

A Conversation with Christopher Buckley

April 21, 2006

Christopher Buckley is a canvasser of the human experience. From the Catholic theology of his childhood to new discoveries in cosmology, from the cultural revolution of the 1960s to Eastern Europe in the 1990s, from the art of Georgia O’Keeffe to the poetry of contemporaries like Gerald Stern and Pablo Neruda, his poetry explores the gamut of the physical and intellectual environs he has occupied. Always incisive, Buckley explains his investigations in direct terms: “One of the main reasons a person is drawn to art, to writing, to poetry particularly, is to try to make sense of his/her life. ...as you go at puzzling out any individual existence, certainly as you look back and try to put pieces together, you are making that myth of yourself.”

His process of mythmaking is mirrored by a technical facility that allows Buckley to pursue the elements of his craft most appropriate to parsing his experience. His lines balance rhythm and image to offer his reader a seat of comfortable distress that echoes the very complexities of life his work so consistently pursues. But Buckley is adamant—poets must also write critical prose, and he has done just that for thirty years, championing the work of young and underappreciated poets we’d be poorer without.

And we’d be poorer without the mythic sense of life Buckley has created in fourteen books of poems, the most recent of which is *And the Sea and Sky*. Last year, Eastern Washington University Press released his second collection of creative nonfiction, *Sleepwalk*. And he has authored or edited, seven celebrations of poets and poetry, including *A Condition of the Spirit: The Life & Work of Larry Levis* (with Alexander Long), *Homage to Vallejo*, and *Appreciations: Selected Reviews, Views, &*

Interviews—1975-2000. He has been honored with dozens of grants and awards, including four Pushcart Prizes. He is currently working on a collection of new and selected poems. Buckley teaches at the University of California, Riverside, and was kind enough to conduct this interview by way of electronic correspondence.

JEFFREY DODD

In your recent “Poet on the Poem” essay in *American Poetry Review*, as well as in several essays in *Appreciations*, you appear both weary and wary of poetry “camps and schools.” Can you draw out some of the dangers—if you consider them dangers—of such schools and divisions?

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Camps are formed to promote their members and often function more politically than aesthetically. They develop, almost necessarily, an us vs. them situation—our way is right; yours is not. And because an individual helps promote the camp, helps wave the banner, makes the work conform to the protocols, that poet will be included and the work—sometimes inferior—will be promoted and acclaimed, whereas alone in the world, it might meet with a fate appropriate to its accomplishment.

I think of my first teacher, the poet Glover Davis, a great teacher, a committed teacher, who gave a great deal, and rigorously, to his students. Mainly, he was a formalist and extolled and taught inherited forms. He published his first two books with the renowned Harry Duncan, then a book with Wesleyan. But he was not a political animal, not a networker. He was ignored by the New Formalists and when he contacted them when they were making a lot of noise on the poetry scene, he was still ignored. I think he has two or three manuscripts of fine, mostly formal verse on his desk in his retirement. So it's never strictly the idea, or quality; it's too often finally political. We have the great example of Donald Justice who wrote, for most of his years, free verse and traditional forms. A good poem presented itself in the form it presented itself—no need to join a school. And one of my favorite poets, Stanley Kunitz, wrote some fine prose explaining why for most of his life he did not want to write sonnets. One of the best poets I know, Mark Jarman, wrote a collection of honest and authentic *Unholy* sonnets and also has a book of prose poems forthcoming. Both are good. Academia is full of politics;

poets need to be more democratic and look to excellence and originality rather than one style as opposed to another.

Also, a young poet may—and I have seen it—appear on the scene with simple narrative gifts and write good and accomplished poetry. He or she often has a difficult time in graduate school where the group or camp or school is theory driven. These kinds of camps work against the wider appreciation of poetry and the range of poetic talent.

I stand with the wise and humane spirit of Stanley Kunitz, who said in the introduction to his *Collected Poems*, “Years ago I came to the realization that the most poignant of all lyric tensions stems from the awareness that we are living and dying at once. To embrace such knowledge and yet to remain compassionate and whole, that is the consummation of the endeavor of art.” So I do not care if the poem is a prose poem, a sonnet, a raving lyric anaphorical ode; if it is well made and says something accessibly and freshly about what it is to be human, then it is a good poem to me. I just don’t see that camps are focused on the essential good of poetry.

