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CHARLES BRASCH AND THE BETRAYAL OF ROMANTICISM

by *Joost Daalder*

A number of years ago, in "Disputed Ground" in the Poetry of Charles Brasch' (*Landfall* 103) I argued that Vincent O'Sullivan had been wrong to suggest that Brasch's allegiance was to the physical world, and not to spiritual powers.

I would still maintain that Brasch wrote a good many poems which bear out my contention that his loyalties were about equally divided. What I failed to do, however, was to make plain that the spiritualizing influence of Wordsworth and Shelley was a more marked feature of Brasch's early poems than his later ones. It would obviously be a simplification to suggest that this development went in a straight line (my *Landfall* essay showed that this was not so), but some of the poems which support O'Sullivan's contention demonstrate that the movement was well under way before it culminated in Brasch's last volume, *Home Ground* (ed. Alan Roddick, Caxton, Christchurch, 1974), which for a proper view of his overall achievement is so important that it warrants a fairly detailed separate discussion.

First, however, we need to see that achievement in the larger perspective in which our earlier discussion together with the present one will enable us to place it.

Despite what appears to be Allen Curnow's view of New Zealand literature (or at any rate that of his generation) as something that is, or should be, 'different, something nobody counted on', Brasch was easily intelligent and educated enough (perhaps also sufficiently diffident) to realize that he could not write in an illiterate void, but, as is commonly the case, first had to absorb what the masters could teach him. Those masters, in his first instance, were primarily Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats and Auden, and the mere fact that Brasch was born in Dunedin (N.Z.) in 1909 can hardly make it surprising that of these the first two were originally, and remained until the end, his chief poetic ancestors. I do not mean, of course, that everyone similarly born was destined to become a Wordsworthian or Shelleyan poet. What I do mean is rather that someone so born with aesthetic/poetic sensitivity, intelligence and spirituality (and Brasch had all of these) was more likely, in an environment where nature even today can stand comparison with what Wordsworth saw

around him and where society and education even today remain predominantly British-orientated and nineteenth century in outlook, to write like an early English Romantic than like Auden or even Yeats. Nor does this in the least distress me. The tradition of Wordsworth and Shelley is a great one indeed, and what now does seem distressing to me is, not that Brasch adhered to it as much *as* he did but that increasingly, while still expressing, often in the language of this tradition, the concerns so typical of it, he nevertheless arrived at conclusions about them which would have been unacceptable to Wordsworth and Shelley at their best and which, more importantly perhaps to those who admire these poets and their value less than I do, do not appear to have been congenial to Brasch's own deeper instincts — with some falling off, perhaps inevitably, in poetic power.

Such contentions, I am well aware, need testing against the evidence, and I therefore now turn to the poems.

In much of his earlier work, Brasch had shown a pre-occupation with 'powers' that 'through all sensible process . . . distantly, fleetingly touch us' ('Waitaki Revisited'). While his language may be Wordsworthian as much as Shelleyan, and while the title of such a poem as 'Waitaki Revisited' alone should suffice to send us to 'Tintern Abbey', the 'powers' of which Brasch speaks here find a match, not only in Wordsworth's 'presence' which is 'deeply interfused' in natural phenomena, but also in, for example, Shelley's 'Power' in the 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', which, Shelley makes plain, visits our 'various world' only inconstantly.

All three poets are essentially religious in their quest for contact with this power, which, though not always readily accessible and touching us 'through all sensible process', is nevertheless spiritual and most easily described, in conventional terms, as a divinity. Even in our predominantly secular age it is generally conceded that those poems of Wordsworth's (e.g. 'Tintern Abbey' or the 'Immortality Ode') or of Shelley's (e.g. 'Adonais') which are most obviously inspired by religious feeling are also poetically the most powerful and successful ones.

It comes as something of a shock, then, even after the comparative de-spiritualization of Brasch's second but last collection, *Not Far Off* which however still contains fine religious elements, to see that in the first poem of *Home Ground* (and the title turns out to be ominous) he turns, not to for example the 'One' of 'Adonais', but the 'Necessity' of

