

CHRISTOPHER BRENNAN AND THE RELIGION OF SYMBOLISM

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Christopher Brennan gave six lectures for the Sydney University Extension Lecture programme in Sydney in June and July 1904. These were public lectures, and the topic was 'Symbolism in Nineteenth Century Literature'. Whether they appreciated it or not, the audience were given a rare treat. Brennan expounded the affinities between Symbolist theory and German Romanticism in terms of one of the leading notions of esoteric tradition: the doctrine of correspondences. Although it is well known that the theory of correspondences was a fundamental tenet of the Symbolist movement, Brennan's interpretation of German Romantic theory in terms of correspondences, and his application of this interpretation to his understanding of affinities between Symbolism and German Romanticism, remains of continuing interest.¹ Brennan speaks as an insider with regard to Symbolist theory, whether or not we choose to regard his own poetry as Symbolist. The eminent Australian Mallarmé scholar Lloyd Austin commented that

Brennan's critical articles on French poetry and particularly Mallarmé, are still of great value and interest, and were remarkable in their time, having no equivalent in English, and indeed none in French.²

¹ For the importance of the theory of correspondences to Symbolism, see Michaud, Guy, *Le Symbolisme Tel qu'en Lui-Même*, Paris, Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1995, pp.397-400.

² Austin, Lloyd, 'Alan Rowland Chisholm: An 81st Birthday Tribute', in *Meanjin Quarterly*, 28, 1969, p.536.

When Brennan was studying in Berlin in the early 1890s, the work of the French Symbolists was gaining a reception there as a *Neuromantik*, a reworking of Romanticism and particularly of German Romanticism. In his article 'Christopher Brennan's Poetic', Noel Macainsh suggests that Brennan's discovery of the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé during his time in Berlin

was not made merely on fortuitous browsing in bookshops, but was prepared for by an already developing, local reception of these works in Berlin... The time when he was reading these works and 'some articles dealing with the symbolists' was also a time when the tide of *Neuromantik* was rising in Germany. There is a wealth of material to demonstrate that the reception of French Symbolism in Berlin was seen as a neo-romanticism derived from the German Romantics earlier in the century.³

In the Symbolism lectures, Brennan says that he thinks the affinities between German Romanticism and French Symbolism are 'deeper and more organic' than those suggested by studies concentrating on superficial resemblances such as 'the kinship of colours and sounds'.⁴ In order to explain these affinities, he introduces in the first lecture the doctrine of correspondences, a heritage from what he terms 'the mystics'. He offers the following statement of the principle from the Smaragdine Table of Hermes: 'as things are below so are they above: all things which are on earth exist in heaven in a heavenly manner, all things which are in heaven exist on earth in an earthly manner'.⁵ While acknowledging that this principle may be

³ Macainsh, Noel, 'Christopher Brennan's Poetic', in *Southerly* 44, iii, 1984, pp.310-11.

⁴ *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, ed. Chisholm, A.R. and Quinn, J.J., Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1962, p.105, hereafter referred to as *Prose*.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.52. For the provenance of the Smaragdine Table, see Faivre, Antoine, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, Grand Rapids, Phanes Press, 1995, pp.91-2.

‘simply the commonsense explanation of the possibility of all expression’, Brennan places correspondence theory in an overtly esoteric context, as part of a tradition of symbolism which includes such currents as Hermetism, alchemy and magic, Rosicrucianism and Jewish mystical Kabbala, along with Catholic Christianity and Gnosticism.⁶ It seems odd to us, with the benefit of the research of Frances Yates, that he does not mention the Renaissance Neoplatonists, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Giordano Bruno; on the contrary, he claims that ‘The Renaissance and Reformation almost choked the flow’. However, he emphasizes the contribution of Jacob Boehme and Emanuel Swedenborg in the period after the Renaissance and Reformation. These are the most important of the ‘mystics’ responsible, in Brennan’s opinion, for the influence of correspondence theory on German Romanticism and French Symbolism.

Brennan regards the theory of correspondences as an expression of harmony between the human mind and the external world. This is represented as an acausal, analogical relationship between the two. Wouter J. Hanegraaff distinguishes Romanticism from occultism on the basis of the reliance of the former on ‘a worldview of correspondences against a world-view of causality’.⁷ According to this distinction, Brennan’s point of view is based in Romanticism rather than occultism.