DODD

Dark Matter seems to represent a turn toward openness in your work, with respect to the last point you made. Was there a discernible pressing outward in the bounds of your aesthetic, or was something else at work?

BUCKLEY

Form follows function, accommodates subject. Matisse said the painting always exists before the theory. So, no, I had no big idea about what I would do next or how I would do it regarding forms or expanding an aesthetic. One simply hopes to grow from book to book, but often there is a pendulum effect, one side of the working spectrum to another. For a number of years the voice that was working in me gave me long poems in long lines. It was not fashionable. Editors always wanted something short, but that is not what I was writing and I was grateful that something was coming to me at all and engaging me, obsessing me to whatever degree. *Fall from Grace* is a book wholly in that manner. The last three books, on the other hand, have gone back to, what is for me, shorter poems in tighter forms—lots of couplets and versions of the triadic line we all learned from Williams. One side to the other.

At the same time, I am writing prose poems when that particular voice fits a subject and the last three books have had a few prose poems

counterpointing the tighter lines. Sometimes I edge more toward the lyric, and sometimes a more expansive, ironic, self reflexive voice. But with *Dark Matter* I was finding more and more varied forms presenting themselves to me as I tackled more pointedly a new and particular subject matter, that of recent cosmology and astrophysics. All of that information and reading was fresh material to support the old arguments and inquisitions regarding metaphysics, mortality, the temporal beauty of the world. I wrote in that book a couple poems in a wide and orchestrated format—lines, images, surrounded by space and floating there to isolate them, to let them “resonate and baste,” as Charles Wright has it. “Star Journal” and “Perseid Meteor Shower” are two of those and their subjects are obvious from their titles. “Sun Spots”—the “concrete” poem—took off in that direction almost from the beginning. The trick was of course to make each line work as a line, to have integrity, and to simply chop it off mid-syntax to fit a visual template. It’s the only one I’ve ever written, but the form seemed to fit the subject and it was selected for a Pushcart Prize and of the four poems I’ve had in Pushcart, it was the one selected for their 30 year best-of anthology— probably for its invention or unusual shape, but I am grateful no matter what the reason. In that book there are a number of regular free verse stanzas, a number of poems in even-lined stanzas, and even a Shakespearian sonnet. But yes, I think you are right to see some reaching out in forms to accommodate a more expansive subject matter.

DODD

The last few lines of “Mystery” approach those issues of metaphysics and cosmology in a nearly *ars poetical* fashion:

“The salt, the dust, the old
suspects—I continue to have them
change hats and coats for this, for any scrap
of evidence we have of heaven.”

BUCKLEY

“Mystery” is an *ars poetica*, but more about the over-reaching themes of poetry than about tidy imagery or strategy. I’m just on to myself there, aware that I keep making the same search, that I keep rounding up the usual suspects, to try to find examples of transcendence. The short ver-

sion is that despite attending Catholic school even through to my BA, I stopped buying into orthodoxy at about eleven years old. But despite my rejection of Church dogma and the changing rules, the idea that stayed with me was that there might be some metaphysical construct behind all we see. Emphasize “might”—it would be great if there was. And so when I first started reading books and articles on cosmology, particle physics, etc., it was clear to me that the good writers of those books had to find imagery and metaphors to explain the concepts of quantum mechanics to those of us with only a high school understanding of science. What subject matter, what great new material.

Dark Matter employed a lot of recent science when dark matter was first discovered. Then, say a dozen or so years ago, they figured that ninety percent of the universe was not radiating and yet something was holding galaxies together, and hence dark matter. What a metaphor, working with any emotional state, past personal history, and more to the point with all the speculation about hidden forces in the universe. But the science usually changes by the time you read the book. Now, the standard model of the universe provides for about twenty-one percent dark matter, four percent atoms, and seventy-five percent of what they are now calling dark energy. I’ve got a new pamphlet on parallel universes (there are three distinct possible kinds) and superstring theory. I read it for fun. It’s sometimes like finding money in the street: theoretical and metaphysical Lincoln Logs to try to construct something to stand on and see clearly to some source beyond our common mortality. Interestingly enough, many of the popular books written for a general audience on cosmology begin with the pre-socratic philosophers who all had postulated what everything in the world was made of—the beginnings of the first atomic theories, and in a way the beginning of the search for the Grand Unified Field Theory, or what they are now calling—without tongue in cheek—The Theory of Everything. Sounds pretty close to metaphysics, going at it a piece at a time.

