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THE IDEAS OF C.J. BRENNAN – A COMPARISON WITH T.E. HULME

Comparative literature offers the possibility of an immense bulk of secondary literature; for if all the possible terms of comparison were exploited, an immense volume of studies would be generated, and our Earth, thus loaded, would surely sink into the furnace of the sun, where, so far as most of these studies were concerned, a fitting and fiery justice would be done. Here in Germany, a land which still has room for a few more books, I have just heard of a young Asian woman who works for long hours every day, in oriental script, on the subject of "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the Korean Doll-Play". Being ignorant of this subject, I have no opinion on it, and can only presume that if this universe is a monism, the Supreme Reality at least must know of some necessary connection between these two topics.

My point in making these remarks is to hopefully disarm those sceptics who may point out that T.E. Hulme and C.J. Brennan never knew of each other, had no known connection, and that their conjunction here is arbitrary. But literary influence is one thing, comparison is another; and while the possibility of influence can be quickly established by giving proof of contact, direct or indirect, the validity of a comparison can only be established more slowly in the course of the comparison itself.

The main aim here is to reveal the essential features of Christopher Brennan's thought by reference to T.E. Hulme. It is thought that this is a useful stratagem, not only to throw Brennan's thought into sharp relief, but to link it with a wider context in which it may be discussed and evaluated. Brennan's prose writings, quite apart from his poetry, indicate that he is probably the most articulate exponent of Romantic doctrine that Australian literature affords. His theoretical position has found as yet little critical assessment.

The reason for introducing T.E. Hulme, the well-known 'Imagist', is that Hulme expounds clearly and tersely a doctrine which, at nearly all points, stands in sharp opposition to that of Brennan. Thus, Hulme, potentially, is of interest as an example of life and thought in accordance with attitudes that Brennan rejects.

Biographically, there is a certain overlap in the lifetime of the two men, but neither appears to have known anything of the other. Both of them spent some time in Germany and were influenced by German thought

in differing ways, Brennan by the early Romantic theorist Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and by the transcendental idealism of the arch-Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801) who wrote under the pseudonymn 'Novalis'[1], whereas Hulme was influenced by later writers such as the art-historians Wilhelm Worringer and Alois Riegl. Hulme was born at Endon, North Staffordshire, in 1883, and his published works, including his "Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme", consisting of five short poems in all, did not begin to appear in print until 1913, some years after Brennan's formative period and his "Symbolist" lectures of 1904. Hulme's *Speculations,*[2] his first properly expository work, did not appear until 1924, that is, not until well after Hulme's death as a soldier at Nieuport, France, in 1917. Brennan, as we know, was born in Sydney, in 1870, and died there in 1932.

The fundamental idea in Brennan's work is that of a universal synthesis, of an infinity of bonds which actually or potentially relate all things to a unity. The fundamental difficulty of man's condition, as seen by Brennan, is that men have broken this unity, are sundered from harmony, and must find a way to re-attain it. Hence, the inevitability of search, of "wandering". With Brennan this idea is expressed in various ways. The emphatic pronouncement, *"COGITATUR is the most comprehensive statement of the Universe",*[3] which stands at the head of his paper read to the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1898, is, epistemologically, the essence of the matter. That is, knowledge is the activity which ideally comprehends all things as a unity; this ideal of unity being a *causa finalis* of our search for knowledge.

The more poetic aspect of the idea of universal synthesis is found in Brennan's doctrine of Symbolism, which is variously expressed in terms of 'correspondences', 'analogies', and 'moods'. Brennan finds this doctrine in other writers as well, e.g. in Boehme, Swedenborg, Blake and Novalis. He writes:

> "Correspondence implies the ideal kinship of all things – a symbol of the final coalition of actual and potential, of transcendental and real, of idea and fact; a symbol also of the complete intercommunion and brotherhood. And as correspondence is not a thing to be attained by argument but only by the imaginative eye of the mind: by transcending the discursive mind, it symbolizes the unlabouring ease of Eden" (p. 167).

Brennan frequently quotes in corroboration of this view F.C.S. Schiller's *Riddles of the Sphinx,* in which a form of humanist and evolutionary pragmatism is developed.[4] Indeed, a perusal of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, an early work of Schiller's, reveals how much Brennan was indebted to this British philosopher. There is not space enough here to do justice to this influence, but some brief comment may not be out of place.

Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller was born in Schleswig-Holstein in 1864. He studied at Rugby and at Balliol College, Oxford. After teaching German at Eton, he returned to Oxford for his M.A. In 1893, he went to Cornell University as an instructor. His *Riddles of the Sphinx* was written under the pseudonymn of A. Troglodyte (London, New York, 1891) and was also offered unsuccessfully to Cornell University as a Ph.D. thesis. A new and revised edition appeared in 1910. Brennan's early theorising, particularly in his 1898 paper, referred to above, is redolent of Schiller's ideas and language. Schiller regarded all knowledge, even of 'facts', as relatively subjective and, under the influence of Hegel, he took the process of knowing to be central to reality, reminding us of Brennan's "COGITATUR" statement, given above. For Schiller, as for Brennen, such terms as 'reality' and 'truth' denote nothing complete and absolute; rather they are intertwined with human intentions and needs. Schiller emphasized the effective creativity of the human mind in organising the universe of human experience and thus making or remaking 'reality'. Man makes his truth along with his other values, beauty and goodness. Our axioms are never God-given but are man-made; they are not *a priori verities* but postulates or working hypotheses. Thus, in Schiller's view, man's activity is focal to both epistemology and metaphysics; he thought of his doctrine of man's making of reality as providing a perfect accommodation for Darwinian evolution. The function of philosophy was to preserve the grand synoptic vision, the ultimate synthesis. It is perhaps of interest to note that Schiller later came to oppose democracy and to support the British fascist Oswald Moseley. Here, one is reminded of William Baylebridge, as an Australian instance of the not uncommon association of evolutionary doctrines at this time with fascist ideology.[5] It will be clear from the foregoing that Schiller, like Brennan, stands for the ideal of unity in human knowledge and affairs, with man as the central agent in making this ideal into a reality.

Brennan, in accordance with Novalis,[6] and consistent with the will to unity, seeks to humanise the whole order of Nature, organic and inorganic, and to raise this to a religious value:

> See – for the wonder glimmers in the gates,
> eager to burst the soundless bars and grace
> the wistful earth, that still in blindness waits,
> perfect with suffering for her Lord's embrace.
>
> (Poem No. 12 of "Towards the Source")

Hulme, in contrast, speaks of an absolute division between the three categories: inorganic nature, living creatures, ethical and religious values. Failure to maintain the divisions between these categories can only lead in his view to aberrations such as the mathematising of life, or relativity in ethics, or, presumably, to the kind of formulation that abounds in Novalis: "God is of infinitely pure metal; the most corporeal and heaviest of all essences. Oxidisation comes from the devil". For Hulme, the categories of religion and the inorganic each have an absolute character and should not be con-

fused with each other. Living creatures, on the other hand, are essentially relative, and to introduce into them an absolute, such as the goal of perfection in Brennan's terms, is regarded as both unwarranted and the source of practical evils.

The conjunction of these latter two categories, that is, of living creatures and a divine absolute, finds opposing expression in Brennan and Hulme. Thus, for Brennan, the approach of man to divinity is attended by an intensification of feeling into ecstacy:

> Dies Dominica! the passion yearns,
> and the whole world and singer is but one flower
> from out whose luminous chalice odour burns
> intenser toward the blue thro' this keen hour:
>
> – this hour is my eternity! the soul
> rises, expanding ever, with the sight,
> thro' flowers and colours, and the visible whole
> of beauty mingled in one dream of light.
>
> (Poem No. 6 of "Towards the Source")

But, for Hulme, divinity stands beyond man, past an unbridgeable gulf, and is almost anti-vital in its absoluteness. The sense of the divine entails a realisation of the tragic nature of life, of its futility. Brennan, adhering closely to Professor Schiller's evolutionary humanism, can envisage a progressive incorporation of the divine into human experience, a long process, perhaps, but nevertheless one of incremental gains:

> "We cannot always content ourselves with fragments. When we broke up the old unity and framed the first concept, we began that journey towards the last Unity of World and Human, the great Fact and Idea in one, made up of all those countless *rapports* between ourselves and nature, which we now separately follow out. Such separate maimed human processes are only justifiable as *Vorstufen* to this synthesis." (p.11)

or:

