

THE REAL COURSE OF LIFE

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THE NOVELS of John Buell are not mere exercises in the thriller genre. They are undoubtedly “entertainments” in the general sense in which Graham Greene used that word, yet they have a subtle approach to the course of life brought under dramatic examination. They demonstrate the symbiotic relationships between the real and the unreal, good and evil, innocence and guilt, deception and self-knowledge. Buell traces quests for soul-satisfaction made by his main characters past a line of no-return, and he is less interested in solving a crime than he is in exploring the mystery of an inexorably decaying world.

It is my intention to explore the nature of reality and the course of life viewed by Buell. I believe Buell’s vision is metaphysical rather than merely “escapist”, much as is the case with Graham Greene’s vision, though Buell’s stories and characters are radically different from Greene’s. Buell is a writer with a style (although sometimes reduced in scope to make mass acceptance possible) that tries to do justice to the visible world. There is a depth in Buell which is sounded only as we become aware of the central direction in his stories. We discover in the author’s symbolism, plot, and characterization a concern for the metaphysical which is no less intriguing than a concern for superficial experience. Of course, I do not use “superficial” in a disparaging sense for Buell shows how various experiences can engage the writer’s full powers of sharp observation, objectification, and immediacy. However, my intention is to sound Buell’s depth and for this purpose I eschew the mechanics of the thriller genre in order to concentrate on the author’s vision of reality.

The central experience in Buell is what is called in *The Pyx* (1959) “the real course of life”, where the vulnerability and self-knowledge of the victim are operative. Crime is the event that creates criminal and victim, for it intersects guilt and innocence, good and evil, but it is not an isolated phenomenon or the focal experience. The criminal event is a point from which Buell may probe — forward (as in *Four Days* or *The Shrewsdale Exit*) or backward (as in *The Pyx*) — into the course of life which produced it.

Good and evil — with all their attendant complications — grow within “the real course of life”, and Buell’s interest lies in observing the tensions between good and evil within the controls of a milieu. Buell’s vision is informed with a sense that the mutable decay of milieux impinges upon the inner world of man, thereby creating confusion and emphasizing human limitations. When we confront the demonic world of Keerson (*The Pyx*), the criminal environment of Milt (*Four Days*), or the brute world of the motorcycle “toughs” (*The Shrewsdale Exit*) our worst suspicions of human vulnerability are tested. We expect human failure and we meet it when the outer world of reality is counterpointed by the inner world of man.

Buell observes the effects of human dream and ambition in the course of life which often overpowers the individual. Milieu interacts with character in such a subtle but ineluctable way that the danger of the “real course of life” is emphasized and magnified beside the weakness of the human soul.

Buell’s mythic pattern is not oriented towards any romantic or sentimental resolution of the conflicts between dream and actuality, milieu and character. Rather, it is a pattern deeply tinged by a realism which, while not always neutral, does maintain a sharp focus on the growth of vulnerability and self-knowledge within the “real course of life”. Milieu and character interact to produce mysterious destructiveness which affects the protagonist, but the conclusion of the *mythos* (story) is not achieved through a *de rigueur* resolution of iniquity. We are made to follow the protagonist’s involvement with reality until such time as a line of no-return has been crossed. What survives at the end of the pattern is the “real course of life”, that is, a measure of self-knowledge for the protagonist trapped in a decaying world.

From the very start, critics have perversely ignored the profound aspects in Buell’s novels. *The Pyx* was received as a suspense thriller much in the tradition of an Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie, or Mickey Spillane story. It was bruited that *Four Days* (1962) was a thriller to leave us gasping, and *The Shrewsdale Exit* (1972) was praised for telling a powerful, “shocking” story that was engrossing in its depiction of “impossible odds”. But there is more to Buell’s work than sensational excursions into evil ritualism and crime. What we should not lose sight of is “the real course of life” — something that is vividly outlined in *The Pyx*, chronicled in *Four Days*, and vindicated with strong feeling in *The Shrewsdale Exit*.

