

# Long Paddock

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*A Neurotic Reading of C. J. Brennan's "The Wanderer"*

I am not a generic poet, but a landscape-specific poet who identifies and creates taxonomies. Maybe this is why I feel I get so much out of symbolist poets, who, while hyper-investing the word – especially the noun and adjective – with symbolic implication, do so starting from a generic vocabulary. The tree being of a particular species, with specific local adaptive characteristics and so on, is less important than the implication of the signifier in language and in a socio-cultural context. Even a decontextualising starts at such points, with the veil of impression holding and withholding the hermetics all such poems contain. The reader's desire for decoding, the writer's desire to weight a word beyond syntax's expectations and directions, is a desire to give meaning and relevance to "all" that is unsaid. In my own work, I name specifically, and identify specific implications. This is not to say words don't then carry their own branching potential, their own *ostranenie*; of course they do, but they do not indicate some greater "glory" (in the Mallarmean sense) that might be obtainable as thing in itself – they are a resonance of actuality. If this is the case, I have no desire to imitate the symbolist poets, though I do feel a compulsion to translate them.

C. J. Brennan's "The Wanderer" is a split poem of place/anti-place and belonging/rejection. The final lines of the poem offer a resolution only in the creative self, in the dream. And here it is a liminal resolution – one in which "dusk" is the settling, where fixity is not possible, it is "somewhere", and even the self is paradoxically "far in me". The conflict between the ID and the EGO, however, is by no means straightforward, and the creative self and traditional self are more reconciled than conflicting. The poem could be easily mapped onto an autobiographical template, but its hermeticisms do not rely on such an exploration: the text is self-defining and self-inflecting.

The three neuroses I see as being pivotal to this poem are:

1. of fear of the dentata *and* the sexually "unresponsive" female and female-self – either to be consumed by the maw (the fertile child-producing entry/exit) – "a clinging home" (p. 99) – or to be shut out of it: "the earth huddled her heat/ within her niggard bosom" (p. 106). This also manifests itself as a gender crisis over "hearth" and "heart", of these being tied to each other but irreconcilable. The "wandering" urge is also license to "throw off the shackles", and there is an undoubted tone that will later be encountered in the 50s Beat "on the road" libertarianism. What astonishes is how many readers have failed to link the theme of liberation from the hearth with a male discomfort at domestic responsibility, or,

rather, the expectation that the female, muse-like, will maintain this while the creative male wanders in search of... It is a poem of sublimated lust and "lasciviousness". It is a poem of predation and voyeurism. It looks through the windows and mocks those who can't be both inside and outside, like the speaker.

The key seems to be in section 92, which begins "I sorrow for youth", with a lament for the loss of the maternal (the female redemptive haven) both in the wife and in the earlier mother. The lines "but for those soft nests of time that enticed the maiden bloom/ of delight and tenderness to break in delicate air" combine the motifs of ravishment and nurturing, creating the unresolvable dichotomy that impels the persona to wander, searching for what is ultimately not obtainable outside himself. The joy the persona finds in the breaking of maiden bloom is directly linked to the joy of observing the mother-to-baby gaze and desiring it for himself in permanency. This is of course unrealisable. Longing for a "deathless heart" as haven, he says, "where have I felt its over-brooding luminous tent/save in those eyes of delight (and ah! that they must change)". Here there are resonances or echoes of the tent of heaven as we find in the Isaiah and the symbolic pure azure skies of a Mallarmé in "Tired of the bitter repose..." Brennan's further neurosis over his relationship to Church and God is frequently echoed here, projected onto the female. Apart from the Biblical overtones of the tent image as "heaven as a tent" or God's dwelling, protecting and nurturing, we also have here the (equally Biblical) sense of the tent as a shelter that goes with the wanderer, *his* house wherever he finds himself. It is the symbol of the nomadic with a longing for permanency, and, indeed, for God.