> "But if the principle of postulation has any meaning at all, it means that the process has a goal. Man, the paradox, who is at once less and more than himself, the wanderer seeking for a home, is on a way, but not an endless one . . ." (p. 165)

For Hulme, the gulf between human and divine precludes Progress, "the modern substitute for religion". There is only repetition, the wheel; and not a spiral, either, as Goethe would have it – that is to "disguise the wheel by making it run up an inclined plane". (p.35)

It is central to Brennan's thought that the whole of Nature, organic and inorganic, can be assimilated to an absolute, to perfection. Everything

can be romanticised, or, to use Novalis' terminology, as referred to in Brennan's "Definition of German Romanticism", "romantisiert", that is, identified with its better self "with a view to its perfectioning". (p. 385) It is plain from his other prose writings that Brennan approves of the views he succinctly quotes from Novalis here: "Gott . . . er ist das Ziel der Natur . . . : die Natur muss moralisch werden." (pp. 392-3) God is the aim of nature; Nature must become moral. For Hulme, such conjunctions of disparate categories are "bastard Phenomena" (p.11)

A particular sub-class of this conjunction of the human and divine is the importing of perfection into inter-personal relations. For instance, attributes of divinity may be introduced into love between human beings:

> "Every beloved object is the centre of a Paradise.
> My beloved is the abbreviature of the universe, the
> universe the elongature of my beloved."
>
> (Quoted by Brennan from Novalis, p. 111)

For Hulme, such an introduction of perfection into human relations where it does not belong is tantamount to inviting expectations which cannot be satisfied. Where Brennan sees the possibility of divinity, Hulme sees the human-all-too-human aspect:

> "The sentimental illusion of a man (invalid) who takes pleasure in resting his head in a woman's lap – it is a deliberate act, work on her part. While he may feel the sentimental escape to the infinite, she has to be uncomfortable and prosaic." (p.232)

Brennan, we know, was disillusioned in love, and this is an important turning point in "Poems 1913".

For Hulme, the introduction of the idea of infinity, of perfection into human relations, depreciates the worth of the present situation by always positing a better state which is at some remove from actuality:

> "The romantic, because he thinks man infinite, must always be talking about the infinite; and as there is always the bitter contrast between what you think you ought to be able to do and what man actually can, it always tends, in its later stages at any rate, to be gloomy." (p. 119)

With Brennan, the parallel to this is the idea of romantic irony:

> O cruel spell the season weaves!
> heart-piercing smell of smoky eves,
> all, all is old!
> ironic gold that but deceives!
>
> (Poem No. 24 of "Towards the Source")

The nature of this irony, defined by Brennan in relation to Friedrich Schlegel, consists in that

> "it is at once a bitter acknowledgement of one's impotence to attain to the absolute, and a proud manifestation of one's freedom from the bonds of the temporal and particular." (p. 384)

Concerning the latter part of this definition, one can again find the opposing thought in Hulme, who maintains that freedom from bonds is an essentially negative thing, that, for man, "it is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him." (p. 116)

The Romantic is continually drawn away from what is present. He is drawn towards the past, the future, over the next hill, to almost anywhere where he is not. Or as Hulme puts it: "The tall lanky fellow, with a white rose, in a moonlit field. But where does he sleep?" (p. 236) Brennan's attitude to this kind of objection is the rather withering depreciation which he deems appropriate for those people who are incapable of responding to Ideals. For Brennan, man is under way:

> "A goal lies before us then – the state wherein man shall have taken up into himself the whole world that is outside him, and the whole world that is within: being intellectually above error, morally above the need for morality, and free from all discord: a state consequently of completed harmony". (pp. 45-46)

To which Hulme might well have answered:

> "I do not imagine that men themselves will change in any way. Men differ very little in every period. It is only our categories that change." (p. 58)

In keeping with the idea of unity, Brennan postulates a harmony between man and nature, organic and inorganic:

> "And the law of correspondences, as a general statement of all such harmonies, as a theory of their possibility, means this – that our spirit is adequate to the whole outer world, and that the whole outer world is a perpetual corroboration of spiritual fact. Between the two discontinuous orders of fact there is a perpetual nuptial exchange: the spiritual conferring significance, the material bringing all its wonder and beauty as a living body for the soul." (p. 160)

In his poetry we find human qualities ascribed to non-human things:

> . . . grasses ponder a vanished trace:
>
> (Poem No. 14 of "Towards the Source")

> Surely her longing gaze hath called them forth
> the bashful blue-eyed flower-births of the North,
> forget-me-nots and violets of the wood,
> those maids that slept beneath the snow . . .
>
> (Poem No. 19 of "Towards the Source")

For Brennan, such imagery is not an idle figure of speech, but, as shown

for example in his sixth Symbolist Lecture, it is everywhere a definite statement of fact, and "That fact was, in the case of each particular image or symbol, a harmony between some phase of our spirit and some phase of the universe." (p. 160)

This idea has important consequences for Brennan's idea of religion and its place in poetry. Hulme, in contrast, and as is to be expected from his denial of unity, rejects the idea of harmony between man and nature, as illusory, or as being of intermittent utilitarian value only. In speaking of the Greeks, Hulme gives an example of a people whose feeling of disharmony in face of the world had been destroyed by certain favourable conditions and by increased knowledge, by rationalism. In such people, a feeling of confidence expresses itself in their religion having "a certain anthropomorphism". Here, one thinks of Brennan's allusion to religion in "Poems 1913", i.e. the blind earth "perfect with suffering for her Lord's embrace." (Poem No. 12 of "Towards the Source"). Hulme maintains that this notion of nature and divinity as something answering to our own feelings is limited to Europe: "It is only there that the superhuman abstract idea of the divine has been expressed by banal representation" (p. 89). Other peoples have felt inexorably separated from the world. Hulme mentions the case of the orientals where this feeling of being separated from an unfathomable existence stands above knowledge, and not before it, as might be argued in the case of primitive peoples.

It is important here to take care in grasping Brennan's idea of religion, lest his known relation to Roman Catholicism distort the facts as revealed in his writings. In 1890, as stated in the "Curriculum Vitae", an autobiographical document in the Mitchell Library (Brennan pps. Set 334, Item 2), he was "a ripe agnostic already beginning to elaborate a special epistemology of the Unknowable, which was the Absolute". Some aspects of this epistemology have already been indicated here; chiefly, its orientation to a total synthesis. By this time, Brennan had become an agnostic, had abandoned his previous faith. In his Symbolist Lectures of 1904 he elaborated a theory of symbolism which, "as represented by Blake, Novalis, and Mallarmé, put forth pretensions to be not merely an art, but a religion" (p.158). He goes on to say that:

> "Blake scornfully rejects the churches . . . and puts his trust entirely in his own revelation; Novalis . . . but his Christianity is just a special outgrowth of his imaginative thought, just an adoption of symbols which were already there; Mallarmé definitely confines to poetry the whole of man's spiritual activity. And in this sense I am content to accept symbolism." (p. 158)

Before pursuing this idea of Brennan's further, we might contrast it with the astringent asperities of Hulme:

> "So with religion. By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism, your

> natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism. The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion." (p. 118)

For Brennan, all special religion is an inference from the presumed fact that the world is capable of spiritual interpretation, of union with us. He is struck by the parallels between symbolism, as he understands it, and gnostic theology, the essence of which is the fusion of human and divine. The mystics, who address themselves to this fusion, are called by Brennan "those higher mathematicians of religion" (p. 160) – a statement which, as we shall soon see, has a certain affinity with Hulme, but an affinity which, on subsequent investigation, will vanish. It is the mystics who, according to Brennan, have the only satisfactory explanation of poetic imagery. Why? Because the mystics in seeking to convey the nature of their experience "beyond all dreams of sense/enmeshed in errorous multiplicity" (Poem No. 27 of "Towards the Source") are driven to use symbolism, that is, to use the disparate data of the senses to represent a suprasensual experience. Each particular image or symbol, as in the 'Realpsychologie' of Novalis, represents:

> "a harmony between some phase of our spirit and some phase of the universe: the inner fact being corroborated, made more real to us by means of the outer, which in turn received its significance from the inner." (p. 160)

