STRUCTURE AND THEME IN BRENnan'S "THE WANDERER"

The Wanderer is a sequence of 14 poems preceded by a Latin 'argument' in the form of a four-line stanza. Examination shows that the 14 poems divide themselves into two equal sections of seven poems each (shown by the presence of a blank dividing-page in the original edition of Poems 1913 but not in the 'Verse' volume of 1960) and that each of these sections is thematically related to the two halves of the 'argument', that is, lines 1–2 of the argument relate to the first seven poems of The Wanderer, and lines 3–4 to the remaining seven. The Latin stanza is not in any classical metre but is composed in the same manner as the following English lines.

There are some surprising regularities of structure revealed on closer inspection. If one associates Romanticism with inspiration of the kind that disdains fixity, premeditation, calculation, then some revision of ideas will be necessary; for in Brennan's "Wanderer" we find sentences measured out in fixed line-units, with the numbers 4 and 7 predominating. With small exception, these are not stanzaic patterns, and certainly are not obvious on casual reading. There are 14 poems, divided into two distinct sections of 7 poems each, with a predominance of 7 and 4 line sentences carefully balanced in meaning and content against each other. These basic unit-sentences are sometimes divided exactly at the mid-point by caesura, and there is a corresponding division and balance of content. There is a strong suggestion of Hermeticism, of Pythagorean or Kabbalistic number-mysticism. It is significant that this respect for certain numbers and exact contrasting of matter, this seemingly esoteric quantification, breaks down in the last two poems of the cycle, numbers 13 and 14, where there is a wavering and doubt about any certain resolution of the poet's quest.

To illustrate this aspect of regular quantification and balancing of themes, two Figures are offered. The sentence-lengths, in numbers of lines, are given, but not to scale. A highly condensed statement of the matter of each sentence is shown above the line corresponding to the sentence. In this way, a sort of 'conceptual framework' of each half of the cycle is given. While there may be more elegant ways of depicting the situation, the present Figures should suffice to show some basic features of the structure. It goes without saying that there is a considerable wealth of orderly detail not shown and, indeed, not capable of being shown by this method. In particular, the interrelationships between individual poems within the half-cycle and between poems in different half-cycles are important. For instance, it would be possible to show the 14 poems uniformly distributed on a graph, a sort of sine-wave, with the first seven of the half-cycle shown below the horizontal axis, with No. IV at the nadir, and the second group of seven poems above the axis, with No. XI at the zenith. Affrighting as this may be to those purists who abhor the application of technology to the free flow of the 'spirit', it would be useful in suggesting further regularities in the overall structure, e.g., the nadir-zenith correspondence of poems IV and XI, the introversion character of the first half-cycle as a whole, against the more extraversion character of the second half-cycle.

The first section (Poems I–VII) articulates the theme of wandering and the counter-theme of home, allowing these to engage with each other in varying tension. The second section (Poems VIII–XIV) modulates these
themes onto a changed and higher basis. They undergo repetition and gain a manifold symbolism, changing and deepening in new contexts. Accompanying these changes are changes in rhythm and metrical detail from line to line.

Some comments on the individual poems now follow, starting with the first half-cycle and Fig. 1.

The first poem of The Wanderer (No. 86) expands on the motif *quoniam cor secretum concupivi*. It is divided into two equal sentences of seven lines each, plus a further seven lines divided into two sentences of three and a half lines each. The sequence of these four sentences is matched by the sequence of tenses: early past, recent past, present, and future. The five-stress line changes character with the tenses.

The mood of the poem, as indeed of the whole cycle, is set by the opening words:

“When window-lamps had dwindled, then I rose and left...”