DODD

So many writers today seem to privilege minutiae and eschew “the big thing,” as though they could be divorced. What are the dangers of failing to recognize the link between the search and the “evidence”?

BUCKLEY

The surface of art is just that, the surface. Alone it’s not much, but some folks want it to be all. The evidence is there just to get us to the search,

to the speculation and reach for something beyond ourselves. You do not have to be religious to realize this. Non religious writers—Hemingway and John Fowles come to mind—make a consistent case for the dignity and essential value in acting humanely toward each other, in realizing there is a “right” thing to do according to just being alive on the planet, even if we are an amazing coincidence of self-conscious chemicals. Williams always had an idea and an emotion, a deep humanity at the core of his work. He wanted to go about it concretely and not abstractly, not in the largely intangible and attenuated language of philosophy. And that was a good thing for poetry, especially American poetry.

DODD

Maybe related, how would you characterize the relationship between poets and “critics”—however you define the term—these days?

BUCKLEY

Poets need to write critical prose on poetry. After Jarrell, what? Professional critics who have a career and often are allied to camps and particular theories—Margorie Perloff comes immediately to mind—there are many out there. An exception is Kunitz. If you read through his prose collection, *A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly*, you’ll see that in addition to the fine introductions he wrote for his Yale selections, he has wonderful essays on many poets—Aiken, Rilke, Jeffers, Louise Bogan, Marianne Moore, Stevens, Lowell, Berryman, and Dylan Thomas. There are four essays on Roethke. But Kunitz was not out to carve anyone up and so his prose on poetry did not draw much attention. I should mention as well David Young and David Walker at *FIELD*—poets who have for years written criticism whose sole intention is to illuminate and praise great work. Young’s short essay on James Wright in the *FIELD* symposium on Wright is to my mind the most helpful and concise essay on Wright, a piece every young poet should read. But again, these are poets who have done their due diligence in support of poetry and who have not tried to “make a name” as a critic. Gerry LaFemina and Dennis Hinrichsen have started a tabloid format journal, *Review Revue*, whose focus is reviews of and essays on poetry by poets. It’s a wonderful project and is really succeeding.

For over twenty-five years, I did my best to write and publish reviews, interviews, and essays on contemporary poetry. I’m not near as brilliant as Perloff, Helen Vendler, Richard Howard, but I trust my motives. I did not gain much critical attention, but I did the little thing I could

to support young poets and say what I could about some of our great poets. I did not do any “hatchet jobs” as I concluded early on that if I were going to spend the time writing critical prose instead of my own poetry, I had better spend it on work I admired and could be instructed by. Ed Hirsch, a fine poet with a brilliant and comprehensive mind for poetry, has many essays on poets of all stripes and varying periods that are our current hallmark for my money. His newest book of prose on poetry, *Poet’s Choice*, is a gem.

DODD

You’ve written admiringly of Charles Wright’s and Paul Mariani’s investigations of the spiritual and earthly. This is a question that appears in various manifestations in your own work. What do you consider the particular characteristics that seem to make poetry so well equipped for approaching this and other big questions?

BUCKLEY

Well, of course in many cases a poem is a meditation. Some classical techniques of meditation, say those of St. John of the Cross or St. Ignatius Loyola, are not so far removed, I think, from the mental processes of imagining and making a poem. And of course the focus of meditation is not how to make more money in the stock market; generally, it is about making some sense of transience and confronting the notions of an afterlife or the lack thereof. Granted, there are plenty of rewarding poems about the plums in the icebox, and the day to day things of the world. I’m a fan of Ted Kooser and his pragmatic epiphanies. Still, beyond the particulars, there is usually an emotion or idea that has more common gravity about our situation on earth. Again with Kunitz, from the introduction to *Passing Through*: “Poetry I have insisted, is ultimately mythology, the telling of the stories of the soul. This would seem to be an introverted, even solipsistic, enterprise, if it were not that these stories recount the soul’s passage through the valley of this life—that is to say, its adventure in time, in history.”