Here, we have the link between art and religion. For Brennan, art, poetry included, is necessarily an expression of the religious instinct since it is "a mediator between us and our perfection, . . . a prefigurement of the final harmony and perfection." (pp. 167-8)

In order to bring out the nature of Brennan's thought more clearly, it is necessary to note that " the final harmony and Perfection", the "mystical paradise", is placed in ourselves. The world is merely used as an "occasion and symbol of the ineffable" which lies within. At the heart of the ineffable, when the last veil is parted (as with the disciple in Novalis' "Temple of Sais") there is discovered one's self, albeit the transcendental self; hints of which the disciple may find everywhere in the "Chiffernschrift", cipher-script, of nature. In Brennan's copy of Novalis (Heilborn ed. 1901) the words "jener grossen Chiffernschrift" are underlined in red. "Man . . . is on the way to himself" (p. 165). The fundamental concept of art is beauty, and this, for Brennan, is "the only possible symbol of per-

fection", the ultimate union with one's transcendental self. Brennan also says that "Beauty is the occasion, object and symbol of a thoroughly satisfying total experience, . . ." (p. 172), reminding us of Hulme's "Critique of Satisfaction", which contends that there are absolutely different types of satisfaction.

In contrast to Hulme, the essential ideas to be observed here are the relative values of the outer and inner worlds, the essentially helpful and instrumental character of the outer world which serves to prefigure the paradise within, and the fundamental idea of art as symbolical of union. Hulme, as we have seen, finds that there is no helpful character in nature, other than what Nature permits man to project into it. Also, for Hulme, the region of divinity is inexorably apart from human affairs. There is no perfection for human beings. "The world lives in order to develop the lines on its face." (p. 229)

Concerning the nature of art, Hulme states that it is necessary to realise that all art is created to satisfy a particular desire – "that when this desire is satisfied you call the work beautiful;" (p. 84). He takes pains to show how the history of art demonstrates that the subjective side of art is never questioned, when in fact it contains basic desires that are mutually exclusive and that lead to different forms of art. Here, his ideas follow those of Wilhelm Worringer, the author of *Abstraktion und Einfuehling,* a text of basic importance in modern art-history, and with whom Hulme had some discussion in Berlin. The basic desire, which art is to satisfy for Hulme, is for permanence amid the alien and ceaseless flux of events. The religious spirit, sensing the absolute contrast between the endurance of divinity and the chaotic flux of the world, will feel disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, and will search for an austerity, "a monumental stability and permanence, a perfection and rigidity, which vital things can never have, . . ." (p. 9).

Beauty, for Hulme, as we know from the history of Imagism, consists in precision and, predominantly, fidelity to visual experience, not in the multivalent allusiveness and musicality preferred by Brennan. In this connection, we may mention a note of Brennan's in the Mitchell Library (Brennan pps., Set 281, Item 1):

> "AXIOMS – No. 1: We seek in Art what we ourselves are not. Example: I, possessing an over-lucid spirit, delight myself with what is vague and mysterious in Art; those whose minds are bemused and bemuddled, go to what is distinct and clear."

To which we might counterpose the abrupt formulation of Hulme:

> "Escapes to the infinite:
> (i) Art. Blur, strangeness, music
> (ii) Sentimentality." (p. 232)

That is, on the one hand, we have, with Hulme, a keen perception of the utter contingency of our place in the world, and the desire to allay the fear that this engenders – using for this purpose an Art which attempts to symbolically master the flux of experience by giving it forms that partake of the rigidity and permanence of divinity. On the other hand, we have with Brennan a will to immersion in the flux of experience, accompanied by the belief that the time-process has a direction and goal, which is complete union and harmony, prefigured by an Art which is allusive and never precise in Hulme's sense, since such a precision is necessarily divisive and contrary to the final state wherein all division is overcome.

Accordingly, Brennan rates music highly, particularly Wagner, who held that we need "a fusion of the various arts, . . ." (p. 47). For Brennan, it was necessary to

> "perceive the necessity of the rhythmical form of verse, since what is really expressed in poetry, the kinship of all beauty, is a system of harmonies and rhythms, the relations between all elements of beauty. And the directing emotion of a poem, in obedience to which these elements unite, is always expressed more by the music of the verse than by the logic of the words." (p. 17)

This is a point of view emphasized by Novalis and the Schlegels, in whose works the lute is always nearer at hand than easel and brush.