the early Shelley of 'Queen Mab'. This 'Necessity', in Branch as in Shelley, turns out to have little of the benevolence of Shelley's 'One'. Indeed, the poem might well be considered anti-Romantic in accepting, indeed praying for support to, a divinity like Shelley's Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound*. That this 'dire', 'rock-hard', 'immovable' divinity does actually bear such a resemblance in Branch's mind may be surmised not only from the association with 'rock' (it is a precipice of rocks to which Jupiter binds a Prometheus), but also from the address 'priming/Mover', which reminds us of the Prime Mover, i.e. God as Jupiter, in Chaucer's 'Knight's Isle'. It is this ambiguous 'priming' divinity which, incredibly, is to be the 'root' of Branch's 'tree' — the whole picture works, in fact, against the words here quoted, so as finally to make it largely unambiguous, and an unconvincing celebration of a most unattractive deity. That Brasch is actually straining against his own natural inclination in this process seems clear from the verbosity and repetitiveness of the words emphasizing what must to any sensible Romantic or indeed Christian seem a strangely limited concept of God, and of the relation between God and life (what 'tree' can we expect from such a 'root'?).

A peculiar danger of Romanticism in the area with which I am dealing is that in its inclination to see God in nature, or in man, it may come to regard God as having no separate identity. Wordsworth and Shelley do not think *as* far in this direction as Blake ('All deities reside in the human breast'), and it is to Blake that we must turn if we are to understand Brasch's 'Shoriken' — if a poem that obscures its distinctions so much is to be understood at all.

The best way to look at this poem is perhaps to focus first on the note at the end. Shoriken is an Immortal, crossing the sea balanced on the edge of his sword. While this situation in itself could be symbolically interpreted in a variety of ways without, for example, confusing Shoriken and the sea, it seems that in stanza 16 Brasch presents us with Shoriken ('you') as not merely crossing the sea, but becoming part of it, and even 'that sword edge itself' is 'a wave-crest of the sea'. Thus, whatever our interpretation may be, the images clearly dissolve into each other, and interpretation is not made easier by this. My guess is that because in stanza 2 Brasch speaks of the 'wood of the world', and because Shoriken is an Immortal, the sea may well be a symbol for some state between death and life. At any rate, this sea

(crossed on a sword) does not resemble such a passage as the bark of Shelley's spirit finds at the end of 'Adonais'. One gets the impression that Brasch is only too well versed in Shelley not to be able to make a distinction between man's spirit and Shelley's One, but that he wilfully blurs such a distinction following Blake (according to whom there is no distinction, in Brasch's terms, between the sea and Shoriken), and, more negatively still, makes the sea 'Malevolent' (stanza 1).

With Blake, the poem thus moves away from contemplation of the spiritual outside and above man towards the 'wood of the world'. But to describe what happens thus is to be unjust to Blake. Stanzas 2 and 3 are drenched in Blake (with stanza 4 looking at Auden, probably, who is more optimistic in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'), but even Blake's world becomes something much more nihilistic and barren in Brasch. Stanza 2 admittedly does justice to Blake's notion that 'Without Contraries is no progression' (Brasch's Blake source throughout the poem is 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'), but in the third stanza Brasch outdoes Blake's cynical irony in that the image of the fountains is positive in Blake, but negative in Brasch (actually Brasch probably at the same time negativizes Auden's 'healing fountain' and Shelley's 'burning fountain', but of this one must feel less sure). In contrast with Blake, Brasch does not even consider the possibility that man might improve himself. This is typical of the modern poet: Blake was at one with Shelley in considering that faith in a divinity implied faith in man (who even according to Shelley could at least *become* divine), but Brasch, not clearly believing in the divine, does not believe in man either. However, it is because of Blake's position that there are no deities *outside* the human breast, pushed to its logical extreme (in which everything becomes interchangeable and nothing can be considered superior), that we find in this poem such depressing, inert and hopeless banalities as 'One place is not better than another' (stanza 13), as well as a general confusion of entities as soon as reflection upon the physical world is abandoned. In this respect, Blake may be seen as a more perniciously modern influence on Brasch than is either Shelley or Wordsworth. Or, even if we do not see Blake's influence as going beyond stanzas 2 and 3, Blake at the least provides a useful point of comparison to show how the Romantic tradition degenerates.

