

FRANCIS BRABAZON: A NEW MEASURE IN MODERN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

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Brabazon's only claim to fame in Australian literature is one poem published in the 1956 edition of *The Oxford Book of Australian Verse* edited by Judith Wright (p.129). There are no poems of his in any other anthology of comparable standard nor is there to be found any critical assessment of his work apart from the occasional book review. These facts indicate either a poet who has been neglected or one whose work has been found wanting. Certainly, Brabazon's output is not excessive but he has produced, along with other works, twelve collections of poetry and his major work *Stay With God* (1959) had a remarkable six hundred pre-publication sales which for an Australian poet writing in the fifties is quite exceptional. Part of this neglect may be due to the difficulty critics have found in coming to terms with Brabazon's thought and his eclectic references to saintly personages and metaphysical ideas. This has often given him the label of being a mystical poet which he flatly denies. And probably a greater reluctance has come from the fact that he chose to follow an Eastern spiritual Master and openly wrote of this fact. In this regard, Brabazon stands alone amongst his generation of Australian writers with the possible exception of the Buddhist's poet Harold Stewart. In failing to understand or even attempting to understand Brabazon's relationship with his spiritual Master, Australian literary critics have tended to treat his writing as marginal and have on occasion crudely satirised this aspect of his work. What they have tended to miss in the process is the universal scope and depth of his vision and the cogency and clarity of his expression. In this paper I wish to give a brief account of Brabazon's life in Australia and present some of his early ideas on art and creativity.

Francis Brabazon was born in England in 1907 and came to Australia as a boy in 1912. Although his father was related to the aristocratic Brabazons, the Earls of Meath of Ireland, he was at heart a radical and felt more comfortable being a member of the intellectual and left-wing Fabian Society along with people like William Morris and George Bernard Shaw. Philosophically he felt most sympathy for

Morris' idealism and his contempt for the destructive force of industrialism and dreamt, like Morris, of an earthly paradise. This desire haunted Brabazon's father and eventually drove him to take his family to Australia which he envisioned as the great antipodean utopia—"God's own country".

In Australia, the family settled on a small wheat farm property near Glenrowan in north east Victoria calling the place Kelmscott after Morris' Kelmscott Press in London. It was during this time that Brabazon's artistic temperament started to manifest under the influence of his father's taste for romantic poetry. He started to write Keatsian sonnets about sunsets and commenced a philosophical work which he titled *The Hill of Life* in Fitzgerald quatrains. As a youth, when he was alone ploughing the paddocks for the wheat sowing, he would stop on the headlands and jot down any ideas that came to him. Later in the evening he shaped his ideas into verse. Although there is no record of Brabazon's Glenrowan poetry, images drawn from the surrounding landscape and the daily round of farming life fill his later work. He loved farming and was happily resigned to a life on the land. Something of his deep joy comes through in one of his notes recalling this period:

There was a song of fullness in driving a straight furrow and the gleaming earth turning over along the long mouldboards for the autumn wheat-sowing and the team with their magnificent chests in line keeping the swingletrees level so that there was no jingling as with unmatched horses; in the brown paddock turning green, and then gold, and the hum of the harvester and the wheat pouring into bags; in the delicate green of vineyards under bare hills; Shiraz which bore the small black grapes for port wine and Muscatels and Waltham Cross which when gorged in their last day of ripening made one drowsy and dream-disposed.¹

Eventually the farm had to be sold due to a series of unfavourable seasons and the persistent onslaught of rabbits. For Brabazon who was twenty-one the future looked grim. His only possessions amounted to five pounds and a rail ticket to Melbourne, a city poised on the threshold of the Great Depression. After a number of set backs he was eventually offered a position as a rouse-a-bout for a shearing company in Menindie near Broken Hill.

It is significant that in his long autobiographical poem, "The Wind

of the Word" which he wrote about fifty years later Brabazon starts with his experience of what he described as the "great Emptiness" around Menindie. The sparse bush and desolate red sand hills of the surrounding landscape left an indelible impression on his consciousness: an impression akin to D.H. Lawrence's experience of the outback's "sense of subtle, remote, formless beauty ..." (87). Brabazon described the place as "not the bush of the romantics but ... the bush of emptiness and silence, the bush where because of its very starkness people speak plainly and simply". Within this setting of the dry heartland of Australia Brabazon sensed this formless presence resonating within his soul as an active frustrated force, deeply longing to find expression like an impetuous wind:

I first met it out on the plains.
 It rushed in from the further West
 covering the sun and shrouding the trees
 with fall-out from the atomic Interior;
 and the trees marked back over the horizon.
 And it raced on. And I went with it.
 For it was the Wind's time to explore all places,
 sound all things that would sound —seeking a throat
 through which it could utter the Song
 locked in a Continent since the First Dreaming. (1976,1)