In the first of the Symbolism lectures, Brennan chooses three aphorisms of the early German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis as the most telling formulation of the doctrine of correspondences for his purposes: ‘Man is a source of analogies for the universe’; ‘Man is a perfect trope of the spirit’; and ‘The world is a universal trope of

⁶ *ibid.*, p.53.

⁷ Hanegraaff, Wouter J., *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, N.Y., S.U.N.Y Press, 1998, p.409.

the spirit'.⁸ All of these emphasize that the relationship between corresponding terms is a symbolic one, supporting Brennan's association of the doctrine of correspondences with a tradition of symbolism. The correspondence is a three-way one between the world, the human being, and the spirit. Thus, the doctrine of correspondences as formulated by Novalis gives a spiritual aspect to the material world and makes a direct, although not causal, connection between inner and outer worlds.

Brennan suggests that Novalis derived the notion of correspondences directly from Jacob Boehme's doctrine of 'signatures'.⁹ He was aware of Novalis' familiarity with Boehme, and makes a direct reference to Boehme's *De signatura rerum*.¹⁰ Recent scholarship, particularly by Paola Mayer, suggests that Novalis probably derived his familiarity with the theory of correspondences from reading secondary sources dealing with Neoplatonism, Kabbala and the natural philosophy of Paracelsus and Giordano Bruno, rather than from Boehme.¹¹ Whatever their source, Novalis' formulation of these ideas, and the conclusions he drew from them, interested Brennan deeply.

Brennan's second lecture discusses human imperfection as a product of the division between mind and nature, subject and object. This imperfection is the matter of poetry:

The first and most patent fact with which poetry has to do is the imperfection of our life: and this involves the contrary fact of its possible perfection. Out of the conflict of these two facts poetry is born: and its office is to exasperate or reconcile that conflict, indeed both to exasperate and reconcile it. The imperfection is in

⁸ *Prose*, p.54.

⁹ An equivalent term to 'correspondences'.

¹⁰ *Prose*, p.52.

¹¹ Mayer, Paola, *Jena Romanticism and its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme: Theosophy - Hagiography - Literature*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999, Chapter 5.

ourselves; the imperfection of a divided consciousness, a divided life; war within us and war upon the earth.¹²

M. H. Abrams points out in *Natural Supernaturalism* that Romanticism tended to interpret the Fall as such a division between inner and outer worlds, and that it owed this interpretation of sin and imperfection to the influence of ‘a Neoplatonized Christianity’:

Evil... is held to be essentially a separation from unity, or a division, fragmentation, estrangement from the One, which is reflected in a division within the nature of man...the fall of man is conceived to be primarily a falling-out-of and falling-away-from the One, into a position of remoteness and a condition of alienation from the source.¹³

The lecture Brennan began with a discussion of imperfection ends by referring to the Fall in its Neoplatonic and Gnostic aspect, as the entrapment of the soul in a material existence. This represents a religious point of view which deliberately sets itself apart from Christianity, and is nevertheless concerned with the relationship of the material to the spiritual.

At the end of the second lecture there is a reference to the esoteric figure of the archetypal human being. Brennan takes the Kabbalic figure of Adam Kadmon, the ‘Grand Man’ of Swedenborg, and the ‘Eternal Man’ of William Blake, as figures of the perfect life, of the Golden Age or Eden. In order to recover the powers of the archetypal human being, to regain the perfect life we have lost through the division of subject and object, it is necessary to reunite mind and nature. In the fourth lecture, Brennan uses

¹² *Prose*, pp.67-8.

¹³ Abrams, M..H., *Natural Supernaturalism*, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.151.

quotations from Novalis' philosophical fragments to develop his argument that the theory of correspondences offers a means of connecting inner and outer worlds, according to which the natural world must be 'read' as symbol. He offers 'We are more closely connected with the invisible than with the visible' as the basis of Novalis' thought, and comments 'But the visible is a sign and symbol of the invisible'.¹⁴ In fact, 'The world is a means of communication' and

To our various senses correspond so many different modes of the universe; for the universe is a complete analogue of human nature in body, soul and spirit. The one is the abbreviature, the other the elongature of the same substance.¹⁵