Whatever the precise cause, Brasch's inclination to make the spiritual part of the physical (or the eternal of the tem-

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poral) is not confined to this poem. We find such a tendency in, for example, 'A Lady of Ten'. Here Katie Scott is at the same time 'Transcendent Subject' and 'Eternal Object'. These are philosophical terms, and Brasch is consistently pre-occupied with philosophical questions pertinent to the use of such terms. However, it is a hallmark of this collection that Brasch is a good deal less hopeful about an eternal world beyond the grave than he appeared to be in earlier volumes. Katie Scott is an 'Eternal Object' merely in being a part of life *on this earth*; a reason why, like all the facts of earthly existence, she has to be reckoned with, and is, indeed, 'an emblem of the world'. This emphasis makes the word 'eternal' not a little surprising, and one must suppose it is, unfortunately, used in a deliberately un-Romantic, or rather anti-Romantic, stance. It is difficult, too, to see how a poem that so firmly commits itself to the physical world can speak of the girl as 'transcendent' either in a Kantian or in a theological sense, except that Brasch is perhaps thinking of his image as 'not an object of possible experience' (Kant) in that she is an enigma in this way. However this may be, since the 'world' is a physical one in this poem, one may well wonder whether we can justifiably talk of emblems at all. For how can part of the natural world be in any way an emblem of anything in that world unless that world, as in Shelley and Wordsworth, is spiritualized? What has happened to the 'powers' of 'Waitaki Revisited', or the 'presences' of the 'Colossi of Memnon'? The language and the pre-occupations of these late poems continue to remind us that Brasch is still writing as a late Romantic; but what vitalizes the Romanticism of which he is part has been squeezed out of the poems. We witness the ascendancy of matter over mind.

That at least seems the general drift in this collection, as we shall further see. However, the cardinal statement in Brasch's verse remains that '... we are that mortal ground/ That spiritual and temporal power dispute' ('To C.H. Roberts' in the earlier *Disputed Ground*). Although the temporal powers appear to be winning out, Brasch shows willy-nilly that Shelley, for him at any rate, was right in thinking that the One continues to torture us 'To its own likeness'. Hence Brasch can still write, in 'Eternal Questions', that 'From every cynic street the sparks fly up, fly up.' This, however, is only a very tenuous way of suggesting something about the question of eternity in, for example, the Shelleyan sense — flying sparks are a painful reduction of Shelley's

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`burning fountain'. The eternity which Brasch seems to know more about, in this last volume, is what we can actually see, by way of cognition. We know for a brute fact that Katie Scott is 'there', is as such part of an eternal history, but we know, in Brasch's view, far less about flying up.

Nor can we find an answer to eternal questions in history ('History Doesn't Relate'), but 'Hauntings' addressed to a great 'shade' (what more Shelleyan word than this?) which is to haunt the poet, though with a diminution of Shelleyan intensity (the shade is to stay at a distance) and 'Huinga September' is a satisfying poem, in the best of Romantic traditions associating the world of the spirit and eternity with that of the imagination. The contemplation of nature in 'artistic fashion leads logically to a triumph of mind over matter, and hence to the realization of other-worldliness. But although this comes to the fore in section 3, section 4 severely qualifies this momentary enthusiasm in talking about a 'down-growing' movement. Section 6 does not receive the dialectic with complete assurance. While there is promising mention of a 'Madonna mountain' which is the 'Eagle of farthest heaven', the mountain is the *question* 'Echoing above our lives'. The mountain appears to be a symbol of heavenly love, but this love will destroy both itself and us; one must hope that Brasch means that all earthly shapes are merely temporary, containing within themselves the potential for eternal self-realization. That would give the best sense, and at all events the language has come to life again in a concentration on the life of the spirit rather than on earthly phenomena (though, appropriately enough, mind is reached *through* matter). That the association of the operation of the imagination and the reaching out towards the eternal spirit would, in particular, have pleased Shelley does not seem to call for further discussion. After all, Shelley's 'inheritors of unfulfilled renown' are all artists — 'Tar in the Unapparent'. Brasch is actually far more at home with art and the eternal life of the spirit than with this earth, no matter the title of his collection. And what a pity that in 'Prologue to The Dream' he recognizes the power of the word only to end with 'These are the riches of our poverty. We pray you hear us out indulgently.'

The poem that is centrally offered for our attention is the one from which the collection derives its title, 'Home Ground'. The poem is important to my discussion also, in that I think that it shows a faint awareness of Shelley and

Wordsworth, but is largely a betrayal of the best in Brasch. It is interesting in that it never really takes off, yet shows by its own inclination how it might have done.

