting his "love of and commitment to both Australian and Irish poetry. "

He published his first poetry collection during his literary career when he finished his master's at the University of Melbourne, titled *'A World's Flesh'* in 1954. In his writing, the world saw a robust expressionistic view when his work on moral criticism of Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, and T.S. Eliot was published in 1959 titled *'Poetry and Morality'*. Buckley's persuasive, rhetoric talent is seen in his *'Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian'* (1957). It contained some precious essays that took Australian Literature to the forefront or gave a baseline to start with. It contained works of Kenneth Slessor, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, and James McAuley and was seen as an exemplar for the upcoming Australian Literature. He published various poem collections after that. Some of the prominent ones are *Arcady and Other Places* (1966), *The Golden Builders: And Other Poems* (1976), *Late Winter Child* (1979), *The Pattern* (1979), and *Last Poems* (1991). These poetry and essay collections have various contexts, and most vividly, in the context of Buckley's writing. His real-life themes may guide his writings, but his diction, punctuality with rhythm, and play with the structures give his work a different kind of strength. Never aggressive in his real life, his political turmoil has found a deep-rooted stagnation in his literary works; if one reads his works in chronological order, one can easily detect the flow of time through them, the natural events, the political stunts, the changing stances of literature and birth of a pulchritudinous Australian Literature. He explored the copious substantiations of love, marriage, motherhood, parenthood, seasons, nature, politics, and laws. Since he was Catholic, he connected physical emotions with divine sentiments. When these ritualistic literary aspirations are solidified, we get pure complex poetry, such as Buckley. He pursued his Catholicism and poetry skills to bring alive all the portions of Australian Literature. Buckley, during an interview, said that while writing *Golden Builders*, he was looking for poetry that was 'locally mimetic'. In his *Ease of American Language*, he addresses that the American spirit influenced his writing, it became free and flowing. It gained more of an open forum, and the work's naturalness was evident. In a comment regarding the substance and style of his poems, he describes the special naturalness' of American literary speech:

"The quality is one of perception, which is largely a matter of intimate and prolonged sensation, the sensation of noticing being used as the focus for the other, more clearly animal sensations; a matter of sensation, and of pace in its expounding (that is to say, its uncovering, its outlaying); hence of idiom, since the enterprise is to a certain degree mimetic, and will have to depend on the availability of a language which is close to the bodily particularity of things and of their common local names; hence of the rhythm which will deliver that idiom and the thinginess which it enfolds." (Buckley, ed. Kirkby 138)

The impact of the revolutionary sixties speaks volumes in the writings. The wave of deconstruction and destabilization impacted the literary world. This period made Buckley use Catholicism, not in the transcendental belief but in the original emotive value. Buckley speaks of a shift from 'aprioristic thinking' to 'existential speculation' (Cutting Green Hay 231), recalling his decision to take 'an anthropological approach to institution and self given his sense of a failure of belief. One can safely say, his theology and poetry were

intertwined, and his ideologies gave a canvas for the poems to flourish. When one reads his works and puts the reader-response theory in use, one can visibly feel he has emphasized more on the *religious awareness* rather than the *religion* itself. Buckley believed in transcendentalism and Immanence, which give his poems a bodacious touch and a suffering reality.

“For the majority of poets of today, the creative task is to test those privileged places - and privileged persons, moments, and events as well - for sacredness: do they offer an opening towards the transcendent? Will the testing of their specific feeling, the exploring of their possible significance, open them up towards the transcendent, or will it merely return the poet to the involuted rounds of his own consciousness?” (Poetry and Sacred, 75)

Vincent Buckley was said to have introduced the institutionalisation and academic study of Australian Literature. His dedication to the study and promotion of Australian Literature was a significant upscale in this context. Buckley’s essay – ‘Towards an Australian literature’ was first published in Meanjin in 1959, wherein he discussed aspects of promoting Australian Literature. Buckley was absorbed in romantic and post-romantic poetry, just like Wordsworth did at his age. Buckley's stress on these kinds of poetry is what pushed and nurtured modern-day Australian poetry. He believed successful poetry has sanctity and incarnational nature. Buckley's shouldering of cultural impediments played a considerable role, and he carried it well by fusing personal, emotional, and political scenarios. Although Buckley mixed politics in his poems, he never wanted to preach alike; he always used the terms like – study, research, and sociological, which protected the literary sphere from any diversion. He wanted American Literature to remain pure and advanced without any dilution. Buckley says-