And what more can I say about Charles Wright? He has characterized the project of his poetry as an ongoing argument with himself about the unlikelyhood of salvation. He doesn’t leave much meat on the bone for those of us with similar concerns coming after him. And then there is just the genius of his talent. Had I been able to predict this when I was

starting out, I may have opted for that tennis pro job at the country club instead of the career path to poetry.

But seriously, what do any of us know early on about what it is that will ultimately concern and compel us? It seemed I struggled for years just to swim to the surface of clarity. Oh, our theme is there, and probably if we spent a few years with a shrink in our twenties he or she could predict what obsessions we would have to work out and resolve in part if we were to succeed. But who had money for that kind support in those early days? I sold my VW van to finish up my MA.

And finally, look back. The great Chinese poets were trying to figure out the metaphysical debate. And the Aztec poets way back in the day. My friend Peter Everwine has translated two books of the Aztec, and I recently found Stephen Berg's 1972 versions of the Nahuatl poems, *Nothing in the World*. What consistency in voice and vision and the ancient problem of knowing the gods, or God, there is between these two translators. Here is a poem that particularly grabbed me from the Berg book:

where are we going Oh where are we going
are we dead are we still alive
is this where time ends is there time somewhere else
people are only here on earth
with pungent flowers and with songs
and out of the world
surely
they make truths!

Had I written that poem as my first poem, I wonder if I would have written another? A meditative poem allows us to look at the world and ask larger questions, allows us to speculate and guess as we try to make sense of our lives.

DODD

There's a slight echo of late Po Chu'I in the Nahuatl poem. There's also an engagement with the natural that reminds me of the end of your poem "From the White Place," in *Blossoms and Bones*:

I come here to be reminded
from the umber and the gold,

from the land's dramatic gestures
as it breaks itself down,
how pure the palette can finally be—
these few columns, rinsed with sun,
lift me—mountain's husk like chalk,
like snow, like our last words
up this dry waterfall of light.

I like the idea of the “pure palette,” and I’ve noticed that one of the “colors” on your palette is the corps of natural images and elements, wherein I see a very strong similarity between your work and Gerald Stern’s. That natural imagery seems to be one of “colors” that sometimes gets passed over in a good deal of contemporary poetry.

BUCKLEY

For me it’s a very obvious thing, my “palette”—I was raised in an Edenic environment in Montecito/Santa Barbara, CA in the mid 1950s, surrounded daily with undamaged and uncrowded nature. I lived in the wooded foothills and often followed the creeks down to the beach as a child.

In my teenage years, a group of us took up skin diving and then surfing, and no experience I have had has equaled the almost beatific exhilaration and vibrant, intuitive communion with the natural world. My subject/palette picked me really, and in spite of my interest in cosmology and philosophy, I always come back to that place and those images and find they are part of the new lines of inquiry anyway.

The O’Keeffe work is interesting in the context of the previous question. The Vanderbilt book and the two chapbooks I have published of poems derived from her painting and life are all very short imagistic poems, very different in scope and strategy from my other work. Yet, I connected with O’Keeffe’s work for its display of and examination into the natural and the metaphysical, so the driving forces were the same. As I’ve written elsewhere, the voice, for those poems seemed to possess me—they are all persona poems, written as if O’Keeffe were speaking. Her writings were quite eloquent and compelling so I am sure I was fortunately influenced. I began the project in the late 1970s and wrote the last of the poems in 2002, or 2003.

And while the natural world may be passed over by many, certainly we have to mention Mary Oliver who is a marvel in her close observa-

tions of nature and her invention and insight and great sympathy for life. She is a favorite of mine and one of the best poets we have.

As for Gerald Stern, I love the man, I love his poetry. His energy and generosity were life-savers for me, and his wonderful poems helped me move in a direction I needed to go at a point when I was a bit stalled. But no one sounds like Stern, unless they are unwise enough to try to imitate him. He's unique, and as well as his attention to the natural world, his cherishing of the smallest element, I love his courage and willingness to engage the political forces of injustice or anything, small or large, that does not grant us our dignity.