The Pyx introduces Buell’s concern with the power and danger of reality by depicting dual worlds in insidious conflict. Elizabeth Lucy’s world of dream is in

jarring collision with the world of action, and when we encounter the Black Mass symbolism we note the discord between virtue and vice in a scandalous, underground context. *The Pyx*, of course, thrives on its dualities: Elizabeth Lucy flirts with Catholicism and spiritual puritanism as she wanders deeper into Keerson's diabolism; the "nothingness" of her soul and the "solidly real" world outside her are metaphysical poles which are objectified and dramatized rather than abstracted and intellectualized.

The Pyx, it is true, does not immediately suggest its own richness. It is not a successful book, for the Black Mass ritualism, so central to the meaning and *dénouement* of the story, is too tenuous. Nevertheless, the major interest for me is not the diabolism nor the crime-solving by Detective Henderson; it is the interplay between the two worlds of Elizabeth Lucy as they create "the real course of life". As in any mystery thriller there is a conflict between the outer and the inner in human experience, but here Buell charges this conflict with a grim, hallucinatory quality that grips us through the eerie blend of Elizabeth's outer and inner worlds.

The outer world of *The Pyx* is the ambience of Montreal (strongly felt in the film but not as vividly in the book) with its *mélange* of the spiritual and the material, virtue and vice. This mixture serves as catalyst for the collision between Elizabeth Lucy's flirtation with Catholicism and her eventual involvement with Keerson's Black Mass and his ring of vice. It is a world of sensationalism in both the sacred and the profane, for it intersects underground religion and scandalous crime.

From the very first page of the novel there is an attempt to separate the edges of the actual and the fictional. Jack Trudel, the cab-driver who witnesses Elizabeth's body hurtling from an apartment to the street below, is aware of a distance between dreams (of money and sex) and acts (for happiness in the massive city). But "the real course of life" blurs the distinction between dream and actuality. After witnessing Elizabeth's death he is confused and disturbed:

Real violence was too much for him; in the cheap stories, he could always dream of sex; but the actual thing . . . Already he was beginning to dismiss it as outside the real course of life.

By alternating between Past and Present in his narrative, Buell is able to create the blurring (in Elizabeth's life) of the outer world of act and the inner world of dream, nightmare, or illusion. Elizabeth, it is shown, has "no mental picture of herself as an outwardly visible person"; she has only an inner vision of aliena-

tion and chaos. Reality appears to be unalterable because she feels too far away from all around her and merely a medium for sensation. She is often described in the act of waiting where she is shown to be in a type of suspension. Her drug addiction (fed by insidious Meg Latimer) does not help and Elizabeth is frequently in a mental daze.

Elizabeth is suspended in Time, between an unwanted past and a fey present. She loses her right to choose and the trap leaves her feeling empty and damned.

One of the paradoxes in *The Pyx* is the anguished despair of Elizabeth as she experiences the "huge nothingness of evil confronting her" in the massive reality outside. In this paradox the apparently irreconcilable are the poles of nothingness and the solidly real. The two poles form a rack for Elizabeth and we watch her (in the words of Jimmy Rande, her friend with his own psychic disorder) grow increasingly taut with the strain. Elizabeth finds it impossible to change or become something else. There is a *taedium vitae*, an addiction to the hazing energy of heroin, and a hallucinatory submission to the rites of Keerson — all consequences of her unrealized "screamingly desired wish" to find the shadows of peace and repose.

There is a sense of Elizabeth's impotence in the course of events and this weakness is compounded by the absence of any reality in the heart of things to which she can attach herself and give substance and strength to her existence. She flirts with Catholicism, but, unwilling to submit to the sacrament of penance, she is without benediction. She is comforted by Jimmy Rande but drifts away from him. She becomes involved with Keerson and cannot elude his agents. Elizabeth perceives that reality is dangerous when it exists as something so largely outside the power of the human soul, but she can do nothing to escape or resist the reality.

