

The Erotic Secret Heart of Christopher Brennan's *Poems 1913*

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Arguably the most formidable obstacle to the wider, even global, appreciation of Christopher Brennan's magnum opus *Poems 1913* is the obscurity of so many of its 105 individual poems. This is due in some cases to Brennan's espousal of Symbolist principles, which held that the reader should receive no help from adjunct material in addition to the bare symbols and images themselves; in others, to their presentation of sophisticated arguments, the main challenge to the understanding of which lies in the arguments themselves and not the manner of their expression; and in others, to the elision of certain words, and re-engineering of the syntax, in the service of rhythm and concision. However, there is also often a sense that Brennan may have chosen deliberately to conceal content in a way which does not fit into any of these three categories. An example of this is poem 63 ('There is a far-off thrill that troubles me ') in the 'Quest of Silence' section, where the precise nature of the sinful event being described remains unclear:

I must go down, thro' chapels black with mould,
past ruin'd doors, whose arches, ridged with gold,
catch, in their grooves, a gloom more blackly dript,
some stairway winding hours-long towards the crypt
where panic night lies stricken 'neath the curse
exuding from the dense enormous hearse
of some old vampire-god, whose bulk, within,
lies gross and festering in his shroud of sin.

James McAuley perceptively remarked the intense personal-erotic character of *Poems 1913*;¹ but I will argue here that this dimension is in

¹ James McAuley, 'The erotic theme in Brennan,' *Quadrant*, Nov-Dec 1968: 8-15

fact far wider and deeper than McAuley recognised, and that its intimate character might provide a very good reason for Brennan's deliberate occultation of so much of it. McAuley wrote:

What prevents the poetry from being completely dead amidst its attempted splendours, is the fiery burning current of personal experience and feeling. Perhaps, after all, the best exposition of Brennan would be a narrative of his life, with quotations from his poems – if only we knew enough of his more intimate experience to be able to interpret the poetry, or could understand the poetry well enough to use it to throw a light into the dark places of his life.

The purpose of this paper is indeed to illuminate some important *occulta* of Brennan's life, as examined in his poetry in a typical artist's journey towards healing and wholeness.

It is of fundamental importance in dealing with Brennan accurately and consistently to interpret his symbols. The key symbol in the present context is that of the sphinx, of which there are four instances in *Poems 1913*:

the stranger-stone, sphinx-couchant, thunder-hurl'd
from red star-ruin o'er the elder world.
(poem 59 in *'The Quest of Silence'*)

even hers, the strangling sphinx, made known
with, on her breast, his fore-erected tomb...
(poem 68.x in *'Lilith'*)

Terrible, if he will not have me else,
I lurk to seize and strangle...
(poem 68.x in *'Lilith'*)

that foe of settled peace, the smiling sphinx,
or foul Echidna's mass'd insidious links...
(poem 68.x in *'Lilith'*)

The erotic character of this symbol cannot be in doubt. The Greek verb *sphingein*, whence the noun *sphinx*, meant 'to strangle', and prostitutes were known as *sphingae*, a usage which the Romans later adopted,

calling them *anxicia*, 'throttlers'.² In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* the sphinx is associated with eros in a mysterious and destructive way. Hardly less memorable is Aeschylus' depiction of her in *Seven Against Thebes*, where she is described as *homositon*, 'flesh-eating', as depicted on a shield of one of the seven attackers, devouring a Theban man whom she has trapped beneath her.

As a sexual predator, capable of inflicting pain and pleasure, the sphinx became a prominent theme of nineteenth century artists, who typically depicted her as half-woman and half-lioness, with a lust for seducing men by her beauty and then tearing their flesh to pieces. Heine, Moreau, Munch, Ingres, Wilde and others portrayed her in this way, while Rossetti's Lady Lilith is her alter ego. Heine's description of her in his *Buch der Lieder* (1839) is especially powerful:³

There before the door lay a Sphinx,
Half-frightening and half-seductive,
With belly and claws of a lion,
A woman in head and breast.
A beautiful woman! The pale face,
It spoke of wild desire.
The silent lips were curved
As warrant of a peaceful smile.
The marble form came alive,
The stone began to groan,
She drank the burning passion of my kisses
With unslakeable thirst.
She nearly drank my breath as well—
And at last, needing lust,
She turned me over, my poor flesh
Ripping with her lion's claws.

Further confirmation that this was also Brennan's intention is given by the fourth instance above, which is found in close juxtaposition with a reference to a Greek myth of particular interest:

² Noel Macainsh, 'Steps into the Forest: Christopher Brennan's Fatal Attraction,' *AUMLA* (November 1989): 244. Macainsh gives a useful discussion of the sphinx without following the clues to their logical goal.