2. of place and identification. H. M. Green in *History of Australian Literature* says:

I say literature, not Australian literature, for one thing because in spite of its physical framework there is nothing Australian about it except the birth and residence of its author; and also because it is too large to be tied down by purely Australian comparisons. The material setting of "The Wanderer" is the long and lonely journey between Manly and Newport as it was over fifty years ago: the sea on one hand; on the other low hills and a wide sweep of bush; a cold and windy autumn evening; Brennan used to spend his week-ends at Newport and he knew it all well enough. He has magnified the bush to a great forest, the low hills to a range of mountains; he could not magnify the sea. But all that is no more than a framework... (522/3)

Green might well be right in terms of the literal physical movement from which the poem derives, but in failing to identify the neurotic nature of Brennan's generics, or "universals" by laying them at the feet of a *revelationary symbolism* (my label), he misses the point as to why Brennan didn't use specific place references. The implication that specificity in some way limits a canvas of spiritual and creative explication, that, say, Latin or indigenous or hermetic namings of flora and fauna reduce the universality, the spiritual ontology, is entirely challengeable. First, specificity doesn't prevent analogy, and as various LANGUAGE poets will tell us, reading and listening should be work. Also, I think generics come out of the perceived limitations of memory (which I would challenge) – that is, in the sense that a mnemonic or refrain or anaphora or any other "aid to memory" might prove ineffective to recall specifics. Brennan is not universalising, but avoiding. Why? Anxiety about the "legitimacy" of the culture he is part of? Perhaps. Textually, it seems more elemental. The poem is driven by a

fear of not belonging, of not actually learning from what is seen on the way. To name is to lay claim. Maybe it's a poem that fears to lay claim?

Furthermore, the wanderer of the poem challenges all that might challenge him, tries to establish an authority against the small ideas of the "ordinary", and certainly the feminine. He plays with the idea of being "king" but "cannot tell if ever he was king/ or if ever kingdoms were" (p. 107).

3. a neurosis of spiritual conviction. As the wanderer trashes home, family, the mundane, God as godhead, he reconciles his loss and inability to be connected, to some extent, through nature. Soul, God, nature, become expressible as the art of the poem. The poem does not actually move in this way but repeats actions of denial compulsively. Interestingly, the poem is rhythmically calm, even when the sea "magnifies" (as opposed to Green's claim) but remains constantly anxious. This is not a poem of stabilising or, within the greater structure of *Poems 1913*, an autobiographical "lull" in the fury of disappointment and unhappiness. Rather, it is a systematising of anxieties, a patterning of these into a journey structure that is actually a mantra, a cyclical "self-speaking", a poem of therapy. Wanderer motifs usually follow the pattern of some wrong done to the wanderer, or some wrong done by the wanderer leading to an unfocussed or co-ordinateless movement that entails self discovery, catharsis, punishment, vengeance, or limbo. A non-outcome becomes an outcome. In this poem, non-belief ("if such there were", p. 101) results from the tests that might apply to a believer like Job, so it becomes an anti-religious but spiritualised poem. The void, the abyss, the illumination of a visionary whiteness, or blankness, or nothingness. Darkness is held at bay through self-perception: cognitive sense is enough to keep anxiety from consuming the self.

On the 6th of June, in my office over the York Town Post Office, I wrote:

I almost randomly open Todorov's *The Fantastic*, and read:

We saw that the "themes of the self" could be interpreted as so many definitions of the relations between man and the world, of the perception-consciousness system. Here, in considering the "themes of the other", nothing of the kind is so: if we wish to interpret the themes of the other on the same level of generality, we must say they concern, rather, the relation of man with his desire – and thereby with his unconscious. Desire and its variations, including cruelty, are so many figures representing the relations between human beings. At the same time, man's possession by what we may call his "instinct" raises the problem of the structure of the personality, of its internal organization. If the themes of the self implied an essentially passive position, we note here, by way of distinction, a powerful *action* on the surrounding world: man no longer remains an isolated observer, he enters into a dynamic relation with other men. (139)

Interrupting the journal entry we might note that in the fantastic of "The Wanderer", the persona is certainly considering the theme of his "otherness", and neurotically, of the primacy of his self-created outsiderhood but the implied tragedy of its necessity. Choice and lack of choice are in oxymoronic struggle. The wanderer is given and claims distinction, sees his otherness and "exile" as a powerful if fated action, and certainly embodies the romantic "isolated observer". Furthermore, his apparent Edenic-hunger, desiring or wish-fulfilment coupled with the constant failure to realise this (if ever,

indeed, “he” wants to), leaves him the isolated observer. Axel Clark, Brennan’s biographer, talks of the gushing sentimentality of “The Wanderer”. This I entirely reject: rather, the poem struggles with a masculine-feminine dichotomy in the passive self, and in being unable to reconcile the feminine in himself, the wanderer remains an unresolved, neurotic, and damaged figure.

