# The Story of Robert Buck /Ah, Pray, Coo/

By Jeremy Biles

/The text beckons. It is an invitation to play—with knives. A temptation to cut, and to come after the cut, *après coup*, here at the beginning of a true-crime story that will unravel itself with too much pleasure*./*

Fall 2005 finds me at dinner with a friend /the one who murmurs in your ear, who takes you out of yourself, with a surprise, a gentle violence, a word that won’t cease its whispered riddles/ who tells me she is thinking seriously of changing her name. My reaction is swift and vociferous, even confrontational. I retaliate with words like castration and betrayal. /The cut of castration will be a fearful invitation, an incision of bliss, a will to risk, an opening onto ecstasy. A brutal hacking at the head to remove the crown. A gentle caress that cuts to the core. Desire thus becomes a force: To betray is to love; to cut is to say Yes./ Yet my protestations awake doubt, and ruminations ensue. My unrest lingers, and I am done in /done in, undone, a major awakening/ by the idea that I know better /misrecognition announcing an intimate cut of self from self, the unraveling of self-mastery/, like our desire is never our own /and already the story begins to unravel—as it will, as it must: an ethical imperative, the refusal of “civilized morality.”/

In August 2007, on a sojourn out west, the high desert, /the desert—where, as Edmund Jabès observes, one loses one’s identity, one’s personality. One becomes, for an interval, anonymous: prelude to an invention./ as usual I read, reflect. This time, though, I encounter a book about psychoanalysis and James Joyce. His relationship to language was tenuous, “off-register,” and the question “How Am I to Sign Myself” troubled him. /The loss of signature as symptom, the first fearful inklings of an event that as yet has no name./ For fun, I make anagrams of my own name /the cutting up and parcelling out of the constituent components of one’s written name, a primordial act of violence, a masochistic bliss/; “Trek Cobber” being the best I can do. Later, while looking through a volume of “The Old West”, a 1979 TIME/LIFE series, my new name arrives with the resounding peal of a thunderclap, Robert Buck. /The name arrives as an interjection, an “ah!” in the midst of the desert: the response from some unknowable exterior, a reply to a murmured prayer, an unconscious coo that comes violently./ As an alias, it immediately appeals to me for its economy and associations, notably stag, cash, son, and dislodge. /But Buck is also a knife, an objection, a gamble, a resistance, a refusal. The beckoning of a bucking. Beck on, buck off./

It was only in solitude that I could have made my discovery. I was afraid to share Buck with anyone, at least not yet, so new and appropriate and precious was it to me /a gift held, for a moment, in reserve, before coming/. I was also cognizant that it was “artistic,” certain that art was the sole discourse in which I could, as a maneuver, “make a name for myself” /The poeisis of nomination. But at the same time a destruction whose remnants are never erased/. And as I suspected, it was when I shared it with others in April of 2008 that things got really interesting, and very discouraging.

Why did I identify with Joyce? I recognized in his biography and writing, as interpreted in the later teachings of Jacques Lacan, traces of my own life and how my art acts to stabilize it. /Here a counter-narrative intervenes on this text of pleasure. Who authors the present text? Who writes within and against it? Who beckons, and who bucks? Buck signs his name to this text, but is not Buck the name of the one who *refuses* stability, beginning with the law of the father? Who therefore refuses the restrictions that guard against that which unsettles identity? Who transgresses the law of proper names? Is Buck’s art (now, forever, repeatedly) Beck’s death? What ambivalence sends a shuddering through the veil of this text? What murmuring unsettles this text, what incessant cooing sets it crumbling? How does, how shall, this story unravel (itself)?/. Some aspect of the way we’re “knotted” by language faltered for Joyce, a unifying element that keeps the tie, and thus the subject, from unraveling. /”Unravel”: an uncanny term. “Ravel” (as Freud similarly notes of “uncanny”) is a term that evolves in the direction of ambivalence; it means both “to tangle” and “to untangle.” The prefix “un-” may therefore be either reversive or intensive. Beck/Buck: endless reversal, endless intensification: what self is unraveling here?/ It is the key signifier “bequeathed” /entrusted, passed down, donated—gifted, in other words/ by the Father, aptly called “The Name-of-the-Father”, for as one’s given name it allows distinctions to be made and things to be named. The religious connotations are also relevant. As a metaphor for language itself, it establishes borders and limits, and orders the world. /What prayers are offered to the father, in the name of the Father? What forgiveness is performed in these murmured supplications?/ Homophonically in French it can be heard as “The No-of-the-Father.” It is the fundamental signifier that enables us to cohere in language, the only “choice” we have /until the refusal of that name that holds us in its self-securing fist comes, until the gamble that puts everything at risk is put into play/. But if this core link fails we lack a crucial device by which to sustain, or regulate, existence—Others, the body, demand, desire, enjoyment, loss. /Buck’s desire is an impossible desire, as is all desire. The fantasy of regulation, control, self-mastery unravels…/

**NOTE:** Since I wrote this text five years ago, I’ve learned that it wasn’t the symbolic loop that was deficient for Joyce, but the imaginary one. Consequently, I now recognize that I was referring to myself, albeit blindly. It’s also important to say that my interest in Joyce is not to analyze him, but to understand his unique relationship to his art and what it can teach me – us. /Buck receives a blind insight, and a delayed one at that. An insight that comes like a trauma, which is to say, bleatedly, after the fact. One detects shades of *Nachträglichkeit,* deferred realization, afterwardness—another *après coup*, in a minor key*.* A blind self-reference, an uncanny form of knowledge: one beyond (literary) analysis of Joyce, but accessed through psychoanalysis of Buck. To such insights, we’re always slow in coming./

