

‘Dead dogs, stones and dust’: the Fall from an Urban Pastoral in Brennan’s *Curriculum Vitae*

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In April 1930, Christopher Brennan wrote his most comprehensive and specifically autobiographical document, a brief *apologia* entitled *Curriculum Vitae*. It was produced twenty years after much of his ponderous masterwork *Poems [1913]* had been completed, during a period when his prose output was at the lowest ebb it had been for thirty-five years. Brennan had, by 1930, ceased to be an intellectual: he was fifty-nine years old and living as a homeless derelict having lost a marriage and family, a lover, and his reputation as a poet. He had also lost his academic career having been dismissed from Sydney University in 1925. Significantly for the following paper, he was also on the verge of return to Catholicism, from which he had lapsed forty years before.

Brennan was born in 1870 and spent the time covered by *Curriculum Vitae* in Sydney. The text recalls with a sense of clarity which is largely absent from the poetry, details of life in the city and suburbs up to the age of twenty one. As early as the introduction Brennan approaches this *techné* of self principally as an institutional problem, that is one which locates the self within the competing discourses of two institutions, the Roman Catholic Church, and the University of Sydney, used by Brennan to construct tropes of identity through particular and highly differentiated uses of language. Self is figured as a series of particular sites, troped as polar opposites on a continuum nominated by him as ‘nature’, gauged in terms of a poetic language, as a presence within, or an absence from nature. In using poetic language as the yardstick of nature, Brennan produces a narrative of a personal Fall from an urban Garden of poetic language into poetic silence. The *Curriculum Vitae* is then, an autobiography which does *not* act as a personal myth of becoming—instead it narrates and situates Brennan’s loss of language, self and his poetic silence.

Curriculum Vitae is prefigured by the most frequently anthologised piece in *Poems [1913]*, its final piece, *Epilogue – 1908*—written twenty-two years earlier—a meditation on self and public transport, a metaphysical tram ride down George Street, past the ‘the sacring lave’ of the Catholic Church and on to the ‘four-turreted tower’ of Sydney University. Although the city-scape appears in this, and in a few other pieces, it does so as an urban other to a sense of nature replete with symbolic presence, rendered in particularly European imagery—woods, forests, springtimes and meadows—from which the ‘I’ is permanently separated. In 128 poems, Brennan constructs the self *via* the ‘I’-persona’s ‘distant dreams’ of ‘nature.’ Urban imagery denotes absence within Brennan’s constructions of self within the poetry. In *Curriculum Vitae*, however, self is initially located as a matrix of urban spaces, which is why this document deserves a closer reading.

A sense of self is initially defined in *Curriculum Vitae* through the city-scape of late Victorian Sydney. Brennan, born in the parish of St Francis’ Church in the Haymarket, writes that, as a child he

roamed far in the region bounded by George Street, the Darling Harbour Railway, and Liverpool Street ... I was sent miles out of bounds it seemed to me, to St John's in Kent Street (now defunct), where I was one of the few who wore foot covering. (162)

Cityscape is negotiated principally through the buildings and objects of the Roman-Catholic Church. Brennan's urban wanderer delineates the city as a circuit of its streets and parish schools, from St Mary's Cathedral, to Redfern's Convent of the Good Samaritan, to Surry Hills' St Aloysius and St Patrick's Seminary at Manly, out to Strathfield, and on to Rome itself. Catholicism, which was embroiled at this period in education disputes with the Protestant state hegemony, maps the political contours of the city through child's 'I' by creating an institutional topography. The scale of the map is further attenuated with a hierarchy of political rank. For *Curriculum Vitae*, the authority of the Catholic Church is absolute, a structure as rigid and as hierarchical as a military unit:

St Benedict's—where I was baptised—is indeed the senior parish next to the Cathedral, but though the Coadjutor Archbishop is supposed to reside there Kelly is the only one that ever did so, for Vaughan, until he succeeded, was the rector of St John's College; Sheehan is out at Strathfield. Now we had as our PP a Dean and Vicar General of the Archdiocese. His name and the figures of his last year of office is still to be read on the tablet let into the base of the monument standing in the NW corner of St Mary's grounds. (165)

Brennan lists the functionaries of the church: Pope, Coadjutor Archbishop, Vicar General, curate, rector, acolyte—men whose identities are positioned as increments of a hierarchy, but also as linguistic units in the great chain of being Catholic. This mode of placing the self within a hierarchy goes beyond mere affiliation, for positioning in this hierarchy is dependent on the accurate nomenclature of rank. Language, then, plays a primary role in generating subjectivity. So too Brennan's early education, which was carried out amid a bitter dispute between Henry Parkes and Archbishop Roger Vaughan over education.