DODD

Your prose work consistently reminds me that poetry is one of the arts that depends primarily on its practitioners for its preservation, and I find that to be a fascinating dynamic. Whom, if anyone, do you look to for that preservationist's perspective?

BUCKLEY

Well, one project that deserves lots of praise and support is *Review Revue*, which I mentioned earlier; they have been publishing three years now and they publish reviews of contemporary poetry by poets and essays on poets by poets. They are pretty democratic too, and have no agendas, no theories or camps to advance. They are doing a great service for poetry and I would encourage everyone to subscribe. They give attention to the famous and important poets but as well to those who are not going to receive any run in the major publications. They recently featured a nice piece on a series of chapbooks by a small press and their poets, and they give a good deal of support to small presses and their editors, essential to contemporary poetry.

Otherwise, I have to give a great deal of praise to Ed Hirsch who has done as much or more than anyone in the last several years to advance poetry. To my mind, he knows everything and appreciates just about everything about poetry. His first book of prose on poetry, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, is just great. I use it in my classes and it shows students how passion for poetry, a particular poem or poet, can lead to understanding and illumination. His essays and examples are accessible and compelling and erudite all at once, and his vision is truly democratic. That book goes from Christopher Smart to Hikmet to Neruda and more. His newest book, *Poet's Choice*, collects 130 short

essays on poets ancient and contemporary, American, European and middle eastern and more. It's an invaluable resource for any student and reader of poetry as it introduces many poets with whom one might not be familiar, while at the same time offering distilled insights and appraisals of essential poets—and all with a passion that is at the heart of poetry. Nothing better.

Finally here, it would be wrong to say that Larry Levis and William Matthews were not appreciated. But especially in the case of Larry, he was overlooked relative to his genius, and both he and Bill were lost to us tragically long long before their time. If I had to pick two poets to whom the often over-used term “genius” applies, it would be them. We should not forget them or their work, and to that end Sebastian Matthews has done a fine job in preserving his father's memory and work. And one other project of mine has been to not let us forget Larry Levis. While he was not exactly ignored, he was overlooked relative to his genius. He received book awards, an NEA and Guggenheim, but was left out of the great anthologies that define the age. He had contributed some truly insightful and salient prose on poetry throughout the 1980s especially, yet there was no study of his achievement. He died at forty-nine and I just felt his work and his memory, so singular in 20th century American poetry, should not be forgotten. So I began to write essays, long and short, on various topics, to keep his work and genius in front of us. Eventually, I put together a fairly comprehensive book on his life and work—*A Condition of The Spirit: On the Life & Work of Larry Levis* (Eastern Washington Univ. Press 2004)—which included Larry's prose on poetry, recollections of Larry as a poet, colleague, and teacher, and a third section which collected both the published criticism and new essays written for the book. Bless Christopher Howell at EWU Press for recognizing the importance of Larry's work. My co-editor of the book was a former student of mine, Alexander Long, who I helped to learn to write poetry mainly by showing him Levis. I feel this book is one of the most important contributions I could make to contemporary poetry.

DODD

You've talked about the mythology of the self with Salamun, and I'm curious about this in relation to your own work. In a different way than Salamun, but especially with the publication of *Sleepwalk*, the body of your work seems to have in many ways accrued into a sort of mythopoetic construction: this in the sense of creating a history that is

native to, and obtains consequence beyond, the individual. Do you, or does any poet, have a choice in such myth- and meaning-making?

BUCKLEY

One of the main reasons a person is drawn to art, to writing, to poetry particularly, is to try and make sense of his/her life. The poet may find as many different versions of “sense” as experience allows week to week; the job is not to formulate a philosophy. Yet as you go at puzzling out any individual existence, certainly as you look back and try to put pieces together, you are making that myth of yourself.