³ All translations in this paper are mine.

but in that cave before his upstart gates
 where elder night endures unshaken, waits
 that foe of settled peace, the sphinx,
 or foul Echidna's mass'd insidious links,
 reminding him that all is vanities;
 and when, at last, o'er his nine roods he lies...

The last line is a reference to the myth of Tetyos and Leto. In this myth, Apollo seized the Delphic oracle and retained its priestess, the Pythoness, in his service. When Leto (mother of Apollo by Zeus) heard the news, she travelled there with Artemis. On arriving in Delphi, she turned aside to perform a private rite in a sacred grove. Tityos, a Phokian giant, tried to rape her. Apollo and Artemis heard her cries, and killed him with a volley of arrows. Tityos was stretched out in Tartarus for punishment, with his limbs pegged fast to the ground, so that his body covered nine roods (acres), with two vultures to devour his ever-regenerating liver.

This reference points in turn to a passage in 'Lilith' occurring just before the last-mentioned, which portrays Brennan's forcing of the issue on his wife Elisabeth, in a scene of squalor and trauma in the *letto matrimoniale*:

He shall not know her or her gentle ways
 nor rest, content, by her sufficing source,
 but, under stress of the veil'd stars, shall force
 her simple bloom to perilous delight
 adulterate with pain, some nameless night
 stain'd with miasm of flesh become a tomb:
 then baffled hope, some torch o' the blood to illumine
 and flush the jewel hid beyond all height,
 and sombre rage that burst the holy bourne
 of garden joy, murdering innocence,
 and the distraught desire to bring a kiss
 unto the fleeting centre of the abyss,
 discovering the eternal lack, shall spurn
 even that sun-god's garden of pure sense,
 not wisely wasted with insensate will.

It has not previously been remarked that these last two lines refer to Swinburne's poem 'Dolores' (*Poems and Ballads*), the subject of which is sadomasochistic sex (Dolores' sobriquet throughout is 'Our Lady of

Pain'). This 'sun-god' is Priapus, the father of Dolores, an expression of the familiar esoteric phallus = sun identification. These lines from 'Dolores' throw light on the last line above: 'We have all done amiss, choosing rather/ Such loves as the wise gods disdain'. That is, Brennan's original failure to embrace eros in a healthy, uninhibited way has produced this monstrous degradation of it. McAuley reads this passage as a deeply personal confession:

I think Brennan is saying: 'My wife was virginal and unready. The marriage was a disaster of Miltonic proportions. The act of love became a bloody obscenity of force and pain, her flesh becoming a tomb of love. The total disappointment of my superheated ardour of sensual expectation, when no answering ardour was generated, became a sombre rage to violate her baulking purity and innocence; but all it could achieve was the realisation of an irremediable lack; so that the marital paradise I had hoped for became a ravaged wasteland.'⁴

Similarly, Axel Clark concluded that 'Brennan rapidly came to feel that his marriage was in some basic sense a failure; a particular passage in 'Lilith' ['He shall not know her or her gentle ways...'] may represent a disguised account of what precisely happened to give him this feeling'.⁵ Katherine Barnes contests such a reading of this passage as a reference to Brennan's personal life;⁶ but I argue elsewhere that her reading is founded on a flawed interpretation of the Eve symbol.⁷

The second instance of the sphinx in *Poems* occurs forty lines or so before the last-quoted passage, in this hitherto problematic stanza:

*What night is this, made denser, in his breast
or round him, suddenly or first confess
after its gradual thickening complete?
as tho' the mighty current, bearing fleet*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Axel Clark, *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1980), 119

⁶ Katherine Barnes, *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan's Poems* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 121 ff.

⁷ Michael Buhagiar, 'Christopher Brennan and the Greeks: The Quest of *Poems 1913*'. PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Aug. 2012

*the unresting stars, had here devolved its lees,
stagnant, contempt, on recreant destinies;
and that a settling of tremendous pens,
above the desolate dream, had shed immense
addition to the incumbence of despair
downward, across this crypt of stirless air,
from some henceforth infrangible attitude,
upon his breast, that knows no dawn renewed,
builded enormously, each brazen stage,
with rigor of his hope in hopeless age
mummied, and look that turns his thew to stone:
even hers, that is his strangling sphinx, made known
with, on her breast, his fore-erected tomb,
engraven deep, the letters of his doom.*

