

Katherine Barnes. *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan's Poems: Esotericism, Romanticism, Symbolism.* Leiden: Brill, 2006, xii + 317pp. €129; US \$168.

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Katherine Barnes begins her book by suggesting that Australian readers have neglected and underrated Christopher Brennan's poetry because they lack a grounding in its "big ideas". Accordingly, she "aims to provide the kind of context that I think we need to grasp if we are to understand and evaluate Brennan's poetry properly". That context lies chiefly in Romantic and Symbolist thought from Blake and Novalis to Mallarmé and Yeats, but with a much longer mystical lineage stretching back via Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme to neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and rabbinical tradition. In Barnes's view, its main legacy for Brennan was "the notion of a higher or transcendent self constituted by the union of the human mind and Nature" (2-3), a theme which she pursues through exegesis of key selections from *Poems* [1913], in the light of the poet's very extensive reading on mystical subjects. The volume is divided into seven chapters: "Divinity and the Self"; "Mirror and Abyss"; "Art and Silence"; "Brennan's Theory of 'Moods'"; "Red autumn in Valvins"; "Two Preludes and a Liminary"; and "The Assimilation of our Inmost Passion". There are valuable introductory sections to most of these, but the main argument remains structured around sequences and individual items from *Poems*.

As a work of scholarship, *The Higher Self* is impressively detailed and well informed. Barnes's research very helpfully complements a reading of Brennan's own explanatory essays on Symbolism, German Romanticism and Mallarmé, and bridges these with the far more obscure allusive mode of his poetry. Having established Brennan's pattern of intellectual influence from his published and unpublished writings, library holdings and access, and annotations in books, Barnes has carefully read her way back into the sources, and found material to enlighten many difficult places. A good example is her discussion of the section "Terrible, if he will not have me else" (121-28), which both James McAuley (*Christopher Brennan*, Oxford UP, 1973) and Axel Clark (*Christopher Brennan*, Melbourne UP, 1980) treated biographically, as a veiled reference to the poet's unhappy union with Elisabeth Werth. Barnes reads it more in terms of Brennan's Lilith symbolism, in which "the violent disruption of the innocence of Eden by human sexual drives is inevitable (Lilith has preceded Eve)". "Both Lilith and Eve have a claim on Adam. It is his task to 'fuse the full-grown sense with soul', to recover the lost,

androgynous complete self by bringing about a marriage of the mind and Nature, the spiritual and the material.” The intellectual direction Barnes offers is valuable, yet it remains difficult to know how actual people and events in Brennan’s life might also figure within the myth, that is, where the place of the “material” might be in his poetry. McAuley remarked that it was rare to find in Brennan “a sense of the real existence of another person”. If the separation of Adam and Lilith means, as Barnes explains, the division of one hitherto androgynous person into two, then the impression remains of a mind still speaking to itself.

Brennan may seem very much a poet of the library, but one of the strongest emphases to emerge from Barnes’s study is the importance to him of natural cycles: light and darkness; the seasons; birth and death; and creation and annihilation. Barnes shows how Brennan drew on German myths of Holda and Undine, Mallarmé’s *Les Dieux antiques*, and his own intimate knowledge of the Roman liturgical year “to reflect the correspondences between human thought and the natural world”. “Red autumn in Valvins”, the elegy for Mallarmé, is read with impressive scholarship as Brennan’s realisation of how literature “can provide the ‘explication de l’homme’ that would be adequate to our dreams and that would itself constitute the new form of religious expression”, Mallarmé’s *vrai culte moderne*. The passionate impulses in Brennan’s Catholicism and his Symbolism are shown to be closely related.

A problem for Brennan critics, and a further tribute to Barnes’s labours, is his extreme eclecticism. It is nothing to find six or seven mythic or mystical sources attached to one sonnet or brief segment of verse. Such density of reference, painstakingly explored by Barnes, makes *The Higher Self* a book to be taken slowly, with the text of *Poems* close at hand. Despite the help of a thorough index and appendices, which will make it usable as a reference work, the material might have been more helpfully dealt with by a longer introductory essay describing the sources and key terms of Brennan’s symbolism, and then more streamlined scholarly reference in the *explication de texte*. Certainly, the overview of particular themes provided in longer discursive passages, as in “Brennan’s Theory of ‘Moods’”, is very welcome.

Overall, this excellent book is rather more about the thought behind Brennan’s poetry than the style of the poetry *per se*. Yeats figures, for instance, as the mediator of esoteric imagery and the theory of “moods”, not as a model for the “Wanderer”’s characteristic rhythm and mode of address: “How old is my heart, how old, how old is my heart”. Numerous Anglophone poets Brennan admired or imitated—Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Rossetti, Francis Thompson, Coventry Patmore and the early Yeats—influenced his verse in ways that may

have little to do with esoteric doctrine, but which perhaps have an equal effect on how modern readers respond to him.

Katherine Barnes concludes by quoting A. D. Hope's view that we await the time when Brennan's "diction would cease to count" so much and his "genius" will become more visible. Till that time comes, *The Higher Self* will bear witness that this poetry has an intellectual provenance and program which demands to be taken seriously; Barnes matches the legend of Brennan's "Bohemian" ways with massive evidence of his studiousness. She has had predecessors in the task of explaining Brennan's thought—the work of Wilkes, McAuley, Noel Macainsh, Rosemary Lloyd and Wallace Kirsop comes to mind—but no one has offered so thorough or revealing a study. Her researches may not result in a major change to Brennan's standing as poet—explication alone can not effect that—but will remain of primary help to those trying to understand him.

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