'Home Ground' is, for Brasch, Dunedin; and the title implies a significant shift away from the previous volume, *Not Far Off*, which showed a sense of belonging to a wider world: Brasch is narrowing his focus, not only towards the physical, but even towards the merely local. Yet everything in the poem goes to reveal that Brasch does *not* feel at home in the city of Dunedin, or indeed our earthly world, which the city is patently a model for. The very first section is far from enthusiastic about the so-called 'home ground', which is (not inappropriately, even in a symbolic sense) described as a 'drift of tide-wrack, sound of shells'. These images suggest something left behind, hollow, and in a sorry state. Brasch sees this life (i.e. in Dunedin and in general) as something highly transitory; we are a company of men sailing through time. Nor does our passage offer satisfaction; section ii elaborates, and indicates that Dunedin is a 'City of nothing', floating on 'the void edge', is, indeed, a 'last step into nothing'. The possibility appears to be entertained that the body is only a temporary state, a 'seamless garment that all put on/At birth, that loses them dying'. But although this notion might have led to one that Shelley and Wordsworth share, namely that we come from a realm of eternity and will return there after death, such an idea is not brought forward. In other words, we witness the Shelleyan dissatisfaction with earthly life as it is, but not the Shelleyan consolation of another world, even though we are inescapably driven to see the world in Shelley's terms. Instead of looking for such another world, Brasch painfully declares Dunedin to be 'here/Which is everywhere'. His horizon has shrunk — if he still has some awareness of a realm beyond Dunedin, as appears to be the case, then such a realm is absorbed into his closed vision rather than that he expand outward from it into an enlarged one.

This is the gist of the matter right through the poem. We do get some sense of entities merging into each other, but such merging is not, for example, like that of Shelley's soul into the One, but rather like that observed just before — of Dunedin into 'everywhere', or, more correctly, everywhere into Dunedin. Thus in section ii, the streets of Dunedin are asked not to betray the 'pulsing inward' of Dunedin's port; while this appears to imply the recognition of an outer world

which must not be ignored but allowed free entry, it is hardly possible to do justice to an 'otherness' (in Laurentian terms) which is to make the poet 'your own' (section iv) in a relationship of appropriation on the poet's part rather than on which might draw him into it. To illustrate: when Shelley asks the West Wind to make his 'thy lyre' he has brought the wind to active life, both physically and spiritually, in such a way that it becomes tempting for man's spirit to move into it, and indeed to *become* the wind. Although Brasch is clearly imitating Shelley to some extent, here, the final effect of his lines is such as to make him appear egocentric. It is quite a different thing to write Shelley's poem or to speak of keeping

*. windows open to the sky
For visitors of all persuasions.
Let them blow in continually
With every season.. '*

Or, if this is not egocentric, it still does not do much for our picture either of Brasch or of the 'visitors'. At the most, this is a feeble genuflection in the direction of Shelley.

And in section vii, Brasch talks of a stream which is our abstract, but not only does this stream not in any way turn out to be very forceful, but it also appears to be no more than the stream of life merely, even though called 'abstract'. Possibly Brasch means something more, for in section ix he seems to refer to some sort of eternal, superior force, a smile 'endlessly loving' — but the very fact that one doubts whether he has in mind something greater than himself or us takes away any force his statements might have and continuously leads one to suspect the possibility that he is not truly interested in the spiritual and eternal outside man. If Brasch is thinking of God's smile, the fact that it is 'infinitely distant' makes it hardly surprising that instead of living in any way with it he is creating a man-centred world. His divinity, if he still believes in it, is not one that bursts 'in its beauty and its might/From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.' Inevitably, section x lapses back into earthly existence, which is here described as some sort of nightmare or hell. Spirituality is by now so absent from Brasch's mind that, tellingly, this section is a most potent one, and the reader is more likely to remember it than the effete Romanticism that we are nevertheless highly tentatively given as an antidote.

The poem moves on with a consideration of various states of being, without ever coming to a firm solution of any kind,

or, on the other hand, stating its opposites very clearly and compellingly. Section xiii, for example, ends on a note of sadness at the imprisonment self. The world is seen as a cocoon, which covers up Brasch's clamouring nakedness. The cocoon may be protective, but it is obviously at the same time stifling, for the nakedness continues to clamour — clearly for something beyond this earthly world. Yet he does not break through the cocoon, even though he criticizes it, and even though it binds him. The nakedness is therefore hardly one that the reader can seriously respect: it is that of a man who knows that the earthly world does not suffice, but who does not give himself up to another world either. In effect, he has given himself up to the world as it is, with Romantic yearning still struggling, but largely betrayed.