Many critics have engaged briefly with this passage without seriously attempting to penetrate its mystery. Chisholm notices the sphinx here, but merely as symbolic of the riddle of life, neglecting her erotic dimension.⁸ The sphinx as symbol of erotic possession is the key. These lines undoubtedly describe an episode of phallic tumescence. 'Made denser', 'gradual thickening', 'infrangible attitude', 'builded enormously, each brazen stage', 'rigor', 'stone', and 'fore-erected tomb' (a reference to the Manichean *soma sema*, 'the body the tomb'), tell the story. 'Pens' bears here the meaning of 'wings' (< 'pinions'). The passage is in italics, and it serves as a kind of choric comment, as the raw expression of the undeveloped common man, deepening our understanding of the surrounding drama. The personal dimension of *The Forest of Night* obtrudes dramatically in this light.

Two lines later there appears another reference to the sphinx:

Terrible, if he will not have me else,
I lurk to seize and strangle...

This is the Hebrew Mother Goddess Lilith, the principal demon figure of *Poems*, speaking in the first person. The word 'strangle' indicates that she is here in sphinx mode, and that the sphinx is an aspect of her. In 'Lilith' Brennan has clearly embarked on an intense and brutally honest journey

⁸ A. R. Chisholm, *A Study of Christopher Brennan's The Forest of Night* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1970), 39

toward self knowledge, or the wisdom of Lilith who is his own self, and who is manifest initially and most powerfully as erotic possession.

In the first instance given above, poem 59 in 'The Quest of Silence' section, the sphinx symbol is a portal into an intimate and problematic dimension of Brennan's inner life, the exposure of which for someone of his sensitivity and secretiveness he might well have considered unthinkable. Not so many years later, when the world and artistic mores had irrevocably changed, another great Irish Catholic apostate writer, with whom Brennan had a very great deal in common, would not balk at revealing similar *personalia* in his hero's odyssey through Dublin. But Brennan for now was more guarded.

Here is poem 59:

Out of no quarter of the charted sky
 flung in the bitter wind intolerably,
 abrupt, the trump that sings behind the end
 exults alone. Here grass is none to bend:
 the stony plain blackens with rapid night
 that best reveals the land's inflicted blight
 since in the smitten hero-hand the sword
 broke, and the hope the long-dumb folk adored,
 and all over the north a tragic flare
 told Valhall perish'd and the void's despair
 to dwell as erst, all disinhabited,
 a vault above the heart its hungering led.
 The strident clangour cuts; but space is whole,
 inert, absorbed in dead regret. Here, sole,
 on the bare upland, stands, vast thro' the gloom
 staring, to mark an irretrievable doom,
 the stranger stone, sphinx-couchant, thunder-hurl'd
 from red star-ruin o'er the elder world.

A prominent aspect of this poem, and of several other poems with which it is grouped in 'The Quest of Silence', is its sense of precipitancy, of an abrupt disturbance of the status quo by an unexpected and unwanted agent. It may be, given the symbol of the sphinx in the penultimate line, that this agent is the will-to-eros. The following exegesis of the poem will add strong support to this theory.

The presiding influence of this poem is William Blake. Brennan scholars have tended to emphasise Stéphane Mallarmé as the principal mentor figure of *The Forest of Night*; but Blake is demonstrably of comparable importance. Brennan in fact took the title 'The Forest of Night' from Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*; and Blake's highly developed spirituality and wisdom as regards the erotic dimension of humankind widely infuse this book of the *livre composé*. 'The trump that sings behind the end' is a Blakean reference; and the language and imagery of this poem strongly point toward Blake. However, Mallarmé may well have been in Brennan's field of influence as well.

The erotic symbolism of the sphinx is potentiated in this poem by the 'stranger stone', the significance of which is to be found in Mallarmé and Blake, in the former in a more general way as the universal will, in the latter specifically as the will-to-eros. The stone fallen to earth from the sky is a striking feature of the 'tombeaux' poems of Mallarmé. Here are the relevant lines of *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*:

Si notre idée avec ne sculpte un bas-relief
 Dont la tombe de Poe éblouissante s'orne
 Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre
 Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne
 Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars dans le futur.

'If our idea may not sculpt a bas-relief
 With which the dazzling tomb of Poe may adorn itself
 Calm block fallen here below from a disaster,
 May this granite at least show its landmark
 To the black flights of Blasphemy loosed into the future.'