Brennan subsumes his Irish ethnicity under the authority of Catholicism. However it is his identity as a member of the Irish family which principally inscribes his linguistic education. Textual initiation begins at home:

I got the elements at a dame's school. Three of these I visited in succession [during 1879]. But all the English I knew was learnt was at my mother's knee: and she used to go through my task with me every evening, and had a fine set of Irish National School Readers—I wish I had them now. (163)

Brennan recalls his early education as more than simple nostalgia: he negotiates his introduction to language through a desire to return to his linguistic origins. Origin is located in his mother's Irish National School Readers. They provide stronger links than their putative sentimental attachments by constructing a dominant subject position, and a moment of political resistance *against* the English. The Irish National Readers also provide a point of return, a return to a state of original, natural innocence at his mother's knee.

So language is political lever. It also carries with it a genetic coding outside of the family hierarchy. For Brennan in constructing the ten year-oldself, the genus language grows and emerges biologically. Language derives its genetic strength from rhetoric, but it is an endangered species:

Our English was 'grammar' of the old fashioned kind, orthography, etymology, syntax, prosody ... and copious parsing and analysis. I could never understand or sympathise with the furious attack on these disciplines. Certainly they involved some mental work and a bad teacher could make them dull. But are you training jellyfish or shall not the mind have spine and sinews as well as the body? All over the world the assault on grammar goes on and the minds of men grow flabbier—and dull teachers are still dull. (168)

As an order of things, the grammatical code is constituted as universal and natural. The code 'grammar' is an unchallenged global coloniser, which is currently (1930), under 'furious attack' from the enfeebling forces of modernity. Language is taxonomy, as the Church is hierarchy, a natural order of strength, competition and power, as well as the focus of the desire to return to an integrated rhetorically derived self.

So naturally, as it were, the function of language in *Curriculum Vitae* is institutional. But language is also linked to a powerful symbolic function. The language of integrated self is liturgical, at its most powerful when it is deployed in symbols of the Church. Brennan describes in two separate sections the rituals of mass and benediction in which he is a participant as an altar boy and acolyte:

On Sunday evenings in summer during Vespers, as the light waned, I used to watch the colours fade out of the window, until the body of the Crucified turned livid grey, then for a while the leads stood out thicker black on the gathering dark.

Next, the blaze of candles lit for Benediction and the placing of the burse. The burse is of no use during the service: it has, of course, the same colours as the cope. These were, for the groundwork a dull light absorbing gold, for the cross of the burse and the cape of the cope a deep ruby. I could never gaze on them enough. (176)

Colour, sound, smell and texture correspond with an order which is both eternal and institutional; colours fade and reappear, the body of Christ becoming clearer in the diminishing light. The power of the vision is mesmeric, a blaze of light and colours, and Brennan writes, 'I could never gaze on them enough.' The 'gaze' of the 'I' is returned in the panoptical gaze of Church authority which continues, although with waning strength, throughout his adolescence.

At the end of primary school, Brennan writes that he gained a scholarship for St Ignatius College, Riverview, located, on the Lane Cove River, north of the city. Lane Cove was the site of recurrent pastoral fantasies for Sydneysiders in the early twentieth century, and was prone to infestations of satyrs and nymphs, released by Kenneth Slessor and Norman Lindsay.¹ With the northward creep of suburbia, Lane Cove also came to represent a lost Arcadia which had only actually existed as lithographs or poetry. In Brennan's text Lane Cove signals an uncanny other to Lindsay's Dionysian picnic-times, a lost suburban idyll of language, love and music:

It is seven years ago that Vie and I used to go to Tarban Creek to Fig Tree and listen to the Angelus rung from all banks. Strange too, though I had so often and so far gone up the Lane Cove River by water, I had never crossed its upper narrow reaches by land until the day of her funeral. (176)

There is, however, no Eden myth without a Fall. Brennan professed no desire to join the priesthood, but went up instead to Sydney University, firstly to Law, then Arts. At this point in the text the Church is transformed and mediated by its other, the Protestant-dominated institution for the inculcation of secular bureaucratic self, the University. The medium for transformation of self is once more language – in the sec-

ond part of *Curriculum Vitae* language is represented by the institutionalised poetic canon.