The curious section xviii highlights this particular problem. The body is viewed with distaste, as something cramping the poet's self. But, also, the spirit is not seen as a vibrant alternative. It is, instead, described as a 'Tedious school-mistress'. At the end, the poet asks the world to be his grave. The reader has a right to ask just what the world is to receive: 'Let me go free at last' — but what is that 'me'? It can hardly be the body, which itself is seen as the chief prison. But if it is the spirit, how is that to find freedom if the earthly world is to be its grave? One may complain, not only about the message, which is unsatisfactory whichever it is, but also about conspicuous lack of clarity.

Section xx is possibly more promising again, in speaking of a dream of love which has sustained the poet throughout life. This power, presumably divine, allows us to live 'beyond ourselves', even though it never becomes our possession. That is a modesty perhaps acceptable enough, in that we cannot reject a philosophy which assumes that we can never become God, but we may well long to be possessed by God — a very different proposition, which is still modest — and this prospect is not considered. In which case, we must ask, 'Just what is this dream of love worth? What does it lead up to?'

Fortunately, section xxvi (I omit from discussion some sections — Brasch is really too repetitive) shows us that Brasch realizes that he has in no way solved his problems, or really grappled with them. The world is seen as distasteful, and he wishes it to close its eyes, to let him breathe. His own eye will not close while he is alive. That states the various tensions quite acutely. But the implication is that if one did close one's eyes, breathing would become possible — in other

words, that one should turn away from this world. All the implications here drift towards a Shelleyan faith, but that is not, ultimately, embraced. We have a fragment of Romanticism here, a ruin. 'The world is too much with us', Wordsworth said, and this is what Brasch is re-stating. If that is his feeling, clearly he should side with Wordsworth and Shelley, and look for an alternative. He is vaguely aware of this logical necessity, but he cannot rescue himself from the world. In the final analysis his dilemma is a most uncomfortable one, refusing either to become wholly anti-Romantic, or to accept the conclusions of his more courageous predecessors.

This poem, though hardly true to Romanticism or Brasch's own deeper impulse as revealed in earlier work, and not true to modern nihilism either, nevertheless may move a reader because its tensions are genuine and left painfully unresolved — although with less zig-zagging, and more thinking through, we would have had a better poem. However, anti-Romanticism is more clearly, and more damagingly (to Brsch) displayed in the last poems. There is, sadly, a distinctly downward movement in the volume. Amongst the very last lines, we read: "Hungering for the ever less,/Set your mind on nothingness.' This depressing way of thinking is more fully developed in

*Empty, Empty.
Let me listen to you, emptiness'
You do not ring, like a sea shell.
You are the void
From which we come into being,
To which we return'
Empty myself,
Let me listen.*

According to Wordsworth, we come 'From God, who is our home'; it is to God also that we shall return, since, for example, our birth is 'but a sleep'. Shelley's thinking is similar: our life is a transitory curse, with eternity our proper realm before birth and after death. Brasch is well aware of these notions. His philosophy is clearly not simply that of 'dust to dust'. Instead, ringing changes on the noble sentiments of his predecessors and betraying them, he altogether deprives the world of God.

It will no doubt be suggested that I am quoting from the 'Last Poems', written when Brasch was clearly a dying man, and therefore not doing sufficient justice to what we must respect in him. However, the pattern of development throughout Brasch's collection and for that matter his poetry

generally is a gradual one. If it has to do with the physical circumstances of his life, we can only assume that the process of growing older was in some measure responsible for it, or prolonged sojourn in New Zealand, particularly so isolated a place as Dunedin. But such conjectures cannot amount to anything like proof, or even a solid indication. More likely, we are to see in Brasch's work some sort of microcosm, in one life-span, of what has happened to our culture generally — a process of secularization, and a rejection of the spiritual for the physical such as lies at the root of, for example, Leavis's criticism of Shelley.

I am not, of course, insisting that all great poetry must be religious; there are other spheres of life to pay attention to. What I do observe is that poetry which concerns itself with such 'eternal questions' as preoccupy Brasch, and particularly in someone with marked religious inclinations, is apt to become aimless, futile and barren if not religiously inspired; and since I have contrasted Brasch with Shelley and Wordsworth it is clear that my notion of religion is a very wide one. It will be interesting to see whether other readers are willing to come to the rescue of this poetry, for it is always possible — though in this case in my view unlikely — that a fairly extreme stance springs from too subjective a position. Moreover, Brasch's poetic work as a whole, whether one agrees with certain of his conclusions or not, seems to me, after two discussions of it, to stand up indisputably as bearing significant testimony to the genuine and profound searchings of an intelligent and sensitive human being in our age.

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