“In a settled and prosperous land such as this, only a tiny minority asks itself the central questions about the destiny of all. Moreover, the poets are not always members of this minority. For us, poetry is not a vocation, but an additional pleasure; it is not seeing ultimate pleasures but a surrender to immediate experiences, whether sensuous, emotional, or even intellectual. The life of the mind is merely one among others in a range of possible experiences.”

Buckley’s idea of poetry eventually rests in the sphere of metaphysical poetry because of over criticism. His autobiography- *Cutting Green Hay (1983)*- was a celebration of his environment and life.

This paper looks closely at two of his poems, *Burning The Effects* and *Fellow Traveller*. These poems are from the collection – *Arcady and Other Places*. The word Arcady is derived from Arcadia, a Greek word that refers to a vision of pastoralism with the harmony of nature. The collection is majorly about his nostalgia, about all the memories he created in his childhood; more than created, this collection somehow revealed or, as we might say, brought the affection for humanity and the physical world. The serenity of nature had taken hold of him. Vincent spent his childhood in Romsey, hilly farmland, most of it occupied by Irish Australians. He is revisiting it through this collection.

Burning The Effects, Buckley dives into his childhood only to find himself extremely lonely and separated. The lines –

*" cold flesh, cold stone, cold branch, and dripping leaves
Stand near the house that could not fathom me,
Or hold him, the earth, your damp earth retrieves."*

Vincent, in a deep unsettling yet silent tone, points at the deep emotional agony he had from his father. He used to take his father outside the hospital in a wheelchair to watch trees. Trees can be seen here as a personification of his emotional trauma. “*your damp earth retrieves*” hints at his father’s death. Cold significantly puts up with the thought of being alone, and there is no warmth whatsoever in the house. It could not make him stay and be close, at least. He left home to continue his education at secondary school and in the city. He came back and realized he had grown aloof. He could not connect to the town or his place

back then. He reluctantly tries to move over his father's death through this poem. He cannot make anything out of the home he once had. He finds it strange, Says

"the flakes whirl like a gust of breath or late desire, Upward."

He says life is slowly moving, his desire which should have been there long back are now ascending up like flakes, flakes which melt and then give away to the heat of the warm air and in that moment show how weak they are. Buckley points at the futility of his desires and the failure of his wishes to present them to reality at the current time. He further says,

*"Nothing of it is absolutely mine,
And he hoarded it owned nothing, Free."*

These lines show Buckley's detachment to the house which was once his home and his inability to have some hopeful or happy memory about the place. He clearly puts it up that nothing belongs to him. Things move on eventually, get replaced or destroyed or damaged. Moreover, the symbolism of the cold breeze directs at the harsh setting of life and yet acknowledges the continuity of life. He puts it in this way-

"Things get cleared away and, cold breeze."

The imagery of cherry trees, cold breeze, cold stone, cold branch, dripping leaves, and whirling flakes provide a befitting natural scene of remorse and grief. The poem follows the alternate rhyming scheme of abab.

When this collection was published, literary critic R.P.Blackmur was of the view that Buckley had transitioned and, like most poets, built a poetic 'behaviour'. This makes deciphering his poems a little less difficult for us. For all we knew, Vincent Buckley's personal and professional life profoundly impacted the political sagas back then. His poems later had two behavioral patterns, one of love and the other of politics. The collection also had eleven political poems, and one of them was *Fellow Travellers*.

The poem was published during his active political years from 1958. He was also recurrently editing the journal, *Prospect*, and then top contributors were of Catholic center-left. His interest was still evident in Politics when he formed the *Committee for Civil Rights* in Ireland, although he knew that politics could deprive the Literature that he was producing.