Textually, Brennan's interaction with the literary canon, a 'foison of profane literature,' establishes the border to the authority of the church and poetic language provides an entry point to the other institution competing for Brennan's subjectivity:

History we did not touch, except for the misdeeds of Henry VIII; but that was a branch of our Christian Doctrine. As for reading outside, my upbringing was puritanical; there were books of devotion, no more. By chance, however ... there was a Byron in the house, and the bookcase was sometimes left unlocked. The Byron wasn't locked up until Father Cassidy made a visitation of my home reading. (168)

Riven with a guilty urge to know, the teenager breaks into his father's bookcase for the prohibited Byron (168), works which lead him from the confinement to Virgil (165), and other works sanctioned by the Church. Biology again determines the process: the adolescent not only breaks into the bookcase, but consequently 'breaks out' in literature, and discovers, at the same time 'Carey's Dante' (173). As Brennan writes through his adolescence, his reading becomes less prescribed by the church or by its politics. It is not Virgil who is Brennan's guide through the canon any more, but the great literary imperialist himself, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who makes Brennan 'all agog to read the books he spoke about' (173).

Within a year of his arrival at Sydney University, Brennan had renounced his faith, and started a lifelong experiment with various alternatives to his Catholicism. His uncanny and unresolved attempts at synthesising nature, self and language in *Poems* (1913) documents this experiment. However, the University in *Curriculum Vitae* acts in the text as the site of a conversion from faith to art, but is also the site of his expulsion from the symbolic Garden.

Brennan wrote extensively² on the Decadent aesthetic autobiography for the *Bulletin* in the 1890s, and the Decadent aesthetic has profound echoes in *Curriculum Vitae*:

Religion began to worry me in my nineteenth year: it seemed to me that I was lacking in fervour, that I was mechanically repeating a dull exercise. I seem now to have been searching, like any mere Protestant, for a religious experience which wouldn't come. (177)

Brennan's conversion from religion to art has an appropriately epiphanic intensity which in this text takes place over Christmas 1890, when he experiences 'a sudden collapse of all the barriers', entering the second year philosophy class 'a ripe agnostic, already beginning to elaborate a special epistemology of the Unknowable, which is the Absolute' (177). However sublime the conversion, the University stands as the institution where a loss of meaning and a consequent loss of self is enacted.

Crossing the not yet ivy covered portals (178), the commentary is abruptly interrupted by a series of blunt dismissals, utterances which remonstrate with the University, but are barely sentences at all. Language becomes suddenly insufficient to recollection. Consequently, *Curriculum Vitae* collapses the University years from a search for the 'universal Absolute' into a 'good time':

It seems to me, at times, as if Sydney University and a Prussian wife have been two great mistakes in my life, enjoyable as the good time was in both cases. (179)

Beyond that, unable to find any details, Brennan allows the text's lacunae to speak for themselves:

What more? I can't think of much, though I had hoped to find more detail. But really I am indifferent: Sydney University has ceased to be an Alma Mater and I claim no connection with it—I can say *επὶ τὸ πόντος ἐρητύει*—just as it was once a pleasant haunt, now a wilderness. (178)

His choice of Homeric analogy (which Terry Sturm translates as 'if only ...'; Sturm adds that the missing words in this expression should be read in the context of the *Iliad* as 'the natural expression of a sad heart recalling a former or happiness now lost as to seem to have been a dream') initiates a nostalgia for nature which the University actively builds against. The university is an institution where a desecrated language denotes nature's absence; the site of a ruined pastoral, a wasteland, and one figured as such from the first experience of it to the last.

