

THE PERFECT MASTER OR AXIS OF THE UNIVERSE
IN THE WRITINGS OF FRANCIS BRABAZON

Ross Keating

In Australian literature there has arguably been no figure more committed to a quest for the universal meaning of beauty and its relation to truth than Francis Brabazon. Indeed his life is a remarkable story of how a young, shy, farming boy living in an relatively isolated part of the Australian bush ends up staying in India for ten years as the poet-disciple of a person who declared himself to be God in human form, the Avatar, or in Sufi terms, the *Rasool*, the divine messenger, of this age.

Brabazon's story begins in London where he was born in 1907. His father, although related to the Earls of County Meath in Ireland, was a Fabian, an admirer of William Morris, and a supporter of the 'common worker'. His mother, who came from a middle-class English family, was a pragmatist by nature and an accomplished pianist. In 1912 they emigrated to Australia and settled on a small farm in Glenrowan, Victoria. As a youth, Brabazon developed a loving connection with the surrounding landscape; he was deeply moved by the beauty of night and the sheer generosity of the earth, and it was here that his first poems were written.

At the age of twenty-one and virtually penniless – after the farm succumbed to drought – Brabazon arrived in Melbourne. In the city he was at a loss about what to do with his life but after seeing the performance of internationally-acclaimed artists like Anna Pavlova, Alexander Brailowsky, Arthur Schnabel, and viewing the Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art

held in 1939, he decided to devote his life to the pursuit of beauty in art.

From this time onwards, the nature of beauty and its relationship to truth became Brabazon's driving preoccupation in life. For the next twenty years he explored different artistic mediums, including music, drawing, and poetry, through which he could find answers to his quest. In the mid to late thirties painting became the central focus of his attention and he mixed with the first group of Australian modernist painters including Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and John Sinclair.

In 1941 and 1942 he exhibited his paintings alongside these artists. According to Max Harris, the then editor of the *Angry Penguins*, the first Australian modernist art journal, Brabazon's paintings

initiated the first appreciation of the naive or primitive symbolism in the Australian art world... [his work] was the beginning of the notion of innocent vision. It influenced the entire Angry Penguin community.

Yet unsatisfied with his painting, Brabazon turned his full attention to writing poetry, which he felt offered the greatest possibilities for expressing what he had to say.

During the early forties Brabazon became interested in the connection between art and spirituality, particularly in Eastern traditions, long before these concerns became popular. He studied Vedanta, Taoism, Confucianism and Sufism, and began a practice of meditation. Of all the spiritual traditions which he investigated it was Sufism which attracted him the most and he became a pupil (*mureed*) of a Sufi Sheikh, Baron von Frankenberg, who lived in Camden outside Sydney.

Von Frankenberg was a past student of Hazarat Inayat Khan, the founder of the first order of Sufism specifically created for Western culture. This was called the Sufi Movement. In the mid forties Brabazon moved to Camden and lived with Baron von Frankenberg in a master-disciple relationship. In 1946 he travelled to San Francisco where he studied under Murshida Rabia Martin and was initiated as a Sufi Sheikh in the order.

In 1951, after returning to Australia, and after the death of von Frankenberg, Brabazon took over the leadership of the Australian branch of the Sufi Movement. In 1952 he again travelled to America and met the Indian-born spiritual Master of Zoroastrian religious background, Meher Baba, whom he described as the living embodiment of beauty and knowledge: 'the living perfection of Art'. His years of searching as an artist and as a spiritual seeker had come to an end and had converged in this person. Convinced of Meher Baba's spiritual stature, and aroused by him to the very core of his being, Brabazon willing became his disciple and abandoned the formality of the Sufi Movement. As evidence to the fact that his conversion was not due to some emotional susceptibility on his part, Brabazon felt his mind had been honed to a 'razor sharpness' and indeed this quality soon manifested in his poetry giving it a hard cutting edge.

