

THE WANDERER ON THE WAY TO THE SELF:
CHRISTOPHER BRENNAN

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I would like to begin with two quotations. The first is from David Malouf. It is about the importance of poetry and ‘the hidden part’ it plays in our lives:

How it spoke up, not always in the plainest of terms, since that as not always possible, but in precise ones just the same, for what is deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur of things, that is our *other* history, that goes on in a quiet way ... and is the major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the very beginning.¹

The other is the opening to Judith Wright’s poem, ‘Brennan’:

Self-proclaimed companion
of prophets, priests and poets,
walkers on the earth’s last fringes,
haunted lover
of the beckoning darkness,
last Symbolist, poor hero
lost looking for your self,
your journey was our journey.
This is for you.²

¹ David Malouf, *The Great World*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1990, pp.283-4.

² Judith Wright, *Collected Poem, 1942-1985*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994, pp.403-4.

Brennan, this suggests, is an exemplary figure. His journey is, or ought to be ours since it was and is part of that other history which, as Malouf also says, is ultimately ‘what binds us all, since it speaks immediately out of the centre of each one of us’.³ This centre has to do not so much with geography as with the quest for identity – the colonial/post-colonial self, the evidence suggests, is an anxious one.

Identity is a first principle and paradigm of Western culture in general but for people like ourselves, Western colonisers settling in a new and strange part of the world and faced with the task Mircea Eliade describes as ‘the transformation of chaos into cosmos,’⁴ it is particularly problematic, involving as it does ‘both an adventure and uncertainty questing for self-satisfaction and self-fulfilment’⁵ in a place in which we are not yet entirely at home. This quest, however, can move in two different directions, depending on whether it is seen in logical or ontological terms.

By and large the Western culture which has in the last few centuries set out to colonise the rest of the world, has made it an ontological one, a quest for totality. We have engaged on a ‘great triumphal march’, going out from a familiar world, journeying through difference to return finally to a self which has taken all difference into itself, asserting its own emphatic identity over against all else. In the words of Luiz Carlos Susin, this march generally ‘proceeds by anathema, by excluding the demons of difference’,⁶ It is unitary, confident in the fullness and rightness of its own identity and almost entirely self-reliant.

³ *The Great World*, p.284 .

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth Of The Eternal Return*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

⁵ Luiz Carlos Susin, ‘A Critique Of The Identity Paradigm’, in *Concilium* 2000/2, p.78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.79.

In this year in which we are revisiting the constitutional premises on which our nation rests, this is an apt enough description of the project of our Founding Fathers – significantly there were no Mothers – which rested on the exclusion of indigenous Australians and peoples from cultures other than our own. In this view identity rests on sameness, on marking out a place for the self, ‘a reserved space, a inner place’,⁷ from which others and, I would argue, the Other are excluded and can even be regarded as the enemy. Theologically this can be seen as the source of an individualistic, even Narcissistic, spirituality which

triumphs above all as critical understanding, distinguishing and identifying good and evil in a very particular way based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet⁸

and thus, to put it more simply, creates a God to its own image who blesses the rich and successful, for example, the God of the Winners.

Christopher Brennan was preoccupied with this quest for identity both in his life and work: he saw ‘man [as] ... the wanderer on the way to himself’.⁹ But it takes him, I believe, in the opposite direction, towards uncertainty. For him the stress falls on the journey itself, not the arrival, on exile not in taking possession and not on the familiar but on the uncanny, the Other, the sacred, if you like: ‘Man,’ Brennan writes, ‘is a wanderer by nature’ and part of a history beyond the self, a ‘transitory product of the continual flux and transformation of species ... not yet self-

⁷ Ibid., p 87.

⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

⁹ A.R.Chisholm and J.J.Quinn (eds), *The Prose Of Christopher Brennan*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1962. p.42. References given hereafter in the text.

conscious but in the process of becoming self-conscious'.(45) This self-consciousness, moreover, is not something made by the self – as our Promethean culture would have it – but the fruit of discovery: the journey 'does lead somewhere'.(45)

True, at first this 'somewhere' may seem to have triumphalist overtones since the goal is 'the state wherein man shall have taken up into himself the whole world that is outside him, and the whole world that is within'.(46) I would argue, however, that this is not the kind of monological unity described earlier. What he sought was 'to see ourselves *sub specie aeternitatis*'.(11) The challenge to 'humanise the world... proceeds from the Infinite'.(10) What was demanded was thus a 'transvaluation of value'. Art in general and poetry in particular must carry 'humanity forward where philosophy failed', (47) since it exceeds the limits of reason, intuit and attempt to express the 'mysterious correspondence of things' touched upon in myth and symbol and in this way generate a deeper understanding ideal 'moods' which alone are vast, clear and simple' (17).

What Brennan was searching for was not certainty but a glimpse of the mystery whose centre is no-where and its circumference everywhere and in this sense, as he put it, '[w]e are all following the Chimeara' (9). This puts him at the other end of the scale from the Cartesian self, 'the thinking and judging self, conceptualising and categorizing along the shelves of his subject'.¹⁰ As Wright understood instead of finding in the self a permanent source of meaning and identity, giving it the stability of a property, he was 'lost looking for [him]self', increasingly drawn to infinity, of being before the other/Other, not by triumphing over or imposing self on it but by opening out to it.

¹⁰ Susin, p.81.

Theologically therefore one could say that Brennan refused to make a God to his own image but accepted what Levinas has called the *mal d'être*, the pain of being human and not God, having caught a glimpse of an Other which 'is without response ... essentially strange, and does violence to us.... We suffer its suffocating pressure like the night, but it does not respond'.¹¹ So he wrote of an 'emptiness that terrifies us in the infinite',⁽¹⁰⁾ accepting, as the poetry shows very clearly, 'the loneliness of night', a loneliness in which 'the other arises in the shadows and disturbs the natural repose of identity in itself'.¹²

This is the opposite of the imperial self which underlies the colonial project. He does not lay claim to a place but accepts being displaced and instead of lording it over others the self undoes itself, is dispersed in the interest of the Other. This gives a very different significance to the idea of the quest for the Centre. True it remains a place of estrangement, a no-place, if you like. But where the quest is usually inspired by the desire to take possession of the whole of the continent, Brennan's quest as reflected in the poems, his *livre composé* and the book of his life, begins and ends on a note of loss, though the note is sounded differently in each case. The note of 'decay from God'¹³ sounded in the Prologue and of being cast out into a world devoid of meaning at the mercy of mindless forces of the natural world:

Wavewise the world is driven for aye,
each gulf the old renewing night (55)

by the end of the journey has become something more serene and settled in being unsettled, on the way elsewhere:

¹¹ Quoted in Susin, note 1, p.90.

¹² Susin, p.81.

¹³ A.R. Chisholm and J.J.Quinn (eds), *The Poetry of Christopher Brennan*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1960, p.41. Hereafter references will be given in the text.

the wanderer of the ways of all the worlds,
to whom the sunshine and the rain are one
and one to stay or listen. (165)

This, I suggest, is a different sense of the Centre from the one which generally figures in our culture. There the hero who arrives and is defeated there, as he usually is: (it is invariably 'he') belongs to the masculine mode of the hero defeated in battle against overwhelming odds. But Brennan's quest belongs to a different mode, to what Helene Cixous has characterised as the 'feminine' economy which is not intent on conquest as the economy she characterises as 'masculine' does, the 'economy of the proper', of property, propriety and appropriation. This economy, she argues, 'is erected on a basis of fear ... : a fear of expropriation, of separation, of the loss of the attribute', of virile power.¹⁴ The feminine economy in contrast is based on giving and receiving and lives from within rather than by externals, listening to the unconscious, 'the other language'¹⁵ and giving oneself to it.