THE IMPLICATION that reality is more potent than danger itself is also evident in Buell's second novel, *Four Days* (1962), which is ostensibly a chronicle of a young boy's fatal idealization of his elder brother who is involved in crime. Here the boy perverts reality (just as Elizabeth Lucy perverts religion with the pyx) by making Milt, his brother, the justification for his life. Here, too, the victim is the one who cannot "assess the situation or read the signs." He can only react, like Elizabeth Lucy, and await the ambush of life.

Reality is shaded more deftly in *Four Days* than it is in *The Pyx*, mainly because Buell does not have to gamble with the nuances of the Black Mass. Evil

still exists as part of the massively real but this time the hugeness of evil is not so much in the reality outside the victim as it is in the victim's ideal itself. It is Milt who is evil, and the young boy's reverence for Milt becomes, in effect, a reverence for evil.

The prime process in Buell's story is the boy's tumble into a mysterious destructiveness. By aligning himself with Milt, the boy distorts the nature of reality. He assigns to Milt's criminal scheme an importance that is greater than the external world around him. The plan is not viewed as part of reality, but reality instead is seen as part of the plan:

Reality was now this plan; he didn't question its source or judge it or choose; it was there, and it offered a continued existence with Milt, an alternative to nothingness, like finding a light switch in the dark. But the house around the switch eluded his insight.

The boy therefore has only a partial security — a security, moreover, that is an illusion because the final reality is destructive.

Deception for the boy, however, is part of reality. Just being alive makes him feel that he is getting away with something. He is convinced that people have to be fooled and his sense of disguise becomes acute. Believing that evil will make him visible, he goes to church to blend with the congregation where "no one would see him unless he did things wrong." He avoids places in his neighbourhood where people might know him and he tries to ensure that others will not touch his inner reality.

However, his attempts at disguise are trying and fraught with danger:

he *had* to be a boy on a bike, and that made him overaware of everything — he couldn't stop to watch things, he couldn't even look at them in passing. All of existence was shrivelled into this one action, and the sunlit city around him had to become an enemy.

Exposure to sunlight and people renders him vulnerable:

The cars began to irritate him; nobody was looking at him, but he felt stared at: he was himself now, not acting, not protected inwardly by role-playing, and not realizing that his appearance was still in character; the self he felt was weak and vulnerable, exposed like a film in the sun, making him dread even a casual question by a stranger, and his fear made him create questions: 'Hot day, hey kid? Where are you going? Run a message for me, kid? Pull that bike over so I can pass. Tell your goddam brother — Don't worry, kid, keep moving, we got 'em fooled' — Milt's voice was back, giving purpose to his actions — 'Just before you get here you take off part of the uniform, cap, leggings, the jacket and put that in your bag — you don't wait for me — don't wait for me — don't wait.'

Concomitant with the senses of disguise and vulnerability is a feeling of suspension in time and space. Time does not exist for the boy except as a tightness or pressure that seems to “make things exist only within his head, free of the physical and devoid of duration, timeless, like pain.” He feels a helplessness — a “sensation of being pulled away despite himself, of going helplessly where he didn’t want to, and being distressed at not knowing the place he resented so much.”

Paradoxically, such helpless suspension comforts him for it boosts his need for anonymity. “Nowhere” is better than “somewhere” because the lack of definition makes it an environment that does not oppress consciousness and where he can be safe in its anonymous unreality.

Tension is developed by the boy’s attempts to resist the power of reality. The factual world seems to leap at him and he is disturbed by the moving scenery, the car, and even himself. He tries to obliterate or dim his own visibility. In his room he wonders if he should put on the light when the street outside is lit and the sky is still bright. He decides against it because the outside world will look bigger this way and draw itself into the room. Then there will be light everywhere and this will make reality too strong for him. The boy works on the assumption that vision or voyeurism is a reflexive action: to see implies to be seen. “If you see the trees, they can see you now.” The relentless clarity pushes him — after Milt’s violent death — along a beach until he is sure he cannot be seen.