The Sufi Movement to which Brabazon belonged paved the way for his acceptance of Meher Baba. It was first established in 1910 by Hazarat Inayat Khan to introduce Sufism to the West as a practical philosophy.¹ Its aim was

¹ A complete set of the writings of Hazarat Inayat Khan is available in 12 volumes published by Barrie and Jenkins: London, reprinted 1973. His autobiography is also available under the title: *Biography of Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan* (London: East-West Publications, 1979). A recent work, H. J. Witteveen, *Universal Sufism* (Melbourne: Element, 1997) gives a useful overview of the Sufi Movement: Witteveen, at the time of writing his work was the Vice President of the International Sufi Movement founded by Inayat Khan. Inayat Khan was also a close friend

to provide a way whereby spiritual ideals could be incorporated into everyday life. Branches were initially established in America, then France and Russia and, by the forties, when Brabazon first heard of the Sufi Movement, there were centres in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, and Scandinavia, with the small Australian group being affiliated with the American branch.

The teachings of the Movement were taken from the extensive writings of Inayat Khan. His training was mainly in the Chishti School of Sufism, which was founded by Hazarat Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (c. 1142-1236) who was believed to be a direct descendent of Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam.² Muinuddin Chishti is still highly venerated today and known throughout India as the great saint of Ajmer. The Chishti school is noted for its use of music to facilitate inner spiritual development.³

Inayat Khan's writings are extensive and wide ranging. His writings on art alone extend across such topics as the essence of art, art and religion, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and Persian Sufi poetry. Besides being a highly competent singer and vina player, who was in demand at the courts of many Indian princes, he was also a poet and playwright. As a music teacher Inayat Khan held the position of Professor of Music at the Gayan Shala Music Academy of Baroda, and during his career he toured

of the Zen Master Nyogen Sensaki (1876-1958) who was one of the first teachers to introduce Zen to the West. Refer to Nyogen Sensaki and Ruth Strout Mc Candles eds., *The Iron Flute 100 Zen Koan* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1964) pp.155-165.

² Begg, W. D., *The Holy Biography of Hazarat Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti* (The Hague: East-West Publications, 1977) p.17.

³ According to one of Inayat Khan's followers, 'by the time he left India, Inayat Khan had received the training in what may be called 'Four School Sufism', which is to say, in the Chishti, Kadri [Qadiri], Sohrawardi [Suhrawardi], and Naqshibandi Schools. The Sufism that was presented in the West [the Sufi Movement] was basically a synthesis of these'. Refer to Samuel L. Lewis, *Sufi Vision and Initiation* (San Francisco: Sufi Islamia, 1986) p.21.

America and lectured on Indian music at such universities as Berkeley, California and Columbia in New York besides touring Europe.

Under Hazarat Inayat Khan's leadership, Sufism was defined as a perennial teaching, and the Sufi Movement was his vehicle to reinstate these timeless truths in Western culture. According to Hazarat Inayat Khan, the word *sufism* is derived from the Arabic *saf*, meaning 'a purifying process', although other teachers and scholars have linked the word to the Greek and Persian *sophia*, 'wisdom', or *suf* meaning 'wool', referring to the woollen garments the Sufis traditionally wore.

In his explanation of the term, Hazarat Inayat Khan emphasised that Sufi ideas have 'never been owned by any race or religion, for differences and distinctions are the very delusions from which the Sufi purifies himself...'.⁴ This type of religious thinking was presented in the writings of Hazarat Inayat Khan as the natural outcome of spiritual understanding. Indeed, even on an exoteric level, he wrote that 'each person should belong to that [religion] which is most suitable. If he is content with his own, that is the reason for adhering to it; if not, he may seek one with which he can be content'.⁵

This openness of the Sufi Movement stemmed from the monotheistic belief that 'There is One God, the Eternal, the Only Being; none exists save He', and a belief that the 'God-man' of the world religions, the founding figure, was this same One Being incarnated. Inayat Khan wrote:

Although the tongue of God is busy speaking through all things, yet in order to speak to the deaf ears of

⁴ Hassen, Selma Al-Faqih, 'A Short History of Sufism,' *Sufism* (San Francisco: Sufism Reoriented, 1971) p.4.