The alliteration emphasises the image—the window divides him from the lamps, he is outside; the lamps ‘dwindled’, and this is the occasion of his rising up and leaving. There follows a comparison of old and present paths, in which the image of the window-lamps, together with the ‘olden path’, suggests altar-lights and the way of the Church. We then learn that he has walked all night and was alone. But dawn is at hand; he hears a restless sea, and the flood of night is thinned. The dawn to come is feared as horrible and revelatory of a crude, inhospitable landscape. Here, there is already an anticipation of the last poem of the cycle. At the end of this first poem, the poet’s vision is outwards, to the future and the sea. This contrasts with the opening of the next poem where the direction is reversed; ships are coming into port, “glad of the shore”.

The second poem is composed of two equal sentences of seven lines each, plus two lines in the centre of the poem, coupling the others and the poet, on opposing sides of the shore-line—a nice example of formal balance of meaning and structure. The first sentence treats of the Others, “people crowding to their rail, glad of the shore...”, while the second sentence refers primarily to the poet himself. He is envious of the Others for the winds have “swept their hearts of the old irksome thoughts...” and “each land smiles a good home” to them. The poet questions his envy but admits that he “would spread the sail to any wandering wind” if he might find a welcome and rest. This is the aim of wandering, not to see “many lands and peoples and the sea”, but to find rest. The end of the poem brings us back to “this night” of waves and rain.

The third poem is also closely structured. It is composed of two sentences, of seven lines and four lines. The first sentence is exactly halved thematically, as is the second. The last half of the second sentence announces a reality which affirms the despair of the first half of the first sentence. These lines embrace a thematic contrast made up of the dream-allusions of the second half of the first sentence, and the “bitter wind” of reality in the first half of the last sentence. The mood is intensified. The desire to wander, expressed at the end of the preceding poem, now becomes the admission that the poet is driven. We note that the “bitter wind” that
shakes his heart comes from the “yellow-pale west”. This colour and direction associate with what is sere, old, and failing. This wind malevolently cries over him that he will roam forever. The role of rhyme, half-rhyme and internal rhyme could be noted here too.

With the fourth poem (No. 89), the lowest ebb of the wanderer’s courage is reached. Like the poem that follows, it has a stanzaic pattern and a regularity that contributes to the state of ennui it expresses. There is the static effect of brace-rhyme and the triple rhyme on “rain”. In contrast to the preceding poems, this poem does not directly link on to its neighbours, before and after, but is thematically closed in on itself, representing a dejected pausing in the midst of wandering. The “tame heart” of the first sentence is repeated in the last, in a mood of dispirited inwardness.

The fifth poem continues this mood but the lines become slightly more animated as the poet’s gaze passes from past, to present and to future. The ‘wandering’ theme stirs again.

Two equal seven-line sentences make up the next poem (No. 91), the first being retrospective of the poet’s past, the second reflecting the present and passing on to affirmation of wandering. The forward movement is now stronger and there is a growing self-possession of the poet confronted by his fate.