The poem '*Fellow travellers*' directly hit Stalinism and the opposition party members. He was angry with the fence-sitting and faltering of the opposition. The literary and intellectual-political scenario of Australia was reoriented in the mid-1950s. Australian Literature suffered from the cultural effect of Cold War Politics. Buckley said a period of "peculiarly Australian intellectual cold war" had begun because of the changing dynamics of the literary world in Australia. Hence the poem *Fellow Travellers* was written to address the effect of Cold War Politics on the Australian Literary field and the declining liberalism or humanism in the writers. The poem starts with the sentence,

*Give him this day his bread of indignation
For he is the Inspector of our Consciences;
Give him his daily signature
To a joint letter, hear him explain,*

Buckley mocks the reckless attitude of the person, most probably someone in a high official post who has no interest in what the public wants to say. Buckley wants the common people to serve him with all resentment and discontent. He has just one business to do, to get signatures as he explains to the public what he aims for in a very ineffectual manner.

*And listen, with half an ear, to hear
Behind the almost empty pipe,
The almost empty eyes,
The high blast of a revolver shot.*

Buckley openly says that this official and (in turn, the entire opposition party) is devoid of any emotion, and they are just explaining the wrong way out. Buckley is advising the public to put half the attention on the official's words and the other half on the actual intention of the officer. "Behind the almost empty pipe" suggests the unavailing and fruitless promises. Furthermore, "the almost empty eyes" suggest the lack of sympathy or commiserations for the common good of the public. This poem is a 'decastich,' poem of just ten lines and yet speaks boldly of the political uneasiness and unrest.

Buckley's poetry was sustained and fuelled by his personal life and political scenarios. He was a witness to the political dynamics of Australia, and his writings made the national literature spur and rise to its heights. Buckley never preached any divinity or produced a moral compass for the society. He simply put out his experiences, thoughts, mannerisms of the world and some themes close to his heart. His collections are extensive in nature. His poetic mindset has different propositions to the corrupted politicians or the silent fury of nature. The gravity of the themes and the concoction of his poetic ability and political mind surprises throughout. Although he considers himself a poetic failure, somehow he apologises for his only talent as a poet. He thinks of his poetic misdemeanor, yet he wants to give to society what it needs, a soothing touch of poetry. He believes that his poetry expresses an opinion, and does not give a sermon. It might not be the best idea to write poetry for the world to learn, but he has nothing else to give. In 1951, he started teaching at The University of Melbourne and talked to his students in the most refreshing yet engrossing manner. His poetry stands as a means to see for humanity the spitting image of its self destruction but through a poetical explanation of events of the world. Buckley gives to the world the power of speech and words, the elegance and impact of poetry, the eloquence and delivery of diction, emphasis on emotions. However, Buckley believes that these things are not required for the world to heal or extinguish the fire within, the world needs more of primal care, a requiting love, and affectionate safekeeping. A concerned mind, sympathetic voices, empathetic hearts and a blessing for a lifetime. He cannot compete with these worldly virtues, merely with his words of wisdom, but he can try to plant a seed of consciousness so that the world might arise to witness the wariness around itself, and to heal itself with these seeds before the end of time. He wants to teach his students exceedingly about life and the world. but refrains from entering the space between his students and his poetic ability to put forth the following lines.

*"O man is sick, and suffering from the world,
And I must go to him, my poetry
Lighting his image as a ring of fire,
The terrible and only means I have;
And, yet, I give too much in rhetoric
What should be moulded with a lifetime's care . . ." (Masters, 2011)*

Thus, Buckley produced varying genres of poetry in the same collection and gave us an insight into his plethora of literary ideas. Australian Literature stands firm today because of its extraordinary and consequential efforts and works. He was a man of great stature and stood high when his country was in unrest and prevalent shadows. He directed his country through his literary endeavours and solid political morals. His poems are a witness to all of it, and the reverberance he gave still lingers within Australian Literature's very soul and mind.

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