'Black flights of Blasphemy' can only refer to Poe's poem *The Raven* as an epitome of his oeuvre, and these flights are clearly cognate with the dark wings of Lilith, who in *Poems* stands in relation to the sphinx as Schopenhauer's universal will stands to the will-to-eros, that is, as a superset of it. The function of the granite will be to guide the flights towards its (the granite's) and by implication their (the flights') star of origin. The relevance of all of this to *Poems*, in which Brennan identifies Lilith as the source of the libido, is plain.

Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*, completes the picture. Urizen is tortured by Los and Enitharmon, and their son Orc. Urizen is glimpsed as an approaching meteor, and Orc is summoned:

'Arise, O Orc, from thy deep den!
 'First born of Enitharmon, rise!
 'And we will crown thy head with garlands of the ruddy vine;
 'For now thou art bound,
 'And I may see thee in the hour of bliss, my eldest born. '
 The horrent Demon rose surrounded with red stars of fire
 Whirling about in furious circles round the immortal fiend.
 Then Enitharmon down descended into his red light...

And there we have it: the red stars whose ruin will cast the 'stranger-stone' onto the Urizen landscape in poem 59 of *Poems*: Orc himself, the principle of passion, whose juxtaposition to the sphinx symbol indicates that it is erotic passion that is in question. *Europe: a Prophecy* was evidently also the source of poem 59's 'the trump that sings behind the end':

The red limb'd Angel siez'd in horror and torment
 The trump of the last doom; but he could not blow the iron tube!
 Thrice he assay'd presumptuous to wake the dead to
 Judgement...

The phrase 'wake the dead to Judgement' is full of Freudian significance in relation to poem 59, where 'the dead' is Brennan in classical mode, and so unmindful of Lilith, who will now judge him guilty and inflict on him the eros he has denied.

We can complete more fully the scenario envisaged by Brennan. I have argued at length elsewhere that a fundamental cause of his problems with eros as a young man was, along with the puritanical Roman Catholicism of his upbringing, his enthrallment by the Classics, especially Greek.⁹ Oswald Spengler can enlighten us as to why:

This very spatiality [or 'roomliness'] that is the truest and sublimest element in the aspect of *our* universe, that absorbs into itself and begets out of itself the substantiality of all

⁹ Ibid.

things, Classical humanity (which knows no word for, and therefore has no idea of, space) with one accord cuts out as the nonent, the τὸ μὴ οὐ, that which *is not*. The emphasis of this denial can scarcely be exaggerated. The material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present—this list exhausts the characteristics of this kind of extension. The Classical universe, the Cosmos or well-ordered aggregate of all near and completely viewable things, is concluded by the corporeal vault of heaven. More there is not. The need that is in us to think of space as being behind as well as before this shell was wholly absent from the Classical world-feeling.¹⁰

Spengler's 'corporeal vault of heaven' finds its correspondence in many places in *Poems*: for example, in poem 60, as the 'oubliette' which excludes the 'hidden stars' of the realm of Lilith:

Far, where our oubliette is shut, above,
we guess the ample lids that never move
beneath her brows, each massive arch inert
hung high-contemptuous o'er the blatant wars
we deem'd well waged for her, who may avert
some Janus-face that smiles on hidden stars.

The realm of Lilith is therefore, in the macrocosm, the illimitable space which lies beyond the Classical shell; but it is also, in the microcosm, by the principle of 'as above, so below', as stated in the esoteric Emerald Tablet (*Tabula Smaragdina*) which Brennan had studied,¹¹ the unconscious mind, wherein resides the broader (in the Freudian sense) libido: and it was the libido which, irrupting the conscious mind as the raw will-to-eros, announced to Brennan the inadequacy of his accustomed world view, and the existence of a realm with which he had no choice now but to engage ('and thou must house it, thou/ within thy fleshly Now' – poem 68.iii). Blake describes just this process, of the inward journey to the centre of the self

¹⁰ Oswald Spengler, trans. C.F. Atkinson, *The Decline of the West* (Oxford UP, 1991), 94-5

¹¹ A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.), *The Prose of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 52

predicating the awareness of illimitable space, in these lines from *Milton* (I.17.21-30):

The Mundane Shell is a vast Concave Earth, an immense
 Harden'd shadow of all things upon our Vegetated Earth,
 Enlarg'd into dimension & deform'd into indefinite space...
 ... It is a cavernous Earth
 Of labyrinthine intricacy, twenty-seven folds of opakeness,
 And finishes where the lark mounts; here Milton journeyed
 In that Region call'd Midian among the rock of Horeb.
 For travellers from Eternity pass outward to Satan's seat,
 But travellers to Eternity pass inward to Golgnooza.

