# Vincent Buckley's Teaching Archive

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MEMOIRS, OBITUARIES, THE RECOLLECTIONS OF STUDENTS AND COLLEAGUES ARE themselves part of the 'impossible archive'. Notwithstanding the innate distortions of the genre—nostalgia, self-promotion, the decorum of eulogy—the remembered teacher (or colleague) can work against the fixed positions of disciplinary history. Joanne Lee Dow tells a lovely story about the critic, poet and University of Melbourne academic Vincent Buckley (1925-1988). He was about to take a trip away for a few weeks and requested from the Head of his Department that she, a favoured tutor, might teach his Honours Poetry course. 'The first I heard of it', Lee Dow recalls, 'was when he recounted their exchange in his inimitable, impish way':

> H: Why on earth do you want her?
> Vin: Because I admire her teaching.
> H: What is there to admire?
> Vin: She has 'negative capability.'
> H: You don't need to tell me about her negatives. The answer is No. No. No.
>
> (Dow 4)

Negative capability, of which Keats famously holds up Shakespeare as the exemplar, suggests openness, hospitality to uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, a

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resistance to factual didacticism. It's not now likely to appear in a university job advertisement, as either an 'essential' or a 'desirable' attribute, but in so far as education exceeds our tabulated learning outcomes, we should perhaps still prize its non-coercive pedagogical ethos. If negative capability is Buckley's goal, how far might his teaching archive show us how it worked in practice? Following Buurma and Heffernan, can we find in Buckley's classroom antics or democratic collaborations evidence that might enrich our sense of his role in the disciplinary history of literary studies in Australia?

We don't need the archive to know that any seeming unity in Buckley hides a lot of motley, some of it self-divisive and conflictual. He was a pioneer in Australian literary studies, who resisted both cultural nationalism and a positivist sociology; he was active in left-wing Catholic politics, but an anti-communist; he strongly identified with his Irish-Australianness but was a sharp critic of contemporary Irish society; he was committed to university ideals but often acerbic about academics. Leigh Dale, in her seminal history of English literary studies in Australia, groups him with the Leavisites (199), and regards his role in Australian literary studies as essentially 'conservative' in its impulse to 'create a canon without rethinking canonicity' (263). Yet, his differences with Leavis are marked, not least by his cleavage to Irishness and Catholicism, as opposed to the Protestant and English Leavis (Strauss 2). Though Buckley's criticism and his teaching are avowedly evaluative, as university English was for most the twentieth century, he finds himself increasingly at odds with Australian Leavisites, like Sam Goldberg. Later, he clashed with theorists at Melbourne University, led by the Shakespearean deconstructionist Howard Felperin (McLaren, 299-309). Yet one of the features of Buckley that makes him more interesting than a pat liberal humanist, shaken by the rise of theory, is that part of him was always alienated and out of place. This agon also might have contributed to his prizing of negative capability in the classroom, understood as a sort of restless refusal of resolution or certainty.

The 'Vincent Buckley Papers' are held in the Academy Library at UNSW Canberra. MSS 229 consists of ten boxes, with teaching materials contained in Series 3, specifically 3.4, labelled 'Lectures 1960-1980s', consisting of five folders. This sub-series includes departmental memos, erudite lectures, many written in cursive longhand over 30-40 pages, examinations, bibliographies, syllabi, 'get well' cards from students. One's first sense on surveying the sundry documents here is how different his world is to our own, despite its relative proximity. Here is a world of carbon copies, scrawled notes to colleagues, telexes. It is striking how involved students are in determining syllabi content and the ease with which one could announce new courses. There is much evidence here of a responsive and two-way teaching, attuned with student concerns and eager to answer their literary interests. Buckley here shows little of the stringency or confinement of Leavisism, and favours policies that will afford students with choice and diversification. In a

memo of 2 May 1972 to his colleagues, entitled 'Possible Organisation of English Pass Course', he advocates against following the restrictive 'example of LaTrobe in having a basic English I course as a pre-requisite for all later courses' and affirms 'that we should diversify courses in English 1'. He urges a model that will break up 'monolithic structures', 'decentralise educational authority', and will 'give in all ways more room for participation' (Folder 1). It's a liberal and expansive ethos, at some distance from cloistered and exclusive canons.

What sort of a teacher was he? The range of topics is wide including 'Aspects of Poetry' honours course (with a strong emphasis on the ballad) to lectures on literary periods, movements and individual writers such as Robert Browning, Emily Brontë, Jonathan Swift, D.H. Lawrence and Arthur Miller. Judging from the material here, he was learned and authoritative, but also unbuttoned, wry and discursive. His was the sort of authority which could admit its failings or draw attention to something it does not fully understand. 'I won't comment much on this passage', he says during a lecture on William Blake, 'because I don't find the poem wholly intelligible, and to the extent that I do find it intelligible, I don't find it paraphrasable' (Folder 2). Equally, he can reassure his students about their own perplexity, adding a comment at end of lecture on T. S. Eliot that 'students ought not to worry if many details remain obscure to them' (Folder 4). There is a sense though that, even when he is provoking or cajoling, he considers himself, and his students, as part of an ongoing conversation. It's common in all his lectures to extensively cite other critics, often unfavourably, but with a sense of a collaborative or community process into which the students are, implicitly, invited. 'What seems just as obvious to me, but is not acknowledged by most critics, is that the *Songs of Innocence* which Blake wrote are a much inferior body of work to *Songs of Experience* or to his still later short poems' (Folder 2). He is not a strict formalist by any means, drawing eclectically on biography, historical context, secondary sources, wide comparison with other authors, and his own judgment, usually identified as such. He could be daring and panoptic and often provocative in his judgements, such as when he compares Victorian poetry unfavourably with the Romantics. 'Harsh words, yes; but there are differences to be accounted for and presumably there are ways of accounting for them' (Folder 2). There is little sign of fervour or evangelism. While the concern is always evaluative and driven by a concern to judge whether a piece of literature succeeds or fails and if so, how, he is not zealous or coercive. One also gets a sense of winning humour and self-parody. During a Victorian poetry lecture, we have the following interruption:

> When you hear me talking this way, take a pinch of salt, count up to ten, take away the number you first thought of, and conclude warily that what I am saying is at best a half truth. [circled in margin—'Read Herald'] (Folder 2)

One aspect of Buckley as teacher that comes across in some obituaries and memoirs is the sound of his voice. This feature is typical of the 'memory of English teacher' genre. However, a deep interest in orality and acoustics is evident in Buckley's teaching practice too. His lectures on poetic ballads bring out their roots in the oral tradition and modes of popular culture. His seminars and tutorials were interactive and in no small part performative. The archive includes a script of *The Waste Land as* 'Reading Guide' with single lines ascribed to each student to read aloud and marginal notes suggesting tone and delivery (Folder 3). Though Buckley is an intellectual teacher, bringing out ideas and interpretative frames, he also wants to impart the rhythm and effect of the work as art and to involve the students in experiencing it.

His chosen modes of assessment are also democratic and pluralist. We might raise our eyebrows at the 1960 essay topics for Buckley's Australian literature course. The typical literature student of today, if invited to compare the novelists Henry Handel Richardson and Martin Boyd, would probably not have to be cautioned to 'concentrate your main attention on one book by each' (Folder 1). Buckley essay topics are remarkably wide and suggestive, which if possibly terrifying for a neophyte student, eschews pre-cooked answers or ideological conformity. Students are invited to discuss, with their own examples, topics such as 'Poetry is never speech'; 'National characteristics can exist in poetry without being mentioned'. Or, simply, 'Quiet is beautiful' (Folder 4).

A striking example of Buckley's interactive mode comes in a typed document headed 'Student Submission to the English Dept' with extended annotations in Buckley's hand (Folder 3). The form responds to the 'firm desire of at least eight potential Language and Literature students' (names marginally noted in pen by Buckley) to have new paper added to the syllabus for 1973—'Contemporary Literature and Thought c. 1925—the Present Day'. The requested course, clearly indicative of the temper of the times, imagines a huge range of continental and American literature taught together with theories of literary criticism and mainstream philosophy. It is, in other words, an early student demand for the bursting of disciplinary and period boundaries. From all evidence, Buckley responds constructively to this request, adding in his hand Wittgenstein and Levi-Strauss to Sartre and Trotsky. Only beside the section on German Existentialism—Heidegger, Jaspers—does he add the comment 'too hard' and to Modern Theology 'too extensive'. Names added in his hand include Hannah Arendt and Iris Murdoch and the overall document concludes with four student names.

It is possible the annotations came during discussion between Buckley and these students. In any case, the student petition seems to have resulted in a somewhat slimmed down, but still highly ambitious, literature and intellectual history course

overseen by Buckley and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, entitled 'Contemporary Literature and Thought'. Prefatory remarks sound some caution – 'it will be noticed that we have not attempted to include every issue or writer relevant to such a course' – and a great deal of flexibility—'we have left room for the expansion of topics which prove to be especially rewarding'. The structure, content and assessment would appear to have more to do with this interaction than, say, teaching and learning committees at faculty and university level, as they might today. The teaching seems to be divided between 'CWC' and 'VB' with a good deal of student input. Notably, Buckley takes not only weeks on 'left-wing thought' (Shaw, Lukacs, Benjamin) but also on 'right-wing thought' (Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis). There are also concluding weeks on up to the moment issues and debates on the 'Counter-Culture' (Marcuse, R. D. Laing and others) and, taught by Buckley, 'The New Feminism' (de Beauvoir, Millett, Mailer). On the latter, his handwritten notes would indicate that he lays out positions and debates within and without feminist theory, about biology or social constructionism, the relation of patriarchy to wider politics. He deploys Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1968)—'real differences will be discovered only by treating them alike' [sic]—but there are also some qualms registered in his notes ('Account of Lawrence reductive' / 'How useful can any lit. crit. be which is framed by a particular ideology?'). Notably, Norman Mailer's critique of Miller in his 1971 book *The Prisoner of Sex* is listed, though Buckley's notes of this book that the 'style detracts from force of argument'.

These are not areas with which we would usually associate Vincent Buckley and I cite them as instances of how the teaching archive can smudge or trouble our received images. The theory wars and the ideological positioning are seldom as Manichean as we might imagine or as the disciplinary histories depict. The notes in Buckley's teaching archive do afford some empirical ballast to the memoirs, obituaries and affectionate recollections which recall his collaborative classroom and would seem to support, in the words of his biographer 'his ideal of a university as a communal society and of teaching as a collaborative venture in learning' (McLaren 308).

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