REVISED VERSION 26/2/07

C. J. Brennan's *A Chant of Doom* – Australia's medieval war.[1]

Christopher Brennan's propagandist *A Chant of Doom* (1918) has very little value as poetry, and what critics have said about it is adequately damning. Judith Wright's comment is the best known: 'some of the most unpleasant and inflated verse produced by any war' (Wright 205); James McAuley found 'an embarrassing brassy rhetoric' (McAuley 35). Nevertheless, the poems collected in *A Chant of Doom* were disseminated and read widely, especially by Brennan's standards, in their original newspaper and magazine print contexts. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* published most of them; others appeared in *Anzac Memorial* and *The Lone Hand*.[2] Brennan parodied Wordsworth to express his new popularity as a 'Retired Symbolist Poet' of 1916:

> Remote I lived, and few could know
>
> If e'er I wrote or how;
>
> But William made his war, and oh!
>
> I'm in the papers now. (Verse 237)

[2] *A Chant of Doom* is conveniently available in PDF through SETIS (The Sydney Electronic Text and Image Service) on http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/v00034.

In the wartime climate there was further substantial encouragement from academic, intellectual and artistic circles. 'The Second Anniversary of War' was read in the Great Hall of Sydney University on 4 August, 1916, and the university journal *Hermes* highly praised 'For France's Day'. David McKee Wright's 'Apollo in George Street' judged the 'songs of war' superior to some of Brennan's previous efforts (Sharkey 522). The title-poem – 'obsessive rigmarole' (McAuley 35) – 'thrilled' Brennan's friends in the cafe where he declaimed it (Clark 218-19). Norman Lindsay wrote in 1916 that it was 'the finest expression of a mighty anger against all that Germany meant…. It is Homeric. A godlike expression of man's just wrath' (Clark 219). Lindsay's brother Reg had a cutting of Brennan's poem for France's Day (*Daily Telegraph*, July 14, 1916) in his pocket when he was killed on the Western Front (Clark 219).

All this goes to show, not that *A Chant of Doom* is good poetry, but that Brennan was successful in mobilising the necessary resources to write Australian war verse for a broad contemporary audience, and in meeting the propaganda requirements of the major Sydney newspapers at this time. Commonly, Brennan's poems were written for recruiting and fund-raising drives. His regular provision of anniversary pieces, occasional verses for special campaigns, and responses to emergencies reveal a strong grasp on how the mainstream press worked. This poetry's rhetoric, cultural reference and strategic engagement with its audience are worth analysing for the picture they give of how Australia responded when involvement in the Great War demanded of us an unprecedented ideological engagement with European, rather than purely Anglo/Celtic, cultural history.

In that connection, it is interesting and surprising, given Brennan's standing as a classicist, to find that *A Chant of Doom*'s mythic, epic and heroic mode is less 'Homeric' than persistently medievalist. Although Brennan marked the Australianness of these poems by dedicating the collection to his brother Philip, '2nd Aust. Machine-Gun Battn', he frequently employs themes from medieval literature, history and myth — the Norse Edda, Dante, the Crusades, Joan of Arc — to bless the war effort and vilify Germany. The Middle Ages, in these and other varied guises, are made part of his promotion of the war as an Australian national struggle, through a medievalising delineation of natural enemies, sacred causes, racial inheritances and cultural affinities. Medievalist discourse and imagery become a chief means of aligning Australian sympathies towards wartime Europe. *A Chant of Doom* suggests that the medieval imaginary, though one might have thought it to be quite remote from Australian concerns, possessed a cultural significance for both Brennan and his audience that deserves further investigation.

A Chant of Doom was not Brennan's first war poetry but very different in political orientation from what had gone before. In the period 1901-03 he wrote a series of poems about the Boer War, *The Burden of Tyre*, which were not published in his lifetime. Brennan was disturbed by Australia's participation in the war. In 1899, a few months before it began, he had written against 'Imperialist' poetry in an article on W. E. Henley for the *Australian Magazine*: 'the sword that is "the Will of God"; and, of course, over all this, the Lord, as Mr Kipling has him, too, casting a fatherly eye on the most brutal. This is sad stuff'; 'You can't throw a glamour over jingoism, you can't make a mystic mission out of it; there are no ideas behind it—at least none that make for poetry' (Prose 200). *The Burden of Tyre* treats the Boer War

(from an Australian point of view) as an imperial connivance to distract the working class from their poor material conditions:

> They hunger? give them men to slay:
>
> they lack for light and air? then room
>
> is free, yonder, and chance of play,
>
> where the hill-scarring cannons boom.
>
>
> The house is rotting? flags will mask
>
> and trophies best, where damps intrude:
>
> lift lights and song, and none will ask
>
> (being fools) if this be to their good. (Verse 47)

The idiom of these poems matches that of the isolate 'Wanderer' of Brennan's other poetry in the period, here doubly alienated from his fellow citizens, who are duped into regarding Australia's part in the war as a badge of its newly federated nationhood:

> Why are these streets aflare? – Today
>
> we are born a folk. – What love begot?
>
> – Our mother's need. – Whither? – To slay:
>
> see now wherewith our hand is hot.
>
> ....
>
> Then count me not of yours: I stand
>
> alone, save for whose gaze I meet
>
> like mine in yearning for that land
>
> that ne'er may rest our questing feet. (Verse 52)

In Brennan's mind, the illuminations for Federation in 1901 seem to merge with bonfires for the war, perhaps those lit to celebrate the relief of Mafeking (May, 1900), when the colony was "'caught up in a Saturnalia'" of imperial solidarity (Carruthers).[3] Taken together, they are a sign of Australian subjection to the harsh imperial 'mother', not of maturity. The quest for 'Eden' – 'that land' which is definitely not modern Australia – functions as a rejection of Empire and official nationhood, as well as of the dulling round of material existence, and the collapse of mind into '[t]he old harlotry of right and wrong!' (Verse 52).

In 1914, by contrast, Brennan was genuinely pro-war; he saw it as a duty to defend European culture against German barbarism. At the time he began to publish his Great War verse in the daily papers, he was mainly known through his conversation, university and extension lectures, and poems, short reviews and essays in Sydney journals such as *Hermes*, the *Australian Magazine* and *The Bulletin*. The collection *Poems [1913]* on which his reputation now rests had only recently appeared in a limited subscription edition in December 1914, after the war had begun. It was probably Brennan's standing as a university man with deep knowledge of French, German and classical literature that allowed him to be seen as a cultural interpreter, well qualified to speak on behalf of Australians to Europe in crisis. Perhaps he felt compromised; he certainly wrote as if his justification for specialist knowledge of German culture was the improved opportunity it provided to vilify Germany.

Brennan's journalistic poetry seems designed to fit in, neither outside the war effort nor very prominent within it, occupying much less print space than the

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[3] Carruthers is citing C. M. H Clark, p.175. See also Barnes, p. 21, n. 18

accounts of ministerial addresses, sermons, recruiting (the 'harvest'), casualties, and determinedly up-beat news from the front. The usually short poems, not placed on a separate literary page as in *The Bulletin*, but interspersed between other articles, look like convenient fillers between the more substantial material. Similarly, the 'brassy', hectoring tone of *A Chant of Doom* indicates a determination to speak collectively, without qualifications or individual touches. The deeply personal, isolated, self-communing stance of Brennan's earlier work is replaced throughout by confident plurals: 'we' for an Australian public indistinguishable from the bardic speaker, 'ye' for the heroic combatants:

> Whether ye sleep upon your fiery height,
>
> Or fortune, maiming, bar you from the fight
>
> Or, gracious and consenting, so befriend
>
> To stride the road of victory to the end
>
> And smite to hell yon ravening bulk of sin —
>
> Humble and proud, we greet and claim you kin. (Verse 181)[4]

The only isolate left in this poetry is the Kaiser and the collective corruption he is made to stand for. Like the press, Brennan irrationally treated the Kaiser as both personally responsible for the war and a symbol of general German evil.

Despite its new stridency, the Great War verse shows no complete break with Brennan's earlier poetry. Some aspects of his symbolism modulated relatively easily into jingoism, once he was politically engaged. One such aspect is the vaguely adversarial rhetoric of the unfulfilled Wanderer, who refuses the compromised safety of the 'hearth' to quest for the Absolute, and in so doing encounters within

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[4] 'Lions of War', *Anzac Memorial*, ed A. G. Stephens (Sydney: Returned Soldiers' Association, 1916).

himself numerous figures of malign temptation or opposition. Although in the later sections of *Poems [1913]* there is some 'repudiation of the Absolute' and a turning towards 'live experience and ... the contingent world' (Wilkes in *Poems 1913* 15-16), we also find the persistence of heroic adversarialism in the style of Tennyson's Arthurian poetry (McAuley 6):

> yet in that wind a clamour of trumpets rang,
>
> old trumpets, resolute, stark, undauntable,
>
> singing to battle against the eternal foe,
>
> the wronger of this world, and all his powers
>
> in some last fight, foredoom'd disastrous
>
> upon the final ridges of the world. (Verse 164)

The sense of being assailed by a potent life-enemy was already built into Brennan's symbolic system, whose main idea is the existence of universal correspondences between the material and the spiritual, which he called 'analogies' or 'rhythms', and the impossible quest for their perfect reconciliation in one's being, which he called the state of 'Eden'. Art may capture or at least point the way towards this reconciliation[5] but it is not found in life. 'From the point of view of our fallen state, Eden is mysterious darkness beyond our ken.' (McAuley 23). The doomed search for Eden is felt in the flesh only under its dark guise of 'sin', and often associated with Adamic fear of the rejected, sensuous first wife, Lilith (Barnes 57-61). That fear is often externalised in Brennan's pre-war verse through Gothic landscapes and personifications of sin, sickness and decay:

> where beneath

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[5] Brennan, *Prose*, p. 392, credts this view to Novalis. See Macainsh 56-61; Barnes, pp. 8-9; 67-73.

