**Brennan, Christopher John (1870-1932)**

Katherine Barnes, Australian National University

Christopher Brennan was a poet of Sydney, Australia. Apart from two years as a postgraduate student in Berlin, he lived there all his life, from his birth in 1870 until his death in 1932. The son of a brewer, he was educated by Jesuits at Saint Ignatius’ College Riverview and subsequently at Sydney University. Returning from Berlin without completing the PhD studies he had undertaken, he found work at the New South Wales Public Library as a cataloguer until he was appointed as a lecturer in modern literature at the University of Sydney in 1909, focusing on German and French. In 1920 he was promoted to an associate professorship in German and comparative literature, becoming the first professor of comparative literature in Australia. In addition to his expertise in English, French and German literature, he had published an article in the field of textual studies in classical Greek at the age of 18. His most important work was simply entitled *Poems*, published in 1914. Many of the poems it contains were written much earlier, in the 1890s.

Brennan’s literary interests, and the literary influences on his poetry, were formed during his time in Berlin, where he discovered the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Over the next years he applied himself to grasping and elucidating Mallarmé’s work, with a depth of understanding that was rare if not unique in the world at that time. He interleaved his copies of Mallarmé’s prose *Divagations* (1897) and the Deman edition of the *Poésies* with a meticulous record of the various recensions of the works, an early indication of his later Yeats-like passion for the book as a material object.

*Poems*, Brennan’s most ambitious and complex work, was intended as a Symbolist *livre composé*. Its arrangement reflects Symbolist and modernist attention to form, using blank space, expressive typography and placement on the page to create a single work in five sections. Together, the poems dramatize the search for an inner ‘Eden’ or transcendent goal represented by the mythological figure of Lilith, often seen as a proto-feminist symbol. The long poem *The Wanderer*, the fourth section of *Poems*, expresses the alienation of the narrator both from settled ways of life and from traditional frameworks of meaning. The poem which completes the *livre composé*, entitled ‘1908’, records the observations of a protagonist taking a tram journey in suburban Sydney and observing the crowds passing by under the illumination of the newly-installed electric street lighting. The concerns are modernist, but the diction remains essentially Victorian.

In 1897 Brennan produced his most highly innovative work in terms of form and diction, a direct response to Mallarmé’s experimental work *Un coup de dés*. This was the *Musicopoematographoscope*, which Brennan describes on the title page as ‘The art of the future, the perfection of the past, the rage of the present’. This handwritten work, written partly as a joke and not published in the poet’s lifetime, uses multiple variations of styles, sizes and weights of calligraphy, reflecting Mallarmé’s use of variations of typeface, weight and point size in the *Coup de dés*, a graphical representation of musical counterpoint.

Brennan’s poetry introduced a Symbolist strand into Australian poetry which influenced a number of later poets such as Judith Wright and James McAuley.

**List of Works**

*Poems* 1914.

*Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope & Pocket Musicopoematographoscope* 1981. Ed. by: Axel Clark.

*The Verse of Christopher Brennan*, ed. AR Chisholm and JJ Quinn, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1960.

*The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, ed. AR Chisholm and JJ Quinn, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962.

*Christopher Brennan*, ed Terry Sturm, Portable Australian Authors, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984.

**Further Reading**

Barnes, Katherine (2006), *The higher self in Christopher Brennan’s Poems*, Leiden: Brill.

Barnes, Katherine (2007), ''‘With a smile barely wrinkling the surface': Christopher Brennan's Large Musicopoematographoscope and Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*'', *Dix-Neuf* 9: 44-56.

Clark, Axel (1980), *Christopher Brennan: A critical biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Farrell, Michael (2012), ‘Unsettling the field: Christopher Brennan and biodiversity’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 12 (1).

Hawke, John (2009), *Australian literature and the Symbolist movement*, Wollongong: University of Wollongong Press.

Kirkpatrick, Peter (2003), ‘The wanderer and the flâneur : Christopher Brennan as modernist’, *Southerly: The magazine of the Australian English Association*, 63 (2).