As a twelve-year-old, Brennan writes that he went to Sydney University to complete the Civil Service Exam, and while there saw Charles Badham, Scottish born professor of Classics at the University between 1867 and 1884. Badham is for Brennan a mentor and a 'household name' (Brennan 1984) but in this context, there is something uncanny about him. Standing at the front of Sydney University Brennan writes that he

saw the old pond, still open to the road, with the busses from over the way washing their wheels in it and the dead dogs floating. I saw Badham, for whom I anxiously looked out—he was a household name. *Vergilium vidi tantum*. (1980: 171)

Classical effusions pepper this piece, but they sit uneasily in their context, surrounded by the detritus of provincial exigency (Brennan inserts direct quotes, in the original language from Euripides, Aeschylus, Homer and Ovid). The immediate contrast between the 'dead dogs floating' and Badham's scholarly person is highly comic, even more so as Brennan assumes the character of Ovid to Badham's Virgil, but these details mask a deeply serious anxiety. Brennan identifies Badham as an exile in a land in which culture, if it can be represented as such at all, might only co-exist with the trash of colonial life, and does so in particularly brutal language. The idea may remain the same, even though the stars may have changed, but Virgil may exist only alongside the institution's dead dogs.

In the last view Brennan has of the place in 1925, while the Botany building is under construction, the pond is again the site, this time the building site, of the Fall:

I couldn't find such a magic of rose odour there now, since they put P.N. Russell's monument just where the roses grew. And my favourite walk along the north side of the Great Hall has been ruined—when I last saw the pond it was full of stones and dust. (1984, 177)

For a colonising government constructing and enforcing Eurocentric cultural space, building 'culture' requires cultural buildings, and the disfigurement of Brennan's Gnostic rose garden by pompous monuments and Neo-Gothic follies enacts a final trauma of expulsion from language.

Or so Brennan may have imagined. Forty years later, and despite the acrimonious charges contained in *Curriculum Vitae*, the poet's presence on campus was permanently inscribed in the Christopher Brennan building, which houses history and languages. Brennan's poetry became similarly monumental, standing for a Leavisean 'thereness',³ a grounding of poetry in European presence and a link forged by the academy in an undisturbed continuum between romanticism and modernism, asserted as

such for its transcendence of parochial poetics.

The narrative of *Curriculum Vitae* tails off in 1892, to an unfinished silence with the postgraduate candidate Brennan sailing for his own Byzantium, the University of Berlin, still, as he says 'unable to speak German' (1984: 181). He returned PhD-less four years later, able to speak German, but unable to speak the self. Throughout the next thirty years Brennan tried to construct in language the symbolic artifice which could manifest nothing less than the 'universal orthodoxy of art' and the 'humanisation of nature', but as both a poet and a teacher of languages at University, the massiveness of the poetic task eluded him.

If, as Jonathan Sturrock argues in his introduction to *The Language of Autobiography*, the autobiographer seeks to tell of his or her own philosophical Becoming (177), *Curriculum Vitae* speaks of its subject's lack of Becoming, in terms of language, nature and institution. A sense of how powerfully Brennan felt the contradictions of such an all encompassing system, and a means of escaping them is contained in the final lines of *Poems* [1913]. In 1908 he is on his way down George Street, the spires of his life, the Church and the University stare off at each other, above the throng of the city at night. The poet can in these, some of his most powerful lines propose a language which can transcend the requirements of either spire, and share the 'old delight' of pre-linguistic poetry. Brennan addresses these lines to a future poetry:

... many an evening hour shall bring
the dark crowd's weary loitering
to me who pass and see the tale
of all my striving, bliss or bale,
dated from each spire that strives
clear of the shoal of shiftless lives,
and promise, in all years' despite,
fidelity to old delight.

Notes

- 1 See for example, Lindsay's 1909 pen drawing 'The Picnic Gods' and Slessor's poem 'Pan at Lane Cove.'
- 2 Autobiographies in this genre reviewed by Brennan include Wilde's *De Profundis*, Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* and Gosse's *Father and Son*, and although Brennan wrote his in the third decade of this century, *Curriculum Vitae* is written out of forms current in the 1890s, the period covered by *Curriculum Vitae* when Brennan's literary influences were still forming.
- 3 See, for example, G.A. Wilkes: 'A particular advantage for [Brennan's place in] Australian literature, as it figures in University courses, is that it is shown that it is tested by standards that are academic, not parochial or chauvinistic. It becomes part of what Brennan called the 'organic unity' of literature, seen by students in the context of the body of literature written in English, and in relation to the literatures of the European and classical tradition.' Gerald Wilkes, *The University and Australian Literature: An Inaugural Lecture*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964), p. 3.

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