The seventh poem, completing the half-cycle, is essentially a recapitulation of the sequence so far. Again, we find two seven-line sentences, except that the latter sentence has an additional line announcing the theme of the second half of the poem. The first sentence is again retrospective, and alludes to the experience underlying the Lilith-sequence speaking of ‘sorrow for youth’, ‘maiden bloom’ and ‘her eyes in the rosy face that bent over our first babe!’. The second sentence invokes a nocturnal ‘Liebesmystik’ akin to that of Novalis, with an apparent fusing of wifely, maternal and religious imagery. There is a longing for the healing and salvation only found “in her eyes to whom we ran with our childish joy”. A raising and broadening of the meditation suggests that a degree of awakening, an emergence, is near. The situation of the poet in the world is beginning to be seen more consciously from the standpoint gained through the preceding development. With the twelfth line, beginning ‘O brother!’, there is an appeal to the Others. The wanderer, as Brennan has stated elsewhere (Prose p. 165), is on the way to himself, the essence of his experience being to bring the transcendental self from its latency, “to make it explicit and thereby to produce more harmony into the world and into our consciousness . . .”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Guest Rcistle From the Plain of Wreck of past Dreams vanished Disowned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Doubts, but continues Past Challenge Loneliness of Way Fair Seal</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Peace is fled</td>
</tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Still haunted by despair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>No miracle of night remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Night is death</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wander</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>To stay Others told they must Go!</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Poet's witness to Others. Prophecy to Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Others bound by dreams</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Criticism of Others</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Others pay Poet</td>
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Figure 2: Ordering of sentence-lengths and themes in second half of The Wanderer.
With the second half of the cycle, beginning with the eighth poem (No. 93), there is a thematic turning from an inward concern with the poet's own experience, outward to the Others, who are described as not understanding the development the poet has undergone. The first three poems of this section (Nos. 93-95) increasingly define the poet's position relative to the Others. There is an increasing taunting and challenging of the Others, of those who think they can shelter from natural forces. Various resonances suggest themselves here. There is the obvious allusion to false security against the normal vicissitudes of personal life, and possibly there is also a sense of political and social upheaval intuited from tensions leading to World War I, but, in addition, it appears that the poet is projecting a message onto the Others, a message that is really directed to himself—a chiding of his own lack of resolution, and an attempted strengthening of his resolve by a castigation of the limits of the Others.

In the opening poem, there are three sentences symmetrically arranged. The first and last sentence, each of four lines, treat of 'pity': firstly, the pity of the Others for the poet, and lastly, the pity the poet has in return. A central sentence of eight lines contains a reflection on the Others, on the limited round of their life, which is the occasion of the poet's pity of them.

The following poem (No. 94) is preceded by a separate line which places the poem as an appeal to the Others. The 20-line poem divides into two 10-line sections, the first section linking thematically with the centre of the preceding poem, and continuing the criticism of the Others who seek safety in creature comforts and restricted vision, uncaring of the night outside, while the second section passes to the poet’s testimony, as one who has come from ‘outer night’ and has seen the natural powers that threaten the Others in their sleep of ignorance. The Others will wake to find their world broken by powers beyond their comprehension.

The succeeding poem, again addressed to the Others, is the most doctrinal and prescriptive of the entire cycle. It begins with a four-line sentence, a challenging cry to the Others, and asking them if there is a ‘master’ of natural powers. The next two lines answer that there is no master—“all is a strife of the winds”. The succeeding two lines (7,8) declare that the Others are bound by dreams, whether they will it or not. This is followed by a seven line sentence, telling the Others that they must become wanderers and experience the natural powers in their own lives. The final four lines are divided into two sections, each headed by the imperative “Go”. This completes the admonition of the Others. They are told to go, to endure the rigours of wandering, for to stay is death. As throughout the cycle, the motifs of wind and rain are stressed.

The eleventh poem (No. 96) is composed of one sentence of 16 lines that resolves itself thematically into two four-line sections and an eight-line section. The ‘dawns of the world’ are evoked at first and are then succeeded by the image of dark, shrinking from the touch of light, to leave “a home-less light, staring, disconsolate, / on the dream world it knows too well, the world / it fled and finds again . . . ” The last section of the poem depicts the mockery of light by darkness, its malicious and evil character. This
poem also stands in symmetrical contrast with the fourth poem of the cycle and likewise represents a pause, a turning-point. The subjection and ennui of the fourth poem, with its motifs of rain and night approaching, is replaced by an attitude of full consciousness and an imagery of the world’s shapes, seen not at evenings but at dawn.

In the last three poems of the cycle (Nos 97–99), the poet descends within himself to an uneasy acceptance of his lot as a wanderer in the world of nature and the world of Others.

In the twelfth poem, divided into three symmetrical sentences of three, four and three lines respectively, the spirit of the night is evoked once more, as a sea of white shapes and hands invading his sleep. The night, the sea, is likened to black maws of hunger. The poet yearns to bring this experience to rest while confessing that “all my peace is fled . . .”.