In poetry, of course, you can adjust the facts to get at the essential truth, emotion, idea. In creative nonfiction, you cannot. Yet both are very similar, and in that respect I agree with the “godfather” of creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, who says creative nonfiction is much closer to poetry than it is to fiction. It was his second or third issue of his magazine *Creative Nonfiction* that he gave over the issue to poets writing nonfiction and wrote a small editorial enunciating the connections. Essentially, a high percentage of creative nonfiction is lyric-driven. More specifically, *Sleepwalk* is my second book of creative nonfiction, and to a large extent it takes up the “myth” of my life where the first book, *Cruising State*, left off—the first book being mainly about childhood in Santa Barbara, CA, and *Sleepwalk* taking up predominately high school and college years and after. And so in the attempt to understand your life, to find meaning putting events and outcomes together as best you can, you tell a story, a true story, about yourself and your experience in relation to the history of the times.

In such a posture, you become to a degree an “everyman”—a mythical figure on a common level. If the essays are successfully written and presented, with memorable and accurate detail, then they will be to some degree convincing, and in that they will witness a portion of the rush of experience from that period. Look, people argue back and forth about history, which is supposed to be objective and factual, so it comes as no surprise that my story, my true nonfiction, can be disagreed with by someone else with another experience. We choose to see resolutions from the events and details we assemble. If we do it well, the emotional impact will trigger a recognition factor, and while it is somewhat a subjective myth, it can also be a truth to be shared.

My poetry and my creative nonfiction have for many years now been aimed at the same target—trying to cherish and preserve my sense

of “home”—and in that sense are the elements of a vanished time and place and environment, social and world view. Gone for sure.

At the very end of Borges’s 1960 book, *El hacedor* (*Dream Tigers* in the 1964 translation) the last paragraph of the epilogue reads: “A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.”

Does any poet have a choice in such myth- or meaning-making? Well sure, you can choose to write about the surfaces of poems, you can write about “Language.” But I feel that if you are truly trying to make sense of your life and engage the larger questions of our short time on earth, you do work toward myth- and meaning-making. What I have been up to is best put by George Santayana in one of his letters: “I wish to mourn perpetually the absence of what I love or might love. Isn’t that what religious people call the love of God?”

DODD

In the title piece from *Sleepwalk*, you make very clear the distinction between the political and cultural atmosphere of the early- and mid-1960s and the atmosphere and turmoil of the late-60s and 70s. How long did it take and what prompted the realization that you had grown up not only during but on the eve of what’s often considered such a revolutionary period?

BUCKLEY

During the late ‘60s and early ‘70s we were too much in the crush of things for many of us to make over-reaching rational evaluations. What was immediate was important.

There was conscription; one reason Kennedy was given a parade in Dallas was his intention to draw down the military involvement in Vietnam; as soon as you graduated from high school—if you were male—you had to start bobbing and weaving to avoid the draft and death at the hands of corporate interests behind the war. Remember that Westmoreland lied, that LBJ lied, and there was no Gulf of Tonkin incident, that the “domino theory” was also a lie.

We came out of the ‘50s, which were great—the biggest battles socially and politically being about duck-tail haircuts, Elvis’s swiveling hips, Rock n Roll, and later the Beatles shaggy hair. Gas was 30¢ and you

could put an old Chevy together for a couple hundred dollars and drive around all night. Ike played a lot of golf and everyone liked him. But his parting words about the military industrial complex—a realization he had just come to after eight years in office—have never been heeded. Witness the Bush/Cheney wars and the national debt. Many of us were coerced into Indochina and death; others more fortunate, like myself, got time to get a little education and time to think, and that brought you the late '60s and protest and revolution on that modest scale.

So we went from dressing in our father's business suits to long hair and work shirts. The same forces that were trying to ban Elvis and rock n' roll were later the political forces promoting the war and advocating rounding up all the hippies and sending them to Vietnam. The Civil Rights movement, the 1968 Chicago Democratic National convention (a title that still reeks with irony), marches in DC—all of it, we went from the eve of change right through the turmoil of the '70s. We were sleepwalking on the eve of it, early and mid-60s, while some a bit older were already fully engaged. But by and large, the country digested what the government and media fed it until those forces were changed. Then a lull, a dissipation of political energy and will. Look what we have now. The term sleep walk seems apt once again

DODD

While reading *Sleepwalk* I was reminded of the Dylan song “My Back Pages,” all about the usefulness of a kind of mature humility. So maybe a more important question is what do we have to learn from looking closely at the period?