This then is the background to the opening lines of poem 59, where the 'charted sky' (Spengler's 'corporeal vault' or equally Blake's 'Mundane Shell') is disrupted from outside of itself, by a 'bitter wind', and Blake's trump sounds to announce the end of mere materiality ('the material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present') and the advent of the unseen beyond, realm of Lilith.

Poem 59 sits with a group of poems toward the end of 'The Quest of Silence', and immediately (except for the two poems of 'Interlude: The window and the hearth') before 'The Shadow of Lilith'. The correct interpretation of poem 59, with the sphinx as erotic demon at its heart, can help elucidate their meaning. I have already noted poem 63, the last of the group, above; and I will now suggest that it describes an episode of erotic possession which grips the subject as he sits at his desk in solitary contemplation ('a faint thin ripple of shadow, momentarily, / dies out cross my lucid icy cell'). Further evidence for this interpretation is provided by a consideration of the neighbouring poem 62 ('ONE! an iron core, shock'd and dispers'd'). That the sin described in this poem may well be erotic in nature—

The corpse of time is stark upon the night:
 my soul is coffin'd, staring, grave-bedight,
 upon some dance of death that reels and feasts
 around its living tomb, with vampire grin,
 inverted sacraments of satan's priests—
 and, mask'd no more, the maniac face of sin

—is suggested by reference to Brennan's likely source, Swinburne's 'A Watch in the Night':

France, what of the night?—
 Night is the prostitute's noon,
 Kissed and drugged till she swoon,
 Spat upon, trod upon, whored.
 With blood rose-garlands dight,
 Round me reels in the dance
 Death, my saviour, my lord,
 Crowned; there is no more France.

Poem 54 ('Fire in the heavens, and fire along the hills ') has long been appreciated as a pleasing nature poem and no more; but in light of its placement in this group, the 'cicada's torture-point of song' may quite plausibly describe, like the 'one clang' of poem 62, the same process.

'The Quest of Silence' is bookended by two sections of two poems each, 'Interlude: The hearth and the window' (poems 46 & 47) and 'Interlude: The window and the hearth' (poems 64 & 65). Poem 64 refers to a traumatic psychological event:

Earth stirs in me that stirs with roots below,
 and distant nerves shrink with the lilac mist
 of perfume blossom'd round the lure that, kist,
 is known hard burn o'erflak'd and cruel sting.

In poem 52 ('The forest has its horrors ') we read of the potential wound of the broken blade that rusts before the entrance of the serpent's cavern; and in poem 102 ('Droop'st thou and fail'st?'):

And in thy house of love thy venom'd dart
 was thrust within thy side—Even so! must then
 the gather'd ripeness of thy mind and heart
 be turn'd to flies? that is no way for men.

The lure, the blade, and the dart in these poems all evidently refer to the traumatic irruption of eros into the conscious ego that would resist it.

I have analysed *Poems 1913* at length elsewhere as an instance of the Journey of the Hero genre.¹² Thus, the work has its Hero (Brennan); Mentors (chiefly Aeschylus, Blake and Mallarmé); Shadows (Apollo, a god of the sun and reason, and Blake's Urizen: both of them gainsayers of the unseen realm of Lilith); Shapeshifters (Elisabeth Werth who goes from positive aspect to negative during the course of the Hero's transformation, and Lilith who goes correspondingly from negative to positive); Threshold Guardians (the academic Classical establishment); and so on. The 'Lilith' section portrays the Hero's quest in the Special World, where he confronts and defeats his demon Lilith, or more precisely transforms her in the Jungian way into a goddess. 'The Quest of Silence' is the last full section describing events in the Ordinary World, where the Hero has encountered a crisis or crises which necessitate his taking up of his quest. Christopher Vogler, developing the theme of Joseph Campbell's landmark study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, describes the Ordinary World thus:

Typically, in the opening phase of a story, heroes have 'gotten by' somehow. They have handled an unbalanced life through a series of defenses or coping mechanisms. Then all at once some new energy enters the story that makes it impossible for the hero to simply get by any longer. A new person, condition, or information shifts the hero's balance, and nothing will ever be the same. A decision must be made, action taken, the conflict faced...¹³

Vogler's remarks on the Shadow(s) emphasise the journey's finally microcosmic nature:

Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. The qualities we have renounced and tried to root out still lurk within, operating in the Shadow world of the unconscious... If the Threshold Guardian represents neuroses, then the Shadow archetype stands for

¹² *Ibid.*, 107-121

¹³ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Pan Macmillan, 1999), 61-2

psychoses that not only hamper us, but threaten to destroy us.¹⁴

For Brennan, the 'new energy' was undoubtedly the energy of Lilith in her sphinx aspect of erotic demon, surging to shatter the shell of his classical ego.