The boy discovers that reality cannot be annihilated either through his false image of Milt or through his search for darkness and cover. His compulsion to be invisible converts, in the final moments of his drama, into a hallucinatory dream. He tries to swim away from the law which is trailing him for his connection with the criminal Milt, but his nervousness, exhaustion, and despair propel him into a hysterical dream that ends with his drowning.

THE TENSION of reality (so inimical to Elizabeth Lucy in *The Pyx* and the boy in *Four Days*) acquires a nightmarish horror in *The Shrewsdale Exit*, Buell’s latest exploration of the victim theme. Joe Grant’s story passes through three main phases: the horrifying murder of his wife and young daughter by three motorcycle thugs; Grant’s vengeful attack on the murderers, his imprisonment, and escape into the isolated expanses of an interior farmland; and his compromise with the law and the locked-in system of society. Of the three phases, the first is probably the most exciting, as Buell captures perfectly the vulgar rhetoric of the psychotic murderers and the acute grief of Grant. The second

phase is more contrived although it is justifiable in terms of Buell's signal for retribution. The third phase, while impressive in its subdued tension and pastoral quality, does leave us with a feeling of disappointment because it never reaches a climactic *dénouement* anticipated in the earlier phases. However, the especial virtue of the novel is its delineation of the tension of reality — a tension that is heightened by Grant's line of no-return.

The major forces of tension spring out of the reality of murder: they are derived from the brutal assault on the Grant family, from Joe's anguished memory of the crimes, and from the buffeting of past and present. The tension charges the antithesis of the visible and invisible aspects of reality — just as it does in *Four Days*. Joe Grant, like the boy in Buell's second novel, feels insecure in light and threatened by his lighted room:

With lights on, he hadn't been able to see outside and could be seen inside. It made him feel watched, hunted in some way, liable to detection. In the dark, all was reversed and he felt more at ease. He'd come a long way from the secure casual life of less than a week ago. Porch lights, hung in lanterns under the motel canopy, enabled him to make out everything in the room. He was still dressed, in the cotton pants and sport shirt he'd brought to be less noticeable. He felt too vulnerable undressed, too unready for a vaguely hostile universe. It was paranoid. He was aware of it, he just couldn't shake it off.

The dim room made memory vivid. The toughs. The image of Sue and Patty in their hands. It was too much. Mercifully he was interrupted.

Joe wonders if he has been observed by anyone. When he drives he is coiled and tense, attempting to remain furtive. As much the hunted as he is the hunter, he watches his mirrors and tries to muffle or conceal his intrigue. Hence the low intensity of sound and light in those portions of the plot which concern Grant's intrigue.

For Grant, vision is linked to survival because to observe and not to be seen increase his chances of tracking his prey while eluding the law simultaneously. While reading a book on firearms, he happens upon the sentence: "The human organism cannot hold sights absolutely steady on the target." Here the physics of visual aim are a proem to the metaphor of hunter and target. This creates a pattern opposite to that in either *The Pyx* or *Four Days* because Grant does not attempt to escape the solid world outside him. Of his own choosing, he crosses a line of no-return and we do not derive a sense of dreamlike suspension on his part:

He cleaned the pistol, put a frozen dinner in the oven, and drank the surviving

can of beer as he waited for the food to cook. The line that was being crossed tugged at his attention. He had no myths to give glory to the crossing, only the knowledge of his wife and daughter, his own made-empty life. He should have been here last summer or even earlier, learning the cold skills that now disturbed him. Would it have been different? The pistol had nothing to say.

Knowledge of purpose and direction comes to him when he hears his own echoes, although the solid world does not necessarily answer his questions. Still, Grant is fully conscious and far removed from either Elizabeth Lucy's drugged suspension or the young boy's neurotic and immature self-victimization. Real sound, verified by his quick senses, awakes him out of dream (whenever he yields to memory or fantasy) into knowledge of the visible, tangible world outside him.