Soon after this experience he returned to Melbourne and after various occupations finally decided to devote his life to art. Besides writing poetry, he studied music but felt most attracted to painting as his medium of expression. He attended classes at the Gallery Art School and identified himself with the group of young modernist painters who came to be known as the Angry Penguins exhibiting his work along with Nolan, Boyd, Tucker, Perceval and others at the Contemporary Art Society showings of 1941 and 1942. The then editor of Angry Penguin journal, Max Harris wrote of his work:

Brabazon's early paintings (1942) initiated the first appreciation of the naive or primitive symbolism in the Australian art world. Brabazon was the beginning of the notion of innocent vision. It influenced the entire Angry Penguin community.

Through his experience of painting Brabazon developed what he called a "means of cultivating devotion and a little concentration" but it also generated in him a deeper quest into the nature of art itself; questions concerning the universal numinous quality of beauty and the

relationship between this quality of beauty with some Truth of existence be it either immanent or transcendent were foremost in his mind. In pursuing answers to these questions Brabazon was attracted to the writings of the mystics and saints of various religious traditions. One in particular, was the writings of the Spiritual Master Ramakrishna who lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Calcutta. The same Indian teacher who attracted Aldous Huxley and the English writer Christopher Isherwood. Brabazon wrote:

Here was a heart that contained all hearts, a mind that cut through all pretence. One at a time he had explained all the possible paths to God and identified himself with each source and had emerged all sources in the One Source...

He preached the doctrine of love, not in dry separative sermons, but by joining in the spiritual songs and dances with the people who came to see him.

Suddenly and forcefully I realized that I would have to find such a Master —one could not think to travel this path alone.

Brabazon was so moved by Ramakrishna that his only desire was to save enough money and go to India and live the life of a sannyasin until he found such a Master.

However, this proved unnecessary for he made contact with a group of people in Melbourne who had a spiritual master living in Camden outside of Sydney. The group were Sufis in the Hazarat Inayat Khan School of Sufism. Brabazon joined this group and became a disciple of the leader Baron Von Frankenburg whom he referred to as his 'first Guru'. In 1946, he travelled to San Francisco and himself became a Shakyh [teacher] in this Sufi Order and returned to eventually become the new Australian leader. With time the Order was re-oriented and came under the leadership of Meher Baba, a Zoroastrian by birth who claimed to be a fully enlightened spiritual teacher. In 1959, Brabazon went to India and lived with Meher Baba for ten years as a devotee-poet. In 1969 he returned to Australia and lived on a property near Nambour on the coast north of Brisbane and continued to write until his death in June 1984 from Alzheimer's disease.

Brabazon was of the opinion that the idea in the sense of something universal or archetypal that operates always and everywhere, was the reason for a poem and the basis of the greatest works of poetry (1971, Preface). He also contended that the source of life and the lyrical

qualities in great poetry were generated by the truth of the ideas they express which in turn was dependent upon the depth with which they were grasped by the poet.

As a starting point, in trying to understand Brabazon's perspective, I wish to use the American poet Robert Creeley's concept of "measure". Creeley sees measure as something which pertains qualitatively to the poet as a person and not quantitatively to some feature of the text. As a poet he states that in his writing:

I am not at all interested in describing anything. I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity. I want, as Charles Olson says, to come into the world. Measure, then, is my testament. What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue (15).

Essentially what Creeley is saying, is that to write, is to "measure" oneself at a particular point in time. Brabazon would agree with this general comment but felt that a great many modern writers produced work that was simply a measure of their own "private emotions or reactions to mental, psychic or material stimuli" or it reflected the "personal opinions or likes or dislikes" of their audience and as such was limited its capacity. Whereas writing, and indeed all artistic expression, in Brabazon's conception—and this is his central point—has the potential to be a measure of what he believes to be the deepest Self of each and every person: what the Buddhists call Suchness, the Vedantist, That, and in the Sufis, the Beloved. This measure according to Brabazon is ever primordial and ever new and is ever cherished by people whenever and wherever it finds expression. He elaborates:

Belief in the idea that anything new is ever achieved in art is due to interaction with the shifting surface of life. The creation [of the world] is not an act of the remote past, but is taking place constantly. Just as That from which creation arises is constant, absolute and changless, so is art, which is simply the permanent constant from which creativeness expresses itself; and is always contemporary. Hence the illusion ... that something new has been created, when it is merely a new shape ... with which creativity (art) has clothed itself.