⁵ Khan, Inayat, *The Way of Illumination (A Guide-book to the Sufi Movement)* (Southampton: The Camelot Press, n. d.) p.21.

many among us, it is necessary for Him to speak through the lips of man. He has done this all through history . . . every great teacher of the past having been the Guiding Spirit living the life of God in human guise. In other words, their human guises are the various coats worn by the same person, who appeared to be different in each. Shiva, Buddha, Rama, Krishna on the one side, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mahommed on the other; and many more known or unknown to history – always one and the same person.⁶

In Meher Baba, Brabazon felt he had recognised this same Ancient One returned again. Within Brabazon's poetry and supported by statements made by Meher Baba, a strict distinction is made between a person who has attained God-realization and takes a position of spiritual authority in the world as a *Qutub*, to use a Sufi term, or *Sadguru* (the Vedantic term) and the status of the *Rasool*, or the *Avatar*, the divine One who continually returns. Although both are recognised as God in human form, the former is seen as having attained Godhood in their present lifetime and will never return to earth once they die; the latter is seen as the first soul ever to attain God-realization and continually returns to earth time and time again. In this sense, the Vedantic term *Avatar*, meaning 'descent of God', refers to this one and only Ancient soul and is synonymous with the meaning of the Sufi term, *Rasool*.

Whatever the case may be, whether a God-realised being is a *Qutub* or the *Rasool*, a *Sadguru* or the *Avatar*, Brabazon refers to them in his poetry as Perfect Masters and even as Perfect Artists. He writes:

One who has attained Self-realization [i.e., God-realization] is a Perfect Artist in himself whether or not he ever opens his mouth to others. His very presence among men [people] is a teaching to them of

⁶ Khan, Inayat, *The Way of Illumination*, p.27

what they should and may become. After Realization he may remain silent; he may sing in verse the fact of Truth and describe the stages and states approaching It and comment on the persons involved in them in order to encourage others to seek Truth as did Hafiz; or he may, like Sankaracharya, analyse non-Truth in order to prove to the others the existence of Truth. Each one of them would be no more or no less an artist than the others.⁷

According to Brabazon, to find a Perfect Master, ‘a Perfect Artist’, is to find the centre of the universe, the world axis, and is ‘all that the world can give’. On an inner level, Brabazon makes the claim that art is a spiritual practice that allows a person to discover this ‘world axis’, this ‘Someone’ who is ‘the sum total of Existence, Beauty and Knowledge’ – as externally embodied in the Perfect Master – as the deep Self of one’s own self:

He [the Perfect Master] is the Axis around which His creation revolves. Consequently, He is the creativity in all creative acts, in all human relationships. Precisely then the path of the artist is not in [the] practice of technique or in the pursuit of [the] relationship of forms... but... [to] draw nearer to this central creativity and work in accordance with its laws, which are always constructive.⁸

In ‘Book IV’ of his major epic poem, *Stay With God*, entitled ‘The Steps to His Feet: abandoning illusion for Reality,’ Brabazon expounds most fully upon his belief in the central importance of the Perfect Master in the life of a spiritual aspirant. This same belief is to be found within traditional Bhakti Hinduism, classical Sufism and also, it

⁷ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, (Sydney: Garuda Books, 1959) p.156.

⁸ Unpublished note from Brabazon’s archives (used with permission).

could be argued, forms the basis of the spirituality of various expressions of Christian mysticism.

The regular form of the verses in 'Book IV' with the words 'Perfect Master' occurring at the end of every last line is repeated for the entire forty verses of the poem. This simple technique powerfully reinforces the poem's central idea that all creation ends with the Perfect Master who stands as the gateway between illusion and Reality. An important theme in this work, and one that runs through much of Brabazon's writing is what could be called his theme of 'unlearning'. It first appears, in this instance, in verse 7:

The clearing of the ground for the sowing, for the entering is the unlearning of learning – for learning is your rubbish heap of conceit.

Later in the poem, in verses 12 and 13, Brabazon reintroduces this theme, but with his own commentary:

All written words are dead until you bring them to life.

But the life you give them will be your own image of falseness, not Truth's: Truth is contained only in the life-giving word of the Perfect Master.

It is better to read than gossip;
it is better to meditate than read;
it is better to love than meditate; but since you are already trapped in the coils of convulsions, read the books of the saints and 'God Speaks' by the Perfect Master.⁹

In verse 29 Brabazon introduces the concept of 'impressions' (*sanskaras*), the mental accumulations formed in the mind after learning has taken place, and cites

⁹ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.84.

them as being the direct cause in preventing the Self from realising its innate nature of love:

Self is not of the conditions or qualities it imagines – nor ‘somebody’ nor ‘nobody’ nor ‘accomplished’ nor ‘unaccomplished’.

All these are impressions impressing mind, vehicle of Self.