The contrary view is again presented by Hulme, for whom "There is only one *art* that moves me: architecture" (p. 238). Here the emphasis is not on the inner, musical realm, allusive of fusion, but on *space* – as essential for clarity and a quasi-geometrical form of art. In poetry, the important thing for Hulme is not musical suggestiveness but precise visual concretion, "Did the poet have an actually realised visual object before him in which he delighted?" (p. 137). For Hulme, metaphor is not to be sought for its multivalent quality, its maximum quantity of "correspondences" with the fusion process, but because it facilitates intensity and precision of "visual meaning". He goes so far as to say:

> "It doesn't matter an atom that the emotion produced is not of dignified vagueness, but on the contrary amusing; the point is that exactly the same activity is at work as in the highest verse. That is the avoidance of conventional language in order to get the exact curve of the thing." (p. 137)

This contrasting of ideas about art also involves differing attitudes to nature, as already mentioned. With Brennan, the emphasis is on activity, the use of nature for artistic purposes, to prefigure the inner world and its perfection. On one occasion, he says that poetry is "to be the fullest expression of our nature, the most complete energy we can command" (p.158). And, more specifically, he quotes Novalis:

> "Without prejudice to the universe and its laws, but by utilizing those same laws, I can set the world in order for myself and give it shape." (p.111)

The emphasis is on *willed* activity. This attitude to the object, the world, may fairly be described as extraverted, and is made clearer still by yet another quotation of Brennan's from Novalis:

> "The world has an original capacity for receiving life from me. It has *a priori* its life from me and is one with me. It has an original tendency and capacity to give it life. Now I cannot come into relation with anything, which does not conform with my will. So the world has an original tendency to conform with me and my will." (p. 111)

There is little doubt, from the context in which they stand, that these quotations from Novalis represent Brennan's own views.

Hulme, in contrast, sees the relationship between willed activity and art in a manner similar to Schopenhauer. This is, art is viewed as pure contemplation emancipated from the will. It means allowing reality to show itself without the distorting activity of the subject, and, for the artist, it also means accurately fixing this pure perception in an appropriate art form. The world has a life of its own, but the activity of the subject normally obscures this fact. "Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists." (p. 158) It is the Keatsian "negative capability" of an artist that allows reality to appear as it is in itself. The emphasis here is on the side of contemplation, of arresting the will in the interests of accurate perception of the world.

Space does not permit of pursuing these contrasts further, nor does it permit of reference to the various qualifications that should be introduced if final justice is to be done to each writer. Apart from the contrast of ideas given above, it should also be of interest to consider the contrast in poetical practice of each writer, as well as in biographical particulars. In this way, some practical hints for life and art might be drawn. For the present, however, it is hoped that the preceding remarks, despite their summary nature, will serve to bring into relief certain aspects of Brennan's thought, with a view to more refined evaluation.

NOTES:

1. cf. Noel Macainsh: Christopher Brennan and 'Die Romantik', *Southerly* 3, 1963.
2. The subsequent page-references given here in connection with T.E. Hulme relate to his: *Speculations. Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art,* Ed. Herbert Read, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1960.
3. *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, Ed. A.R. Chisholm and J.J. Quinn, Angus & Robertson, 1962, p. 3. Subsequent page-references given here in connection with Brennan relate to this book.
4. For a critical study of F.C.S. Schiller's philosophy, with an exhaustive bibliography, see: Reuben Abel: *The Pragmatic Humanism of F.C.S. Schiller,* New York, 1955.
5. cf. Noel Macainsh: Baylebridge, Shaw, Nietzsche, *Australian Literary Studies,* 2, 1975.
6. This aspect has been discussed by the writer in "Christopher Brennan and 'Die Romantik'", *op. cit.*

E.L. WHARTON

TRIBAL LAW

Kit McKay was uneasy. It was the chanting of the corroboree that worried her. It was different from anything she had heard before. Besides, during the last few days she had been aware of tension among the lubras who worked at the homestead. Amelia, Daisy and Sarah, usually merry and giggling, had been silent and morose, putting little effort into the work she had set for them.