McAuley is highly critical of Brennan's outlook in *Towards the Source*, the first book of the *livre composé*:

The pre-nuptial poems convey a perilously overwrought expectation of a perfectly ineffable fulfilment of the poet's inexperienced and suspended desire ... He seems, moreover ... to be trying, even before the consummation of their union, to fix his beloved fast into the frame of innocent girlhood, as if preferring her in that role ... There is an unhealthy sickliness of sentiment, which bodes ill for the future, in the following poem ['And does she still perceive, her curtain drawn'] ... a sickliness that is translated into the false tone and impure diction that pervade it ... But I still think that the cumulative effect of these poems suggests a dangerous tension between the pressure of erotic expectation and the infantilizing of the conception of the bride ... Brennan conveys an alarming sense of a mind so auto-intoxicated that the ideal and real have no controllable relation, and are on collision course.¹⁵

These observations are mostly accurate and justified. However, McAuley failed to appreciate the Journey nature of *Poems 1913*, and that in *Towards the Source* the Hero is still well and truly in the Ordinary World, with all its attendant problems. Here is Vogler again:

But Heroes must also be unique human beings, rather than stereotypical creatures or tin gods without flaws or unpredictability... Interesting flaws humanise a character. We can recognise bits of ourselves in a Hero who is challenged to overcome inner doubts, errors in thinking,

¹⁴ Ibid., 71

¹⁵ Ibid.

guilt or trauma from the past, or fear of the future. Weaknesses, imperfections, quirks, and vices immediately make a Hero more real and appealing. It seems the more neurotic characters are, the more the audience likes them and identifies with them... Flaws are a starting point of imperfection and completeness from which a character can grow.¹⁶

The Journey of the Hero therefore has direction, and we owe it to Brennan to acknowledge his honesty in publishing this portrayal of himself at a stage that would evidently have given him little pleasure to recall. In general he was richly endowed with flaws, as it has pleased several critics to note; but flaws are not incompatible with heroism, as Vogler notes. 'The Quest of Silence' represents the last gasp of the Ordinary World before the transformation of Brennan in his quest for the wisdom of Lilith.

We can define more precisely the significance of Elisabeth Werth in the young Brennan's life. They had met in Berlin in 1893 and become engaged, and she had travelled to Sydney in 1897 to join him. We may with some justice characterise her as a type of classical goddess. R. G. Howarth described her thus: 'When she first arrived in Australia, Mrs. Brennan, I have been credibly told, was a girl of radiant beauty—golden-haired, blue-eyed, a Nordic dream of a woman.'¹⁷ Like Apollo's, Elizabeth's eyes were of the blue of the sky, her hair of the gold of the sun. Apollo was the dominant god of Hellenistic culture of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE which so enthralled Brennan;¹⁸ and Spengler uses the term 'Apollinian' to describe that culture's prevailing materialistic and cosmetic bent. Classical beauty of the kind exemplified by Elisabeth Werth is the first Beauty of the first lines of poem 1 ('MDCCCXCIII:A Prelude') of *Poems 1913*: 'Sweet days of breaking light ... sweet dawn of

¹⁶ Ibid., 39-40

¹⁷ R.G. Howarth, 'Personalialia', *Southerly*, Number Four of 1949 (Chris Brennan Number): 214

¹⁸ See for example Stéphane Mallarmé in *Les Dieux Antiques*: 'Le culte d'Apollon fut en Grèce de tous le plus largement répandu, a eut la plus grande influence sur la formation du caractère grec' (*Oeuvres Complètes* [Éditions Gallimard, 1945], 1205).

Beauty's day';¹⁹ while the deeper, more robust beauty of Lilith is the second Beauty of the same poem, in its final stanzas:

And, O, ye golden days,
 tho' since on stranger ways
 to some undying war
 the fatal star
 of unseen Beauty draw
 this soul, to occult law
 obedient ever, not
 are ye forgot.

Brennan explicitly stated the nature of the problem in this letter to Dowell O'Reilly:

What am I arguing for? Merely for the illimitableness of Beauty, which I hold is found everywhere, even in mud-flats (if you deny this, then you set a wall round Beauty & become a lousy earthworm wriggling thro' the decaying mould of *classicism*)...²⁰ [Brennan's italics]

Elisabeth's love of outdoor pursuits is well recorded, and Brennan described her in 'Lilith' as 'creature of morn'. In a poem written on the steamer home in June 1894 and entitled 'Hymn',²¹ to which scholars have given little attention thus far, he juxtaposes his attraction to her with his love of the Classics which evidently still held him in thrall. The two loves are continuous. It is worth quoting in full and examining closely, for the insight it gives into the central conflict that beset Brennan at this time, the healing of which would be the central theme of *Poems 1913*:

¹⁹ Most commentators take these lines to refer to the moderns whom Brennan discovered in Berlin. However, there are strong external and internal indications that they in fact refer to the Greeks, to whom he was after all still committed in 1893 – the break would not come until 1894. I discuss this poem in some depth in my PhD thesis (132-5).