Brennan is interested in Novalis's idea that in art, the human mind can bring nature to self-consciousness by reuniting inner and outer worlds. He quotes 'Our mind is the member that unites what is completely unlike'; 'We are called to the education of the earth' and 'Nature must become art and art a second nature'. In the sixth lecture, what Brennan takes from Novalis is summarised according to two related principles: 'on the one side, an education of the earth by man, on the other, of the coming of nature to self-consciousness in man'.¹⁶ He continues:

I might find the same thing in Mallarmé, despite his absolutist foundation, when he says 'The divine transposition, for which man has been made, is that of the fact into the ideal'.¹⁷

It seems that Brennan perceives a similar notion in Novalis' 'education of the earth', to which humanity has a quasi-

¹⁴ *Prose*, p.108.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp.108-109.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.111.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp.163-4.

religious call, and Mallarmé's 'divine transposition ... of the fact into the ideal', and that this is the one of the affinities he perceives between Novalis and Mallarmé or more widely between German Romanticism and French Symbolism.

In order to relate the aspirations and practice of Symbolism to what he has drawn out of Novalis, Brennan introduces in the first lecture the idea of 'moods', and gradually develops this idea through the remaining lectures. He credits W. B. Yeats and E. J. Ellis with the first use of the term in their 1893 edition of *The Works of William Blake*. However, there are considerable differences between Yeats's and Brennan's application of the term. In Yeats' story 'Rosa Alchemica', first published in *The Savoy* in 1896, the 'moods' are embodiments of spiritual entities, given form by artists or magicians, much more overtly Neoplatonist and even supernatural than Brennan's concept:

... the divine powers would only appear in beautiful shapes, which are but, as it were, shapes trembling out of existence, folding up into a timeless ecstasy, drifting with half-shut eyes into a sleepy stillness. The bodiless souls who descended into these forms were what men called the moods; and worked all great changes in the world; for just as the magician or the artist could call them when he would, so they could call out of the mind of the magician or the artist, or if they were demons, out of the mind of the mad or the ignoble, what shape they would, and through its voice and its gestures pour themselves out upon the world. In this way all great events were accomplished; a mood, a divinity, or a demon, first descending like a faint sigh into men's minds and then changing their thoughts and their actions.¹⁸

¹⁸ *The Secret Rose, Stories by W.B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Marcus, Phillip L., Gould, Warwick and Sidnell, Michael J., Ithaca and London, Cornell U.P., 1981, p.143.

How does Symbolist theory deal with the transposition of 'the fact into the ideal' or accomplish 'the equivalent of creation'? Brennan's notion of the 'mood' fulfils the requirement stated in the second lecture for 'some activity of the whole man, some reading of the world in the light of our own totality, some complete interaction of man and the universe.'¹⁹

'Moods' are

...the furthest we can get towards a glimpse of the whole. They transcend ordinary life and consciousness, being the attitudes or gestures into whose rhythm the innumerable single thoughts or feelings are resumed.... The mood... because it implies a determinate energy of the self in a certain direction, implies a certain artifice, since artifice there must be in any presentation of the transcendent; namely a raising of the appearance to a higher power; and that is the definition of symbolism in so far as we regard its dealings with images taken from the ordinary world.²⁰

Symbolism, according to Brennan's interpretation, is concerned with the 'presentation of the transcendent' by 'raising... the appearance to a higher power', and this is accomplished in the 'mood'.

Brennan discussed Novalis's idea of raising the object to a higher power in more detail in 'German Romanticism: A Progressive Definition', published in the *Modern Language Review of New South Wales* in 1920, but originally 'handed round among his senior German students at the University as a sort of introduction to his lectures on German Romanticism' and dating from 1909 or 1910.²¹ In this

¹⁹ *Prose*, p.75.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.85.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.395.

paper, Brennan explains Novalis' phrase 'The world must be romanticized' as 'the identification of an object with its better self.'²² Later in the paper, Brennan refers to Novalis' idea of 'one and the same thing taken once in its ordinary power, a second time in its higher power.'²³ This is Novalis' equivalent of the Hegelian term *aufheben*, to simultaneously annul, preserve and raise to a higher level.²⁴

In his meticulous reading of the prose and poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, Brennan came to the conclusion that Mallarmé's use of images from nature fulfilled the Romantic aspiration to raise the object to a higher power. When Mallarmé refers to an 'equivalent of creation' in the suggestion of 'some new object, whose lack we deplore', or to the 'divine transposition... of the fact into the ideal', Brennan suggests that he is expressing just this kind of aspiration. In the first lecture Brennan offers in his own translation two passages which he takes to explain this process in more detail:

The principle of transposition leads us to take from anything nothing more than the image, just at the point where it is about to melt into a thousand others... by such evaporation this, which is the substance of literature, gains in purity. Language should not seek to intercept anything of the brute reality of its materials, which cease to be when once uttered: we are left with the essential, with that which, until then, did not exist and which it was our business to create.' That is to say, we leave behind us the unformed everyday fact, whether mental or material; we have to deal with the fusion of the two kinds in correspondence. Elsewhere he gives the rule, briefly and more abstractly: 'Institute a relation, with exactness, between the images; a third aspect will be

²² *ibid.*, p.385.

²³ *ibid.*, p.393.

²⁴ Abrams, *op. cit.*, p.177.

the result, fusible and clear, offered to the divination.²⁵

In the lecture on German Romanticism, Brennan suggests that Mallarmé contributed a ‘fundamentally Hegelian interpretation’ to the theory of correspondences in his version of Symbolism; it seems likely that he had passages such as this in mind.²⁶

When Brennan came to write an elegy for Mallarmé, the poem ‘Red autumn in Valvins around thy bed’, he acclaimed the French poet for his ability ‘to spell our glory in blazon’d ether spread’. This is praise for Mallarmé’s mastery of the poetry of ‘moods’, based on the principle of the correspondence of the human mind with nature. Brennan owned, and heavily underlined and annotated, a copy of Mallarmé’s *Les Dieux antiques*. This was a translation of Cox’s *A Manual of Mythology*, itself a derivative reworking of the seminal mythological theory of Max Müller, according to which all mythology can be reduced to solar myth. Mallarmé made few changes to the text, but one in particular is telling. In *La Religion de Mallarmé* Bertrand Marchal points out that where Cox made an identification between the god Zeus and the Christian deity, Mallarmé inserted instead a reference to ‘the divinity inscribed at the depths of our being’.²⁷ The spiritual world ‘out there’ had become the spiritual world ‘in here’. If the transcendent is, as Brennan says, within, then nature has its correspondence within the human being.²⁸ Symbolist poetry can speak of the ‘moods’ of nature as such a correspondence. By uniting outer and inner worlds through symbolism, poetry could become the expression of the transcendent self and ‘the unique spiritual

²⁵ *Prose*, pp.61-2.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.388.

²⁷ Marchal, Bertrand, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, José Corti, 1988 (no place given), pp.155-7.

²⁸ *Prose*, p.157.

activity of man to the exclusion of everything else'.²⁹ In Brennan's view, Symbolist poetry could be interpreted in terms of a fundamental analogy between the inner world of the human being and the outer world of nature, most visible in the analogy between the seasonal cycles and the passions of human life.

This is the religion of Symbolism, as Brennan understood it.³⁰ For Mallarmé, Brennan asserts in the fifth lecture, poetry was a religion, and should have a public expression.³¹ Ideally, to 'satisfy all our spiritual needs', the art-work should be both myth and drama, 'the myth written on the page of heaven and earth and imitated by man with the gesture of his passions; the drama of nature which is 'the assimilation of our inmost passion to the tetralogy of the year'.³²

Studies of Mallarmé's poetry by Robert Greer Cohn, Gardner Davies and Bertrand Marchal support Brennan's contention that the identification of the daily and yearly cycles of nature with human experience is a central preoccupation of the French poet.³³ Brennan's suggestion that the Romantic ideal of 'raising the appearance to a higher power' played an important role in Symbolist theory demonstrates that his grasp of esoteric and mystical aspects of German Romanticism and Idealism produced valuable insights into the French Symbolist movement.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.143.

³⁰ For Brennan's discussion of symbolism as a religion, see *Prose*, pp.158-62.

³¹ *ibid.*, p.145.

³² *ibid.*, p.145.

³³ See Cohn, Robert Greer, *Mallarme's Divagations: A Guide and Commentary*, New York, Peter Lang, 1990, pp.321-2; Davies, Gardner, *Mallarmé et le Drame solaire*, Paris: J. Corti, 1959 *passim*; and Marchal, *op.cit.*, pp.103-162.