Kit could not shake off the feeling of urgency, but what to do? On this isolated cattle station in the Northern Territory vastness was lost in the black night. It was wild rough country a hundred miles from the nearest neighbour, with no telephone or outpost radio. When Jim brought her here to Birricannia as a bride she was over-awed by the immensity of the place. It seemed more like a small township. There were quarters for jackeroos, ringers, windmill expert, book-keeper and the cook, whilst down on the flat the aborigines of the Wangi tribe had their camp. Kit was too busy learning how to run the big homestead and manage her staff to be lonely. It was only when Jim and the men were away mustering and she had no one to turn to in an emergency that she had such a terrifying sense of her aloneness.

From where Kit sat on the verandah she could see the flickering fires of the aborigines' camp and a single light burning in the hut of old Jack, the cowboy. Should she ask him to take her down to the camp? . . . but Jim had made it a definite rule that she should never interfere with the tribal customs of the aborigines. Perhaps the mailman would talk to them when he arrived tomorrow.

Again Kit heard the strange sound of the corroboree, the eerie keening wail of the women rising above the compelling, guttural voices of the men. A bright glow on the horizon heralded the rising of the maturing moon and suddenly it emerged spilling light and shadow on the garden and the bush beyond. She put down her book and walked restlessly up and down the verandah, trying to make a decision. Then she picked up a hurricane lamp and hurried down to the cowboy's quarters.

Old Jack was sitting outside, smoking a pipe. He got up as she approached.
"What's the trouble, Missus," he asked.
"Jack, you must come with me to the camp. I'm sure something horrible is happening."

"Now, Missus, don't go rushin' yer fences, they are only havin' a bit of a corroboree."
"It's a bad one Jack, I know it. If you don't come with me, I'll go alone."
"Well, I reckon the boss will flay me for takin' you there," he grumbled, "but I'll get me lamp."
"Hurry, we must hurry," Kit said, as they stumbled over the uneven ground. She kept praying to herself that whatever they found would not be evil.

Now they could see the figures of the men made grotesque by shadows, with stamping feet and waving arms. The gins in the background were slapping their thighs and moaning. It was all noise and movement and then silence.

Bungil, the leader of the tribe, approached them. He was a fearsome sight. Two emu feathers decorated his head and only the eyes could be seen in his broad face, which was covered with small white feathers, stuck on with dried blood. An apron hung from a belt of human hair around his waist and more feathers were stuck to his thighs. Whorls of gidyea ash covered his chest and arms and small leafy branches were tied to his ankles. In his right hand he held a boomerang and in his left a sharp-pointed spear. He spoke:
"Whafer you come up, Missus?"
Kit, trembling, could only point to the body lying on the ground. A beautiful, young lubra lay there, shining and smooth as ebony, and as still. She was dead. The whimpering piccaninny, tied with bark and hessian to her chest, was alive. Bungil, following the pointing finger, spoke again:
"Him finished."
Kit called out in horror, "Whafer you got that bubba like that?"
"Him finished too."
Jack stepped forward and said belligerently, "That job no good fella."
Kit motioned him away and turning to Victor asked, "S'pose you gibbit longa me?"
The huge aborigine stooped and untied the baby.
"Him yours now, Missus," he said simply.

Kit took the piccaninny in her arms. It was a girl. She turned to old Jack. "Bring the lamps. We must return to the house. She needs attention quickly."

Still un-nerved by the horrible scene at the camp, Kit found old Jack's quiet help a source of comfort. There were a few coals left in the wood stove in the kitchen and he quickly had a fire burning to boil a kettle of water and a saucepan of milk. Then he brought in a tub from the laundry. Kit bathed the baby and found her unharmed. She felt a surging desire to care for the tiny piece of humanity.
"Terrible small," Jack commented.

"But strong, Jack, and good lungs."

The baby continued to cry loudly, but Kit knew she must be thirsty and hungry and would probably sleep after being fed.

"You go to bed Jack. I can manage now, and thank you for your help tonight." She smiled at the old man, so bow legged from years in the saddle, sometimes cantankerous with afflictions of age, but good hearted and trustworthy.