BUCKLEY

The often quoted sentence from Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” applies once again. Check the income for the corporate recipients of the military industrial complex going back to Kennedy. The profits keep going up with each war; it's not likely we will not have wars, as lucrative as they have become for those at the top. Santayana also tells us, “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

We got complacent after the 1970s. We had Reagan and conspicuous consumption for eight years and the steady funneling of our tax revenues into the military industry. But there are lots of things to buy. What did Cicero say? Bread and Circuses. They give us bread and circuses instead of freedom. Dylan. Some flaming brilliant social defiance

in his youth. Mature humility? He had an angle on that even when he was not mature, certainly as mature as he is now. One secret which is not really such a secret about nonfiction writing is the value of humility; you had better be able to see yourself as a character with failings and blind spots if you are going to tell a true story and have anyone believe you. Were we idealistic, sure. Did everything turn around? Not by a long way. We did eventually stop a war and push LBJ out of office. LBJ—supreme irony of ironies—did have to promote Kennedy’s Civil Rights agenda and some changes were made. But were we foolish or unrealistic at times? No doubt. But again, the motives were moral ones and not driven by a spreadsheet presented to shareholders or a desire to drive a Hummer. In *The Godfather: Part II*, one of the characters says that if history teaches us anything, it’s that you can kill anyone. Would the reforms have been more long lasting, would they have been cut more deeply into the bedrock of our society had Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King lived? Perhaps. I’d like to have seen that play out. Had they lived, perhaps fewer of us would have disappeared into mutual funds, mortgages, and installments on the Honda.

DODD

You’ve written that hearing William Stafford read when you were in college influenced the way you approached poetry. What were your other early influences beyond the standard college curriculum of the time?

BUCKLEY

Well, a very early influence of mine was Swinburne; I first found a stanza of his poetry in a surf magazine when I was fourteen and read him through college. I loved Eliot too, and largely for the same reasons I like Swinburne, the grand music of the phrasing. I read Eliot on my own, not having a clue as to the themes and concepts until I took a class later in college. So the early influence of Stafford was important that day when I first heard him read. I learned about contemporary voice and language and what was possible in a poem without high philosophy of archetypal overarching themes. Stafford was the first poet to show me you could write in your own voice and sound like a human being, a lesson it took me years to come around to,

In the early 1970s everyone was trying to sound like Merwin and I loved his *Lice and Ladders* books, but it did not take me too long to stop trying to imitate the inimitable. Same with James Wright. Phillip

Levine was another story. I was so taken with his poems—still am—that I spent a couple years while working on my first graduate degree trying to write like Levine. Luckily my first poetry teacher, Glover Davis, was an early student of Levine's and would always point out my thefts. I did not write many successful poems during that two and a half years at San Diego State, but I learned something, if not wholly consciously, about writing poems from reading Levine so closely. Peter Everwine was a big influence also, as was Charles Wright. Those three poets' work has never faded for me.

DODD

In what ways might poetry be underestimated, even among poets and serious readers?

BUCKLEY

Many do not fully appreciate it as art, i.e. craft, discipline, work. It takes an equal amount of discipline and work to make a good poem as any other piece of art, but art in general is undervalued; look at the emaciated NEA for example. Of course the semiologists and theorists discount it totally; they look at writers as not much more than satellite dishes receiving messages. I had a colleague at a university in Pennsylvania say to me shortly before I left there that I didn't really think I knew what I was doing when I was writing a poem, did I? This was at a social occasion, but he was serious. This kind of academic arrogance is not uncommon. He was so sure of his theory that the level of insult never occurred to him.

Then there is "popular" poetry by way of poetry slams and pop culture/socially immediate end rhymes, and people forget, at that level, the long hours—aside from degrees of talent—that go into real work. Now you may put in weeks or months and still not come up with a memorable poem or piece of writing, but the idea that it all comes in a flash of inspiration, that all you have to do is aim your Palm Pilot or BlackBerry at the brightest star on a clear night and save the document, dismisses poetry as unimportant and a minor hobby.

To do well at all, you have to give your life to it, and in return it gives you your life and some thinking about your life that may well support your spirit. Everyone cannot be a celebrated poet; all the usual received wisdom about politics applies. William Carlos Williams said that a successful poet is one who writes a successful poem. That's it—it's

hard to keep going on that alone, but many have to. Poetry, any art, is the result of dedication and great discipline and I've never had the feeling that many appreciate that.