As an aside, and as something to be explored further with regard to “The Wanderer”, Todorov argues that the “the fantastic can subsist only in fiction” (60), but his definition of poetry is narrow and genre-stricken. He notes: “The poetic image is a combination of words, not of things, and it is pointless, even harmful, to translate this combination into sensory terms”. We have to step outside structuralism, but the opposite is certainly the *modus operandi* of many contemporary poets writing in many languages, and what is more, I would argue that Brennan’s “The Wanderer” is a poetry of the fantastic. Even allowing for the regularities of poetic prosody, we do not need to read something as fiction (as Todorov says of Nerval’s “dreams”) to induce the fantastic. I would insist that the more controlled a poem, the more we should consider where the fantastic lurks.

The journal then moves to a draft of an “Un-numbered Graphology Poem: Fantastic”. It then moves to the following:

Which brings me to think of Christopher Brennan’s “The Wanderer”. I wrote a “wanderer” poem at Churchill (College, Cambridge) a few months ago. I have been thinking of the neurotic vis-à-vis Luce Irigaray. I recently applied this to a poem by John Boyle O’Reilly, “The Dukite Snake”. The wanderer and Todorov’s “themes of the other” make a neurotic misreading necessary. As I mentioned to Barry Hill, Mallarmé’s 1866 crisis was not religious or spiritual but domestic. There’s no room in the house for “genius”... At home, Tracy is feeding the kids. Her “loss” of time to the wellbeing of “the others” is my time to ramble, grow paranoid, concentrate my neuroses. Brennan and the domestic. I don’t need his biography, his 1897 marriage and what followed to see this in the poem. It screams. It is a poem only pretending to be quiet. It is louder than Lilith. Brings to mind the necessity of domestication in biographising. In autobiographising and making universal: the trick of the poet. Who are the real confessional poets? Brennan writes hungry for the domesticated, but not the domestic. He wants to sample but not be “trapped”. This is where the symbolic is purely romantic:

“Quoniam cor secretum concupivi”

or maybe memory is what enforces neuroses – loss and regaining. Like the old corner frames for photographs in albums – a broken but decisive frame. Narrative order, unsequencing the poems:

93            You, at whose table I have sat, some distant eve  
              beside the road, and eaten and you pitied me  
              to be driven an aimless way before the pitiless winds,  
              how much ye have given and knew not, pitying foolishly.

“Ye” – “he” addresses all of us. Emphatic. Retributional, God-like. Apotheosis. A replacement for the scriptures as Lilith was the first and was cast out, usurped. Back in 1991, I read Brennan’s Lilith poems and wrote my own. So, “ye” – not worth the pity. A hear-me-don’t-pity-me-but-pity-me scenario? A reconfiguring of

the Ego-Id tension through narrative distraction, rhetorical interlude – exchanging guilt, loss, failed self-image, with arabesques, gestures? No. That his domestic self is lampooned by his wandering self. A split. A public declaration, an oration, a soliloquy – a neurosis become paranoia. Loss, yes, but imprisonment too. We go to “unwitting lives” and “narrowing soul” and “short-lived summer’s mirth”. The dialogic loss and gain parry to drive out the hunger for the domestic. The initiator, the definer of the neurosis is evident in “I know, I had it and rejected it” – the speaking for all through the ego-defining initial (Self) experience. When the romance was alive before the nitty-gritty of living and raising children and *obligation* came into play. Until reality hit.

This becomes a megalomaniacal assertion on the surface that collapses – this is yelling out of the calm of the rhythm, a manic self-revelation – a laying open, a flensing of self by kicking against accusers like a drunk does when s/he is being evicted from a pub, their home. To claim the neuroses of sexual denial, onanism, loss of the domestic through violence to the idea of others and alternatives, to declare self other, to ward off “the other” – it is body-hating (especially female-body-hating). The last two lines of 93:

I have lived your life, that eve, as you might never live  
knowing, and pity you, if you should come to know.