²⁰ Undated fragment collected in Terry Sturm ed., *Christopher Brennan*, in the series *Portable Australian Authors*, (University of Queensland Press, 1984), 396

²¹ A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.), *The Verse of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 210-11

HYMN

Perversity! that wilt not stay
as merely guest within my brain
arise from memory or display
if any trace of thee remain

tho' but as streaks of various hue
cast from what drugs of various dyes
for comprehension of the few
poison the equatorial skies

far other than beneath whose roof
that never took the tint of blood
my fever'd spirit stood aloof
to reach the heaven from out the mud

The flowers in the hothouse grew
(the nipping and the eager air
might charge them with no proper dew)
we enter'd—I but unaware

Yet found delight in every bloom
that pois'd upon exotic stalk
scatter'd a radiance thro' the gloom
that else had overcast our walk

and haunted by the lucid one
mine eyes forgot the others' soil
saw but the children of the sun
not of the loveless nights of toil

My heart exulted to behold
those flowers in that endless aisle
mark'd but the glory and the gold
deluded by the nostril's wile

but she that hitherto had seem'd
not any of those flowers to see

(of others not so rare she dream'd)
open'd her eyes and look'd on me

The hothouse vanish'd with its flowers
and as before the breath of spring
the fever of the winter cowers
I sate beside her listening

Let those who prate of treason know
that as we walk our farther way
flowers of far other colour grow
in this my spirit's second May

and not as agonising day
flares o'er the equatorial sea
in strangeness that has power to stay
the phantom in my memory

And if I seem to leave the strife
and forth as albatross to fare
resolv'd to lead another's life
beneath the ardent height of air

I yet behold that lucid flower
that rising from the endless sea
beneath what skies that laugh or lower
points upward to infinity

and far from that perversity
beneath the open heavens' roll
with absoluteness silently
interprets nature to the soul.

A key image here is of the 'equatorial skies', in which the noonday sun stands directly overhead, casting no shadow. 'Beneath whose roof/ that never took the tint of blood', 'the lucid one', and 'children of the sun' point in the same direction, which can only be toward Apollo. The alarming word 'perversity' opens and closes the poem; and we remember the 'benevolent tart on the side' with whom Brennan spent time in Berlin

even as he was wooing Elisabeth,²² as recorded in the slightly later poem 'Threnos' (late 1894, see below).²³ Eros plays the role in 'Threnos' of the incubus in Classical mythology, which descends on the sleeper in his dreams.

There is an alarming sense in stanza 1 of 'Hymn', and also in 'Threnos', of Brennan striving to expunge what was in fact a constitutive part of himself. A plausible conclusion to be drawn is that this is precisely the element which he would later come to identify as Lilith in her sphinx aspect of erotic possessor, now no longer to be oppugned, but accommodated (see for example poem 68.iii: 'and thou must house it, thou,/ within thy fleshly Now'). At this stage, though, Brennan is evidently far from that state of grace.

Stanza 2 of 'Hymn' describes the corruption of his classical idyll by the ineluctable eros. In stanza 3 Brennan portrays his Apollonian strivings towards scholarly distinction in the Classics. The following five stanzas, where the flowers in the unnatural climate of the hothouse represent the intellectual triumphs of Brennan's first classical phase (cf. 'The grand cortège of glory and youth is gone' – poem 7), describe Brennan's initial introduction of Elisabeth to the wonders of his inner life – to which she is however unresponsive, offering him instead a simple natural beauty which he embraces. There is a suggestion here, however, that we are still in the realm of classical beauty ('of others not so rare she dream'd') rather than the deeper and more robust beauty of Lilith which Brennan would come to find so essential to his healing and transformation.

Brennan's enthusiasm for the Classics now wanes ('The hothouse vanish'd with its flowers'), and his Apollonian striving is now seen as a winter, beside Elisabeth's spring. The chronological correlate in his life in Berlin would plausibly be early 1894, when he began to edit his research on Aeschylus for publication, to draw a line under that phase of his life. Brennan finds his new-found love for Elisabeth now able to suppress his 'perversion' ('in strangeness that has power to stay/ the phantom in my memory'). So that his future remains, still, charged with Freudian potentialities.