DODD

Aside from a handful we might name, it seems that poets often have to die or win the Nobel before they receive wide attention among American readers. What do we risk losing by not having a strong understanding of and appreciation for international contemporary poetry?

BUCKLEY

We risk missing out on some of our best poets and their original imaginations and thinking, and we risk a cultural and aesthetic myopia. The greater range and variety of voices the better. Szymborska is a good example. Without the Nobel, most of the English speaking world would not know about her. In Milosz's anthology, *Post-War Polish Poetry*, published in 1965, Szymborska has but one poem. There was nothing in English until she got the prize in 1996. The Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert is another example. After he received the Nobel in 1984 *The Selected Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert* was brought out by an English publisher. Prior to that there were only two thin paperback books, one published in the UK, *An Umbrella from Piccadilly*, and one in the U.S., *The Casting of Bells* from The Spirit That Moves Us Press, both in 1983. Part of the function of major prizes is, I think, to bring the poet/writer to a larger audience.

However, to my view, a great deal of great poetry by great international poets is in print and is promoted. Look to Bly and all of the Spanish language poets he, along with others, has translated and rounded up into anthologies. Merwin has two books of selected translations, and James Wright translated many poems from Spanish and German. Of course Rexroth and all the Chinese and Japanese translations should not be forgotten. As far back as 1957 Langston Hughes translated the Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral. Philip Levine does not, I feel, receive much credit for all the translating from Spanish he has done—*Tarumba*, by the great Mexican poet Jaime Sabines (along with Ernesto Trejo): *Off the Map*, by Gloria Fuertes, translated with Ada Long. And for anthologies, Levine has translated José Emilio Pacheco, Efraim Huerta, Miguel de Unamuno, Jorge Guillén, Miguel Hernandez, and Claudio Rodriguez. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk have been bringing Nazim Hikmet to an English speaking audience for more than thirty years and now

have a revised and expanded edition of his selected poems. New Directions has done a good job over the years; to point out one example, *Shadow Lands*—selected poems by Johannes Bobrowski. In England, *Bloodaxe* has an eye on translations as well, recently the Romanian poet Liliana Ursu, *The Sky Behind the Forest: Selected Poems*. The University of Texas Press has an ongoing translation concern with books of Borges and Gabriela Mistral. And look at all the good years Robert Hass has put in helping Milosz get his great poems into English. William Matthews' selected poems was in fact *Selected Poems & Translations*, and he translated a book of 100 epigrams of Martial, *The Mortal City*. In the 1970s Peter Everwine and Stephen Berg brought out translations of the ancient Aztec poetry and Everwine has recently published a new book of Aztec translations. And look at someone like David Young at Oberlin; he has recently edited a new anthology of Montale with translations by himself, Charles Wright, and Jonathan Galassi, and has translated the T'ang poets, Petrarch, as well as a superior rendering of Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Piccu*. Really, there is a lot available out there and I for one regularly bring a great deal of translation into my classes and workshops. The work is being done and done well and there is little excuse not to include it.

DODD

What are you currently working on or hoping to pursue?

BUCKLEY

I'm working on several things of late. With a graduate student, Ruben Quesada, I am translating some poems of the great Spanish poet Luis Cernuda. Ruben is especially interested in Cernuda's work and life, a poet who is not near as well known to us as Lorca, Machado, Hernandez and others. I expect after I make my little contribution to the handful of poems we are working on, he will go on to more ambitious translations of Cernuda. I also have put together a book of prose poems. I find that over the last ten years or so I have counterpointed the lined poems—which more and more often present themselves in couplets or the triadic stanza we learned from Williams—with prose poems. It's a book which collects twenty years of work, but really most all of it is new and recent. The prose poem has undergone a revival of late with Peter Johnson's magazine, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* and now Brian Clements' good journal, *Sentence: a journal of prose poetics*. I have notes for a few essays. And, I guess it is about time for a *New & Selected*

Poems, though I keep putting that off. I need much more time than is available to me to really get my teeth into that project, especially for a concentrated go at the “new” poems. But it’s there.