The natural condition of Self is love – its demonstration is the being and life and acts of the Perfect Master.¹⁰

In verses 36 and 39 this theme is brought to a resolution:

Unlearn your learning, unhope your hopes, unlove your love; nothingness is becoming to those arisen from Nothing. Clear some ground for Love, Love, the entire forgetter, the only rememberer, the Chastener and Cherisher – the Perfect Master.

Clearing the ground is erasing the impressions of the mind.

Impressions are the veils between ourselves and Truth.

When they are erased ‘Self stays in His native condition’¹¹

Self, the beyond-God of love from whence we once came; the here-God of redemption in the person of the Perfect Master.¹²

For Brabazon, the way of ‘unlearning’, the way of ‘erasing impression of the mind’ is the ancient way of artistic practice. If Brabazon’s artistic practice was to be reduced to only one word it would need to be ‘devotion’, but

¹⁰ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.87.

¹¹ This is a quote from the Indian Sage Patanjali. Refer to Shree Purohit Swami, trans., *Aphorisms of Yoga* by Bhagawan Shree Patanjali (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) p.25.

¹² Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.88.

devotion defined in a particular way which he articulates in his manifesto statement ‘Art as a Practice of Devotion’. This work opens with the following salutation, and although Brabazon introduces some new terms, still central to his thinking is the idea of a Perfect Master, or ‘True Teacher’, as the living axis-of-all-creativity or the divine archetypal artist – the ‘Supreme Artist’:

Art is a method of practising devotion to the True Teacher, who is the Supreme Artist; the whole universe being His creation, and man His most finished work. To this Artist every true artist has ever bowed, knowing that without His help he is helpless, without His inspiration he is void of any creativeness.¹³

Later in this same piece, Brabazon states that the purpose of the artist is to work in the same manner as this archetypal ‘Supreme Artist’ and that ‘the actual practice of art [itself]... should have only one purpose: the faithful representation of the creative purpose of God, and his [the artist’s] own self-effacement’.¹⁴ For Brabazon, it is a spiritual truism that artists can either express their separate self or seek to let their spiritual Self create through them; it cannot be both, and for the spiritual Self to be expressed the separate self has to give way. In actual fact, this is how Brabazon sees art as a practice which ultimately leads to God: for artists working in this spiritual manner will eventually become totally self-effaced in union with the source of their creativity which is none other than God.

In short, Brabazon’s spiritual approach to art could be seen as a practice of attunement: a meditative attunement to the source of all creativity. The use of meditation in art is not particularly new: many artists use some form of meditation

¹³ Brabazon, Francis, *7 Stars to Morning*, (Sydney: Morgan’s Bookshop, 1956) p.77.

¹⁴ Brabazon, Francis, *7 Stars to Morning*, p.77.

to ‘get inside’ the object which they wish to represent in their work. What is unique about Brabazon’s approach is his reinstatement of the facilitating and all-encompassing role of the Perfect Master in this process. And indeed, what Brabazon is implying is that potential artists must, first and foremost, develop a personal relationship with a genuine spiritual Master, who will be their ‘True Teacher’, their source of inspiration and who embodies for them what they seek to find in themselves and express in their art.

In Brabazon’s own poetry, ‘Light’ is his central metaphor in describing his experience of love manifest in art:

Light – flood of the mind, and dress of the soul, –
movement of which in a man through his hands or
speech is called Art.¹⁵

‘Light’ gives

the SHOCK, whereby the soul awakens to awareness
of itself; and understands that the world is the shadow
of the Real.¹⁶

Indeed, all creation is nothing but ‘the shadow of the Real’, and likewise all belief in self-doing is equally full of delusion and not an act of love and therefore yields no joyful shock of ‘Light’:

A tree is a tree. It is not creative, but reproductive,
A man is a man and likewise creates nothing.
The image is already in the stone, the bridge
in steel, waiting revelation and spanning
at the word of God in a man’s hand.
Mind, which prompts us, ‘we are the doer’,
is a mirror-house
of distorting in which Self is deluded

¹⁵ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.118.

¹⁶ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.122.

by being imagined
as everything other than Self. A man
as a man can cease from foolishness and
begin to love –
begin to repeat the Name of God in his heart,
seek in his heart the Beloved's lovely face,
wait patiently for a word or a note or some intimation
of His form and make his many notes and
words and outlines
pleasing to Love's ears and eyes. Only one become
One may create.¹⁷

¹⁷ Brabazon, Francis, *Stay with God*, p.123-4.