That is, himself. Wander to avoid. The lines are fascinating collations of statement – axis – reply. Almost faux-saga verse structure.

The wanderer, in declaring position, is compulsive. Lament and accusation help define a position, a place that is contradictory and yet fixed in this, as he moves, giving co-ordinates in a shifting, unstable universe, through neurotic comparison, challenge, qualification etc.

Todorov writes:

It would be tempting, at this point, to relate our second grouping, the “themes of the other”, to that other great category of mental diseases: the neuroses. A superficial rapprochement might be based on the fact that the decisive role of sexuality and its variations in the second thematic system seems, in fact, to be rediscovered in the neuroses: perversions, as has often been remarked since Freud, are the exact “negative” of the neuroses. (147)

So, is there an absence of the perverse in Brennan’s neurotic wanderer? No, it is also evident and the two can be co-morbid. Case studies? An early life of drug addiction. Brennan’s poem neurotically indulges through announcement, and represses (textual) self-doubt through blame. There are also mild elements of psychosis in this.

Todorov continues:

Here is how Freud approached the problem shortly after his second formulation of the structure of the psyche: “Neurosis is the result [*Erfolg*] of a conflict between the ego and its id; whereas psychosis is the analogous

result of a similar disturbance in the relations between the ego and the external world" (148)

How much is denial and how much is repression in Brennan's "The Wanderer"?  
How much is denial and how much repression in confronting an exchange between co-ordinates between region/locality and an international/ist paradigm?

The love affair (the fetish!) between the ego and the id of Brennan's wanderer persona is the loved/the lost/the domestic – the GPO fixed – prevaricates between neurosis and psychosis:

97           What is there with you and me, that I may not forget  
              but your white shapes come crowding noiselessly in my nights,  
              making my sleep a flight from a thousand beckoning hands?

This supremely over-invested "symbolist" poem is in fact a romantic poem of de-aesthetics, a neurotic and sometimes psychotic battle of self and id. It was never a symbolist poem. Its lushness of self-doubt and its obsessive repetitions (words, motifs, sounds, shape and colour/light), its anxieties of loss and belonging, leaves the persona and the text itself trapped in a crisis of masculine self-possession in the struggle for ownership of the body of text (female).

98           The land I came thro' last was dumb with night,  
              a limbo of defeated glory, a ghost.

Brennan's poetry is supremely self-analytical. The poem's release is in the acceptance of the role of the poem in the life-role of the poet moving over physical, conceptual, and emotional regions to which he/it cannot belong. It becomes a poetry of anti-nation and spiritual crisis versus the pragmatics and promulgation of place. It is a poem of self in which the unified self is replaced with a neurotic and deceiving self, struggling to avoid psychosis, struggling for a "truth", a genuine revelation not of its own making.

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

## Postscript

Journal entry of 14th July, 2007:

Thinking of Brennan's "The Wanderer" and reading short stories by Philip K. Dick (the greatest English-language fiction writer of the last 60 years!)... Dick's first published story, "Beyond Lies the Wub" carries the lines:

"I find in your Odysseus a figure common to the mythology of most self-conscious races. As I interpret it, Odysseus wanders as an individual aware of himself as such. This is the idea of separation, of separation from family and country. The process of individuation!"

"But Odysseus returns to his home." Peterson looked out the port window, at the stars, endless stars, burning intently in the empty universe. "Finally he goes home."

"As must all creatures. The moment of separation is a temporary period, a brief journey of the soul. It begins, it ends. The wanderer returns to land and race..."

Now, Brennan's wanderer like all wanderer-constructs is a trope, a generic and genre construct (Todorov). Equally, the obvious link with Odysseus has often been noted. We might push the idea of genre further – it is science fiction. When Green talks of the possible physical location for "The Wanderer", that it is not mere construct of the intellect and imagination, and that it might lay claim to an "Australianness". I agree, but as he also quotes Hughes regarding Brennan mentioning the "Mediterranean" in his mindset (which Green attributes to the Australian sun) and the cosmology of his work, you get a merging of temporal and mythic co-ordinates. A speculative anti-fiction or a speculative subjectivity.