Experience becomes a puzzling and haunting fact in Buell's stories because it undergoes change in the retelling by witnesses. As Grant repeats his story about the crimes against his family, the event grows less and less actual and becomes something different from what had happened. With this unsettling phenomenon there appears a vacuum in the soul of the protagonist and Grant feels the world around him growing emptier.

What complicate the fate of Joe Grant — and this is shown to be the crux of the victim theme in Buell — are the protagonist's responses to evil. The crux is reached at that point when the protagonist realizes that a line of no-return has to be crossed. Joe Grant acknowledges as much when he notes that the past is the past while the present demands a firm commitment to action. In *The Pyx*, Elizabeth Lucy learns from Meg Latimer that she must commit herself totally to Keerson:

[Elizabeth] "Look, I'm here. I've come this far."

[Meg] "It's not far enough."

"All right, what is far enough?"

"When you can't turn back. That's what far enough is."

Sometimes the line of no-return is reached prematurely as in *Four Days*, for example, where we are given every indication that the boy's desire to align his fate with his elder brother's has been a lifelong obsession which generates a fatal conflict with the law.

The Shrewsdale Exit crystallizes the complicated nature and fate of Buell's protagonists. Joe Grant faces imposing odds in a locked-in system and suffers much more than he deserves to, yet retribution is an elusive event. What we find in this story (which ultimately confirms the quality of Buell's realism) is an observation of a man "more sinned against than sinning" denied a vengeance

he has persistently sought. Grant discovers the overwhelming power of the societal system when he is in the penitentiary. Prison is a contrived expression of law — a force that oppresses as it restrains. Grant observes the nefarious effects of a legal system that can create a persecution complex for some people (Willy Dreye for example), and when he escapes from it he takes note of the larger, “whole system”.

Elizabeth Lucy and the young boy are no less victimized by the worlds they inhabit or pass through. Their respective environments are postlapsarian in their corruption and seductive evil. Elizabeth Lucy is immersed in a drug and prostitution ring before she even meets Keerson and when she dies the violence of her end obtains silence and evasion from those who exploited her vulnerability. Her world, like the young boy's, is a massive place (full of massive pleasures and sensations) that forgets its victims unconsciously. Were it not for the likes of Detective Henderson in *The Pyx* and the priest in *Four Days* Buell's worlds would be unjust and as hostile as the vaguely threatening ones in Green's fiction. As it is, very few of Buell's characters expend any grief for Elizabeth Lucy and the young boy. Their world is dim and plastic, dominated by dark bars, empty rooms, and indifference. It takes a priest to pray for forgiveness but his prayer is as pitiable as it is pitying, for it is a helpless acknowledgement of the mystery of suffering and evil:

The priest whispered a formal prayer for the dead, “requiem aeternam dona ei —” but his mind seemed to chatter its own colloquy: he has paid for his love, Lord, have mercy on him. You know the worst about him, and that's a circumstance for forgiveness, it was that way when You were on earth.

Buell's characters are not romantic heroes or heroines but acquire a flawed heroism almost by default. Buell reaches beyond the sentimental superficialities of romantic heroes to the inescapable paradoxes of impure heroism. Of course, there are no rigid categories in Buell's fictional worlds because reality is much too complex and ambivalent for neat divisions. The protagonists do not consciously seek after heroism although the young boy in *Four Days* is the closest thing to an exception. They quest after peace and soul-satisfaction rather than for power in a material sense. Elizabeth Lucy is too weak to physically survive Keerson's attrition but spiritually she becomes one of the good finally resisting the forces of anti-Christ. Joe Grant's self-knowledge and renunciation of revenge purify his soul and make him a person whom suffering and evil have touched without destroying. His heroism is purified by his decision to abandon revenge and it is denoted in

terms of a victory. Only the young boy in *Four Days* consciously seeks a connection with the heroic, but he is too immature and neurotic to be considered the same way as Grant. He yearns to be attached to Milt and converts his desperate solitariness and flight into an untenable posture of romantic heroism. He is, of course, too weak to defeat the law but there is a special pathos about his solitariness, for the boy's anguished loneliness is a sign of love — an undying, unyielding love for his brother — and in this way he vindicates the potential of the human soul to magnify itself in a world made all too solid and gross by materialism.