In the light of Elaine Lindsay's argument that the myth of the Centre is a largely masculine one, this is an important point since it suggests, to take up David Malouf's idea of an *other* history that goes on under the surface, that Brennan takes us in this direction and that it is one which can be seen as 'feminine'. In the light of the part played by the monstrous figure of Lilith, 'Lady of Night' who seduced Adam who

begat on her not majesty, as Jove ,
but the worm-brood of terrors unconfest (125)

¹⁴ Quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London, Routledge, 1991, p.111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.113.

this may seem a dubious claim. But this encounter figures as an essential stage of the journey. Where the dominant paradigm, which is the paradigm of patriarchy also, shrinks from the feminine which it sees as uncontrolled and uncontrollable, Brennan dares the 'horrors of the forest', the void inhabited by Lilith, 'the unwed vast'.(131) This opposes the self's autonomy, drawing it, '[t]o occult law / obedient ever'(65) beyond the bounds of reason and of good and evil as reason knows it and which defend it towards an infinite beyond the self to confront its terrors and splendours:

Go forth : be great, O nothing. I have said. (140)

To pick up the distinction made earlier, identity here is therefore not ontological but logical. The self is brought up before the irresistible logic of a reality which is by definition not only beyond human logic but also beyond our comprehension and control, the reality which Jean Luc Marion calls 'God without being'¹⁶ and the logic by which the self is in a sense unmade in order to be remade as it embraces the *apeiron*, the indefinite or impossible to define, which the monolithic culture which defines identity as sameness cannot endure. But if we accept Cixous' argument the 'feminine' economy can, 'daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other[s] ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them'.¹⁷

This, I suggest, is where the conclusion of the Wanderer sequence which marks the journey's end leaves us. It has often been seen as offering a conclusion which is merely rhetorical. Wright, for instance, finds in it 'a note not only of uncertainty but also of hollow vaticination' and

¹⁶ Jean Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, London. Chicago University Press, 1991.

¹⁷ Judith Wright, *Preoccupations In Australian Poetry*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1966.

suggests that Brennan has ‘disintegrated under the strain’.¹⁸ But in my view the inconclusiveness and the uncertainty are precisely the point. The goal set earlier, ‘the state wherein man shall have attained complete knowledge of the self’ (Prose,10) has opened out into a knowledge and acceptance of incompleteness, into the ‘vertiginous crossings which lead to the other/Other’. Thus there is

no ending of the way, no home, no goal. (165).

But that precisely is why the poem concludes:

I feel a peace fall in the heart of the winds
and a clear dusk settle, somewhere, far in me (165).

The distance between self and the other/Other has exhausted speech and generated a longing for the silence which has all along bade him home. The desire for total identity has disappeared and for knowing has given way to an acceptance of a state of unknowing. There is no homeland but the Beyond to which the self is called, and peace is not to be found in self-possession but in dispossession since self is ultimately founded in the mystery of the Other.

There is no time nor is this the place to discuss the implications for the larger life of our culture, though it is worth considering what attention to the ‘*other* history’ might mean, for example, for our relations with the country’s First Peoples or with migrants from other cultures. But it also resonates with the strain in our culture which makes the folk song ‘Waltzing Matilda’ so powerful. Essentially the notion of identity we have been proposing replaces the figure of Ulysses, a ‘closed circle around sameness’,¹⁹ with that of Abraham who is destined not to

¹⁸ Judith Wright, *Preoccupations In Australian Poetry*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1966.

¹⁹ Susin, p.88.

return home but to be always on the way to the promise and finds an identity not as something for or within itself but by being open and vulnerable to others and the Other.

If, with Judith Wright, we see Brennan as an exemplary figure, it appears that as a people we may need to rethink our notions of identity and that poetry may be more important than we think. As, to conclude with Wright's poem on Brennan,

history's burning garbage
of myths sends
up its smoke-wreath
from the city dump

we may need to follow him into 'the Wanderer's / emptiest, loneliest desert', whence, as Alec Hope said, the prophets come.