The thirteenth poem grows in mood from the end of the twelfth, although with different imagery. The gain in consciousness achieved by the poet is still not assured. He is wrung with the hopes and dreams of the past. His pain is immense. Yet, on balance, the new standpoint prevails. At first, he looks backwards, confesses the loneliness of the way, then remembers the challenge of the past and draws enough strength to continue on, uncertain, but hoping for some glory even in defeat.

The final poem begins with the confession that the land the poet has passed through was “dumb with night”, a limbo, a ghost; the past is wrecked, dreams have vanished. He is now a disoriented wanderer, indifferent to opposites, acknowledging that the “heart” he seeks is withheld, and finding, with this acknowledgement, a momentary easing of his burden. For we notice in this last poem that it is “a clear dusk” that settles “somewhere, far in me”. It is not a light or a dawn, suggestive of the illumination that follows on the surpassing of “opposites”, as in Hindu doctrine, when the “One” is seen — rather, Brennan’s imagery appears as the apt expression of the poet’s ambiguous state: like the “clear grey day” of his emergence in the ninth line, his contemplation of the failure to attain to the “heart” he has quested for culminates in the settling of “a clear dusk”, that is, a clear fading of hope. But this is attended by peace, given as a momentary settling of the winds, which follows on relinquishing the strain of the quest. Nevertheless, both images, of the winds and dusk, indicate a contrary condition, namely that the winds will rise and night will fall again. The poet is not free of his old obsession but has merely gained on it enough to obtain a respite. That substantial progress has been made, there is no doubt, but it is also clear that the wanderer is not free but is still driven, is no happy Wandersmann but a haunted exile ill-adapted to the world about him.

This conclusion, apropos the 14th poem of the Wanderer, first published in 1902, is borne out by the last poem of Poems 1913, written in 1913, where he plainly indicates his “fidelity to old delight” and writes:

“long is the way till we are met where Eden pays her hoarded debt and weare orb’d in her . . .” (Verse, p. 174)

Again and again, with Brennan, we find the desired object is envelopary,
that the poet desires to be surrounded, enfolded in 'her'. We notice also
that he finds no understanding in the world—and nothing so completely
enfolds us with love and understanding as the mother.

One is loathe to bring psychology into play, but it does look as if
Brennan had a troublesome mother-bond, and that the Wanderer, from one
important aspect at least, is the poetic precipitate of a struggle against
an incestuous, retrogressive longing. The pressure, the sense of being driven,
is expressive of the acuteness of a conflict for independence, to break all
sentimental connections with the life-inhibiting haven of the past. One
thinks of Nietzsche's words in "Human, All too human":

“One may suppose that a mind, in which the ‘type of free mind’ is
to ripen and sweeten at maturity, has had its decisive crisis in a great
detachment, so that before this time it was just so much the more a
fettered spirit and appeared chained forever to its corner and its pillar.
What binds it most firmly? What cords are almost untearable? Among
human beings of a high and exquisite type, it would be duties: that
reverence, which is suitable for youth, that modesty and tenderness for
all the old honoured and valued things, that thankfulness for the
earth from which they grew, for the hand which guided them,
for the shrine where they learnt to pray: their loftiest moments
themselves come to bind them the firmest, to obligate them the most
permanently. The great detachment comes suddenly for people so
bound.

‘Better to die than to live here’ — thus rings the imperative voice of
seduction: and this here, this ‘at home’ is all that it (the soul) has
loved until now! A sudden terror and suspicion against that which it has
loved, a lightning flash of scorn towards that which is called ‘duty’, a
rebellious, arbitrary, volcanic, impelling desire for travelling, for strange
countries, estrangements, coolness, frigidity, disillusionments, a hatred of
love, perhaps a sacrilegious touch and glance backwards there where just
now it adored and loved, perhaps a blush of shame over what it has just
done, and at the same time an exultation over having done it, an
intoxicating internal joyous thrill, in which a victory reveals itself—a
victory, but the first triumph. Of such woe and pain is formed the
history of the great detachment. It is like a disease which can destroy
men, — this first eruption of strength and will towards self-assertion.”