I have often described my artwork as having been a means to create an index by which I could make sense of earlier, often traumatic experiences that at the time I could not bear, or symbolize, or make legible, so to endure or transcend them. /Does the creation of Buck refuse the closure that would capture the trauma, corrall it within a narrative, relegate its force to legibility? Is the slash that cuts and erases Beck also the sign of a will to gamble, to put at risk the will to duration? Does it reproduce the originary cut that divides the subject, the traumatic influx that bucks every self-stabilizing gesture?/ Basically, by making art, I strove to establish a bulwark against my fears of being overtaken by a surplus of affect or drives—emotion, anxiety, longing, enjoyment—that chance events and contingencies could ignite within me. /And yet, we see everywhere in Buck’s art symptoms of that affective surplus, expressions of drives that remain out of control. As he will say, *just look at it*./ Evidence of this struggle /struggle, not mastery; insistent risk, not the illusion of control/ infuses my work, just look at it: violence, bodies, wounds, holes, camouflage, mimicry, memorials, erasure, guilt, corruption, sex, and death—even my own. And so much of it is haunted by the presence (or is it the absence?) of the Father. /Precisely. Beck haunts Buck, beckoning back with a ceaseless murmuring, a whispering beneath the thunder. Buck’s *jouissance*./

If I saw myself in Joyce, I likewise glimpsed a way forward. I sensed that my art had successfully delivered me to Buck, an “exchange of vowels”, a self-nominating act. /The name-of-the-son, the beckoning unto Buck./ Since art was the only procedure that would permit it, I found clarity, and could realize my promise. But the knife cut both ways /a double cut: the knife incises, but it also knots, raveling the self-ablating, self-nominating subject in all its ambivalence/, for I sorely underestimated the indelibility of my “brand” in the art market. /Marcel Mauss teaches that refusing the gift—here, the gift of the given name—is the antisocial, antieconomic act par excellence. From Beck to Buck: the exchange of vowels partakes of a counter-economy, one that will disrupt the market economy upheld by the name of the father./

The reaction to my new name by others around me, though rarely artists, was adverse. And here I include myself, for I was initially defensive and guilt-ridden. /Guilt—and blindness: the marks of Oedipus are the conditions of Buck’s birth. / Yet I cannot say that the vacuum my reticence created was not intentional, revelatory or productive. Everyone seems to have taken the Oedipal dimension literally. To symbolically kill the Father, the signifier that collectively binds civilization itself together, really upset people, as if I broke *the* law. /And enacted *the* refusal: of the gift of the given name. To refuse the gift is tantamount to declaring war. It is an invitation to chaos, to cutting./ So much so that via denial and displacement, I was, metaphorically speaking, accused of killing myself. /Nietzsche teaches that one must have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star./ Anyway, it’s done, and in time the act will be obsolete, like a pseudonym scrawled on a urinal, “R. Mutt”. /But Buck knows “Buck” is more than a pseudonym. It is a new name for the counter-father, the institution of a new law—of his own desire./

What joy /ah!/, in the face of censure, criticism and reprisal, to be able to re-inscribe oneself /to heed the beckoning to buck, the prayer against the Father, from the desert where the name will always arrive/ in this way /the coup, the cut, the refusal, the unbinding/. Indeed, the ordeal has shown me that way too many people, due to their fears and limitations, can be threatened by enjoyment, /a well-placed fear: Buck teaches that enjoyment is, in some sense, lethal/ either in them selves or in others, or agitated by the idea that someone may claim to be the master of their own fate. An evolution. /A revolution, a dissolution, a refusal: to refuse is to “pour back, to give back”—to counter-gift./

So, I have come to think of Buck, my self-made name, as ethical. Psychoanalysis taught me this, to admit to my desire, and never to give up on it. /The ultimate coup, the prayer of prayers, the song of songs./ It was Joyce’s writing that saved him by restoring the defective “loop” by which he could adhere to the symbolic, and naming, however loosely. (There are no metaphors in “Finnegan’s Wake”, so is it literature?) His writing was his symptom, or as Lacan later calls it, his sinthome, or invention. I too write, and for as long as I can remember, now nearly 60 notebooks in all. /Incessant inscription, relentless murmur, from cut to coo and back again, ceaselessly: invention of the inimate-ecstatic./ It is not art but necessity that causes it, a way to carve out meaning from what we imagine reality to be. /To fill the wound with another hole around which signification takes its place./

Isn’t it fascinating, so much fuss because I replaced one letter in a name I didn’t choose but was given? /By Buck’s intimate logic: the gift of refusal, a no to the No. A counter-gift that bucks the economy of self, language, law, market…/ I did know better, I was beckoned by my best work, heralding whom I became through art making. /Yes I said yes I will yes./ After all, the equivocations littered by “the vowel movement” rang true to how I had been riddled by language. /The gift of a refusal, traces of a vowel movement: Buck’s art, an incessant riddle, incessantly riddled, a ceaseless murmur, an unraveling as endless as desire itself./

# Robert Buck/Jeremy Biles

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