AS IN THE FICTION of Graham Greene, Buell's novels provide a suggestion of "grace" in a decaying world. Buell is fascinated by the idea of a "fall" to the degree of identifying the workings of "grace" as a counterbalance to human weakness and corruption. True, there is no leap to God, no tortuous discovery of faith in the Greene *cachet*. However, salvation is sought — not in religious terms but in a metaphysical sense of harmony. Even as some of the protagonists tumble into destruction in a hostile universe they receive some form of benediction. Occasionally they deliberately seek the blessing but frequently blessing comes to them unsought. Elizabeth Lucy, who does not ever submit to orthodox Church rites, eats the sacred host rather than desecrate it according to Keerson's sacrilegious orders and in so doing she expresses her fundamental goodness. She establishes herself on the side of God and becomes stronger than chaos because she believes in sacredness. As the dying Keerson proclaims, Elizabeth is one of the good — as Henderson is one of the righteous. But benediction or "grace" need not be in religion itself. For Joe Grant there is not even a flirtation with religion. At the funeral of his wife and daughter the only fact brought home to him is the experience of real presences — other than God's. Grant's "grace" is the memory of Sue and Patty for they are "a sort of benediction." Of course, another "grace" is Grant's choice of justice and the renunciation of violent revenge at the end of his story.

The religious nuances in Buell share affinities with those in Greene and the strongest example of this occurs in *Four Days* where the young boy's spiritual fate is left an open, throbbing question — slightly reminiscent of the ambiguous soul-consequences of Pinky and Rose in *Brighton Rock*. Of course, the boy in *Four Days* hardly possesses Pinky's cold, cruel, criminal nature but he does opt for Milt and makes of his evil brother an unrealistic idol of strength. Where Pinky

lapses from his boyhood faith and weeps silently in a movie-house for his lost innocence, the boy in Buell's book uses religion as a "perfect front" for his involvement with Milt. Religion is debased to the level of automatic responses and unexamined prayers in Latin. The secret seal of Confession is used as a protection against the law but the boy's love for Milt is indeed an expression of God's own charity and when the priest prays that God might forgive the boy we might well think of the suggestion in *Brighton Rock* that Pinky, who admits his own damnation, could still inherit the strange mercy of God.

However, Buell, unlike Greene, does not concern himself with a context for eschatology. God's wishes and actions are irrelevant because it is people who choose for themselves. Perhaps, we could argue that the characters subconsciously seek God but even if this were demonstrable it would remain outside the realm of theology because it is an issue for psychologists. When drama begets its own sense of the spiritual in Buell it is only in the manner of a character seeking something larger and stronger than the human soul. It is described as a "shadow" of peace and repose in *The Pyx*, or a distant light of peace in *Four Days*. But it remains vague and outside the soul. Only Joe Grant finds an approximation of it and then it emerges as something non-religious: a clarity of self-knowledge acquired after remorse and revenge have been purged.

Buell's novels tempt us into anticipating a climactic retribution which never develops, and while this may create an anti-climax (as in *The Shrewsdale Exit*), the strategy does testify to a vision charged with pathos, sincerity, and truth. Joe Grant, after all his suffering and yearning for revenge, finds the truth about himself and his world. This is the only novel where Buell works towards a synthesis for his protagonist. Grant is given a solution which is trite in juxtaposition to his intense, personal agonies and because his is a story about the feeling of agony it loses some of its impact when that feeling becomes explanatory, discursive, or didactic. Nevertheless, it is a story that admits the truth about man's locked-in system and the compromises demanded for survival. So it retains a pathos for Grant while being sincere and truthful in its anti-climax. We are returned to the milieu which produces both good and evil in the solidly real course of life. We realize at the end that the humane attitude of the author is checked by the grim nature of reality. It is the milieu that survives — however much at the expense of the victims — and this confirms the inexorable reality of the course of life under dramatic observation.