The journeying, the wandering, is a quest for the other, for the meaning
of life that lies in union with ‘her’. That the sought object is feminine
is not surprising, and that her characteristics are ambiguous is to be
expected. Indeed, when, as in the seventh poem, we get a fairly clear
glimpse of the actual maternal character of the woman, whether as personal
wife, or mother, we find that the poet is close to relief from the bond,
the exact nature of whose object has hitherto been guarded from
consciousness.

That Brennan had some knowledge of the Unconscious and its value for
the integration or maturation of the personality is plain from his 1903
address on “Philosophy and Art” (Prose, p.45).

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But it would be naive to think that the poet’s burden would be cast from him all at once, without many a further gaze backwards and the inevitable comparison of past and hoped for glory with the first and shaky stages of a grey and fledgling maturity.

Nor should the allusion to a mother-bond be taken as an easy way of disposing of all problems of ‘wandering’ — for the process of integration of the personality, whether in modern psychological terms, or in those of Brennan, is that of a never-ending process and is the perennial concern of all culture. That Brennan should have been drawn to consider Gnostic and Hindu ideas of cyclic return, in the course of his questing for the perfectioning of the self, is inevitable. That he seems, however, never to have freed himself wholly from the trauma of his battle with the mother-imago is to be regretted, for it is arguable that he may then have achieved that application of Art to life mentioned in his letter to Dowell O’Reilly (undated, vide Wilkes, Southerly 4, 1970) — a statement which recalls that brilliant associate of Freud, Otto Rank, who wrote in his Art and Artist, 1930, . . . “The creative type who renounces this protection by art and can devote his whole creative force to life will be the first representative of the new human type, and in return for this renunciation will enjoy, in personality-creation and expression, a greater happiness.”

It is a common assumption in modern times, under the influence of the idea of the Unconscious, that this is the source of our creative ability, whereas in fact the Unconscious is a strait-jacket which, while it may produce the need to create, also compels us to a sterile round of obsessively repeated conflictual expression. Where unconscious influences predominate, the creative process becomes synonymous with a neurotic process—creatively transforms the unconscious conflict into a symbolic form that is socially and artistically acceptable. However, when the artist, through his work and life, helps his audience to deepen their self-understanding, he has contributed to real cultural progress. If he seeks to express his own conflict artistically, he is pursuing a valuable aim and demands respect even if he is not wholly successful. His failure to reach complete resolution of conflict is all too understandable and goes to prove the immaturity of our entire culture, to whose processes of up-bringing and education we are all exposed. Lamed and confused by inner and outer impediments, the artist is often driven to unintended compromises which serve more to obscure the nature of his conflict than to enlighten it. And this too, is a defect in Brennan’s work, that so much of his expression, the recondite allusions and obscurities, serve the reader as instinctively grasped defence against identification with the central problem, thus allowing the work to be put aside as a period piece, an unhappy item of Victoriana. But this criticism applies less to The Wanderer than to other parts of “Poems 1913” and explains why it is the more preferred of Brennan’s works. The Wanderer is a failure in that it breaks off too soon, shows us no clear victory but only the immense agony and sweep of the struggle. It expresses a process, one that stops at the uncertainly gained threshold of new life. That Brennan never won his way further is regrettable and seems attributable to that very fineness of character which as Nietzsche suggests in the quotation above, is an impediment to the necessary sundering of “cords almost untearable”.

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The poet, as hero, has valiantly struggled "towards the last hope of a glory won in defeat" and has achieved his glory in the paradoxical way so often the case with artists, where, in the narrow sense, the work and the life are a failure, but in the larger sense a lasting triumph.

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1 The numbering given is that of the "Verse" volume. Angus & Robertson 1960.