Following on from this perspective is Brabazon's claim, that the artist who works in this manner does not imitate any form found in creation but works at a deeper level and creates in the "likeness of the creativeness" of the creator (1956,77). This manner of working has a clear link with St.Thomas' famous statement that, "Art imitates Nature in her manner of operation" and can also be seen in the general point made in one of Eliade's early essays [written in 1932] on Indian art:

A "natural" landscape is possible only in the intuition of a man (or a culture) who has separated from nature and is trying to approach it and reintergrate himself in it. To want to describe or suggest aspects of nature is a sign of the dissociation of nature from consciousness ... But India still is living in nature; thus, she does not observe it but realizes it. The Indian artist in his work of creation coincides with nature —and his works are nothing but new forms, rich in living, of the same nature which creates flowers, lakes and monsters (73).

Brabazon however takes this idea further by explicitly naming the way of nature as being the way of love (as found in traditional Indian Bahkti songs and Sufi poetry) and much of his greatest work *Stay With God* is an extensive elaboration of this very theme. What comes across in this work is Brabazon's clarity of vision and the powerfully intensity of his conviction. He writes:

Art is an act of love —an imperishable statement
cut in stone, uttered in tones and words or through the
movements of the dancer, —and thus impressed in the
"material" of mind,
continually contemporary and continuously accessible to one
who loves:
as act, self-sufficient —useless
for the works of progress, O man; as statement,
revelment of the beauty of God, and proof of His eternal
Existence (111).

In one of his earlier poems, "Reflection" Brabazon conveys this same idea. In this instance he presents the task of the artist as being receptive, of listening quietly by the stilled waters of the mind:

Leaning. Leaning. And the ear
 stretched purely along the waters
 for the note of that entering
 Bird. Solitary. Oh, if

a harp-string should clang
 on that tenderness, or a
 violent horn shatter the petals
 of its gardening. —Give it

unfolding, and in noon
 it will be music
 supporting the singer

who sang-it. Leaning,
 leaning. In the lake quietly
 the Image is breathing. (30)

Brabazon considered the Image thus created from this meditative experience to be a measure of being and a form of intuitive knowledge. He saw it not only as a true and satisfying representation of the being of the artist but as a reminder, to all who likewise encounter it aesthetically, of the reality of their own being for it was a measure of that same one Being which resides in all humanity and once this was achieved then the "act of love" of art was complete.

In Sufism, an "imaginal world" of art is sharply differentiated from the imaginary world of private fantasies and is given 'independent ontological status'. The American Sufi scholar William Chittick states:

Once we lose sight of the imaginal nature of certain realities, the true impact of a great body of mythic and religious teachings slips [and I would add here also, a full appreciation of genuine art] slips from our grasp.

All religious traditions accord a central role to imagination, though not necessarily by this name. The [imaginal world] *mundus imaginalis* is the realm where invisible realities become visible and corporeal things are spiritualized. Though more real and 'subtle' than the physical world, the World of Imagination is less real and 'denser' than the spiritual world, which remains forever invisible as such. In Islam, the later

intellectual tradition never tires of discussing the imaginal realm as the locus wherein spiritual realities are seen in visionary experience ... (ix).

This sort of approach to the portrayal and appreciation of art in Brabazon's eyes is "an act of adoration and worship and can only be experienced through devotion and discipline" it is not obtained cheaply. However, he certainly did not consider it to be, in any manner, mystical, otherworldly, nor exclusive. In point of fact, it was for him, simply an expression of the depth of life itself open to any sincere artist or persons living naturally and without artificiality.

The Indian art critic Coomaraswamy sees art of this measure as not simply a revelation of divine being, a type of epiphany, but as providing a katharsis experience in which the passive, natural self is separated from our spiritual being. In this state, the spiritual being participates in and is nourished by what Coomaraswamy calls the "scent" or "flavour" of the art work "not a sensible shape but an intelligible form that [the being of a person] tastes". And adds:

Plato's "heartsease" is the same as that "intellectual beatitude" which Indian rhetoric sees in the "tasting of the flavour" of a work of art, an immediate experience, and congeneric with the tasting of God. [18]

Instead of "heartsease" Brabazon uses the Sufi term, "the wine of love" to describe the same experience and was convinced of its spiritual yet practical purpose:

The manifestation of this love (in the art work) is a means of revealing that love to others; it becomes a vehicle for their emancipation. Because it clings to nothing it creates no impressions of attachment upon others, but is in itself pure in its creativeness.

Thus life is revealed as no mystery; and the artist's purpose is accomplished (p.78).

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1. This quote is taken from the unpublished Brabazon archives. All further unreferenced quotes are from this source.

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