Down at the camp the corroboree for burying the dead lubra continued, but now it had lost its sad note. She was not of their tribe and had been on walkabout when she died. Their law said they could not keep her piccaninny.

Kit had never longed so much for her husband's return. A month later when he rode up to the homestead, she rushed out to meet him. Clinging to him she described the corroboree.

"Oh, Jim, that poor baby! They were going to put her in the fork of a tree, tied to her dead mother. The horror of it still haunts me."

Jim looked at his wife, seeing her strength and tenderness and thought again how lucky he was to have married a woman who could meet the problems of their life in the outback with courage.

"Poor Kit, you've had a tough time," he said, taking her thin tanned face in his hands. "You did a brave thing my dear, in saving this child but you cannot alter the law of the tribe. You must forget what you saw that night."

As they walked up to the house Kit told him how co-operative old Jack had been. "Not a grumble about the milking, and I managed quite well for a few days feeding the baby with a teaspoon. Then a Qantas 'plane landed here on its way south. The pilot was very interested in what had happened. On his return trip he arrived laden with bottles and teats." She laughed. "Enough for half a dozen babies. But it has been a wonderful help. He could not have been kinder."

She led Jim to the cot on the verandah. Brown eyes, bright as an emu's gazed up at them. The baby's body clad only in a napkin was brown and smooth as velvet against the immaculate white of the sheet. Her tiny hands reached out to them and Jim thought, "a piccaninny is the prettiest baby in the world." He turned to his wife. "You must not become too fond of this little one. Her tribe will come for her eventually, you know. You will have to part with her."

But the weeks passed and they did not come. The happiness a baby brings pervaded the house. It was in the light hearted laughter of the lubras as they found innumerable excuses to be near the cot; in the touchingly innocent smell of baby powder and soap in the bathroom; in the absorbing routine of caring for the child.

The monsoons arrived and brought a miracle of green. Practically overnight the dry, parched plains became verdant pastures. Millions of flies followed and Kit was thankful for the gauzed cot made by the station carpenter. After the flies went to bed at night and just before darkness fell, she delighted in taking the baby for a short walk under the bauhinia trees. Her thoughts were of the child's future and how the task of caring for the baby would sustain her in her loneliness. Jim's warning was forgotten. She believed what she wanted to believe, that the tribe did not know of the existence of the child and would not come.

They came with the Easter moon, after the ending of the wet. The child's grandmother (a gentle-faced old lubra), a wet nurse and two men formed the party.

Kit received the news with dumb, uncomprehending disbelief. She looked imploringly at Jim and cried, "You can't allow them to take her to the rough life of a camp." Her voice rose. "She might die."

Jim's face was stern. "I warned you this would happen and she won't die. The aborigines are kind and good to their children. She belongs to the tribe and they have come a long way to claim her." He added in a softer tone, "They are waiting, my dear, do it now."

Kit held the small bundle for the last time. She stroked the curly black hair and kissed the soft brown cheek. As she gave the baby to the grandmother the old woman said, "You good fella, Missus, me name bubba longa you. Me name him Kitty Birricannia."

Kit searched for the right words to ask the grandmother to give the baby a chance of a better life, to send her to one of the missions to school. She seemed to understand. "Mebbee, Missus, mebbee."

The dusky group moved off at first light. Kit, desperately miserable, watched them go.

"Goodbye little Kitty. May the world be good to you." She tried to dry her eyes, but the tears would not cease. Hardly knowing what she was doing she walked down to the garden gate and on and on through the large horse paddock, before awareness of the futility of trying to walk away from

sorrow forced her to turn back.

On the homeward trudge she met a group of the camp children playing on the dusty track. Tommy, one of Amelia's brood, ran up to her holding out a home-made steam roller, minus its string.

"Missus fix?" he enquired.

She took the toy and at the same time noticed that Tommy had trachoma again. The child's eyes badly needed attention. Kit fought a constant battle against this eye disease when the flies were bad. She took Tommy's hand and at that moment knew there was so much more she could do for the camp children. Suddenly, she found courage in honest acknowledgment of the fact.

The cowbell announcing breakfast rang out from the house as she and the children walked back through the bauhinia trees. Overhead a butcher bird sang his glorious aria to the new day.