²² Testimony of J.J. Quinn. Quoted in Clark, *ibid.*, 74

²³ Collected, with commentary, in Sturm, *ibid.*, 132-3

Brennan had evidently transferred his affection from the Classics to the flesh-and-blood of Elisabeth: the problem being that this was in either case an idealistic love, the ideal being that of Apollo, of day, of summer, of the power of sunlight to reveal nature to the sense of sight, of body at the expense of soul. Brennan would have to learn the hard way that Apollo is deficient in the property of soul, that night and winter are constitutive to the world, and that one repudiates the inward looking, sunlight-independent vision – enshrined in Greek myth in the character of Teiresias – at one's peril. Had Christopher and Elisabeth belonged to different times and backgrounds they may possibly have been able to have a relationship and get it out of their systems and move on; but as it was, the bonds of marriage and children made it a tragedy for both of them.

Since it is of such importance to this argument, here is 'Threnos', which Brennan tried to suppress, but which survived in a letter to A.B. Piddington:

Her place is dark in my brain tonight, her face is faded and dim,
a picture veil'd in a sanctuary unhaunted of seraphim,
where never mounts the incense nor memorial vesper-hymn.
She that sunn'd herself in my love, that freely gave of her best,
whose ghost crept back and found some warmth in the secret
shrine of my breast,
is but a piteous shadow now, despoil'd forever of rest.
The years have gone by and left me here in a bare-blown corner of
days,
the treacherous mists have crept at length o'er the old beloved
ways,
and alas! I cannot weep for the soul that was mine in her vanisht
Mays.
Yet ah! that the years should work their will, that the wind of time
should blow
out into the wide and soundless night and Eternity's cruel flow
of lovingkindness and tenderness and kisses of long ago.
and ah! that the poor pale spirit that liv'd and lov'd and was
tender of yore
should sleep forever the second death, foul-murder'd on Lethe
shore
that she and I should be lost to each other, forgotten for evermore.

Here he explicitly refers to the other woman of his Berlin years, who evidently offered him the passion of Lilith – which in ‘Hymn’ he had characterised as a ‘perversion’ – even as he was wooing a spotless goddess of day. McAuley’s words (quoted above) come to mind here: ‘Brennan conveys an alarming sense of a mind so auto-intoxicated that the ideal and real have no controllable relation, and are on collision course.’ And Clark’s: ‘Brennan’s relations with women in Berlin, as in Goulburn, showed that, in his sexual attitudes, he was a radically divided man.’²⁴ And Vogler’s (quoted above): ‘If the Threshold Guardian represents neuroses, the Shadow archetype stands for psychoses that not only hamper us, but threaten to destroy us’.

Clark surmises that Brennan may have been clinically schizophrenic. The evidence on the whole does not support this. Nevertheless, there is a strong odour of incipient mental illness in Brennan’s life and work of the early and mid-nineties, with Apollonian sunlit reason warring with the blind libido in a typically Freudian-Jungian way. The healing of this conflict would be the goal of the quest of *The Forest of Night*, begun in 1897. This would not be a case of the mere slaying of a demon of the unconscious (the sphinx), but of the transformation of her (Lilith in her wholeness) into a deity, in a way that we now associate with Jung. Let W. B. Yeats have the last word, in a passage that Brennan marked up in his copy of Yeats’ study of William Blake. The context is Yeats’ discussion of Blake’s symbolic system:

This means that Imagination, the great force that surrounds us within and without, coming to us in the form of Inspiration, has power to perform what are miracles in comparison with our own strength, and to make the most egotistic sensation of all in the world of Time, that of the sexual organ whose symbol is the plough, into an expansive emotion leading to the true Centre, the great mental opening which leads to the Unlimited in the world of Eternity.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 74

²⁵ Yeats W.B. and Ellis E.J., *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, in 3 vols., (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 1.407. It is a quite straightforward task to distinguish Yeats’ contributions from his collaborator’s, such is the difference between genius and mere competence. I have identified (ibid., 81-6) several cogent reasons for concluding that the copy of this work held in Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Sydney, is Brennan’s own.

Michael Buhagiar was awarded his PhD in the Department of English, University of Sydney, in August 2012, the title of his thesis being 'Christopher Brennan and the Greeks: The Quest of *Poems 1913*'. Before beginning his PhD he self-published full-length books on Shakespeare (2003) and *Don Quixote* (2008).