> a sudden rock on the short blasted heath,
>
> bare-set, a cavern lurks and holds within
>
> its womb, obscene with some corroding sin,
>
> coil'd on itself and stirring, a squat shade
>
> before the entrance hides a broken blade. (Verse 114)

and, from a sonnet of 1896 revised in 1913,

> The corpse of time is stark upon the night:
>
> my soul is coffin'd, staring, grave-bedight,
>
> upon some dance of death that reels and feasts
>
>
> around its living tomb, with vampire grin,
>
> inverted sacraments of Satan's priests —
>
> and, mask'd no more, the maniac face of sin. (Verse 119)

In several poems, the mythic landscape becomes attached to medieval references:

> the stony plain blackens with rapid night
>
> that best reveals the land's inflicted blight
>
> since in the smitten hero-hand the sword
>
> broke, and the hope the long-dumb folk adored,
>
> and over all the north a tragic flare
>
> told Valhall perish'd and the void's despair
>
> to dwell as erst, all disinhabited. (Verse 117)

Brennan figures the desolation into which the failed search for Eden leads the soul, in a conflation of the time to come after Ragnarok (the destruction of the Gods) with

the original barren time before the creation of the earth described in *Voluspa* (Poetic Edda 4) and *Gylfaginning* (Prose Edda 32)[6] along with vaguer elements of an apparent Waste Land legend in which the breaking of a significant weapon brings blight. The sequence 'Twilights of the Gods and Folk' (Verse 151-54) develops Norse themes with further reference to Ragnarok and the death of Baldr, which Katherine Barnes sees as linked by Brennan to the defeat of Iceland's 'pagan Norse religion' by Christianity in AD 1000 but also to 'the eschatology of other religions' (Barnes 37-41). Medieval reference often becomes for Brennan a sign of universal significance, an almost inevitable process for one who believed that 'the essential condition to a new interpretation [of 'the ancient myths'] is that one drop their anecdotal character and insist on their larger features' (Prose 188-89).[7]

Brennan may also have been drawn to medievalism by its wealth of personification allegory. In theory, he disdained the simplicity of allegory: 'The symbol … is an image condensing the largest possible number of analogies, a central knot of rhythms — thereby different *toto caelo* from allegory, which is simply a naïve putting of one thing for another.'[8] Yet he had a tendency in practice to reduce the 'knot of rhythms' to simpler personifications. In particular, figures that symbolise living death and corruption – 'some old vampire-god, whose bulk, within,

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[6] The *Prose Edda* cites Voluspa here: 'In the beginning / not anything existed, / there was no sand nor sea / nor cooling waves; / earth was unknown/ and heaven above / only Ginnungagap / was — there was no grass.' 'Ginnungagap ' means 'Open Void'.

[7] Quoted in Macainsh 56-57.

[8] From the prospectus of an extension course of six lectures on Symbolism in Nineteenth-Century Literature (1904), Sydney University, Lecture I. In Brennan collection, State Library of NSW. See also *Prose*, p. 60: 'Allegory is just a childish way of putting one thing for another'.

/ lies gross and festering in his shroud of sin' (Verse 120) – abound in the pre-war work, and would soon supply Brennan with a rich repertoire of invective against Germany. In retrospect, the anti-German Brennan of *A Chant of Doom* seems only to have been waiting to put a name to the 'eternal foe', his recurring image of sin, obscenity and decay. Classical literature was comparatively lacking in such types. Even in his Anzac poem, 'Lions of War', quoted above, Brennan eventually leaves behind classical allusion and imitation – 'Hellespont', 'Chersonese', 'Whether ye sleep ...', etc. – and raids scripture and his earlier symbolist lexicon for abuse of Germany/Turkey as the 'ravening bulk of sin', creating a Spenserian or Bunyanesque monster for Christian soldiers to slay as they '...[s]tride the road of victory to the end'.[9] The corrupt Central Powers seem but a further permutation of the gross material, the 'flesh' of Brennan's neo-Platonist symbolic system, with a role to play like St Paul's 'old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts' (Ephesians 4:22). The difference is that in the pre-war poetry such figures of 'sin' stand for a common human destiny, the inevitable frustration and 'bondage' by matter of the soul's impossible quest for Eden in the fallen world.[10] 'Sin' and 'evil' are ineradicable elements, along with innocence and good, of the mysterious 'night' in which the psyche must quest for its fulfillment. 'As the source of all things, it [the 'night'] is the source of evil and terror no less than of joy and beauty' (McAuley 24). In the war poetry, this complex system is simply binarised on political grounds:

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[9] 'Bulk'/'bulks' occurs five times in *Poems [1913]*. For 'ravening', see Psalm 22:13, Ezekiel 22-25; Matthew 7: 15, where it applies to lions. 'Bulk of sin' may also suggest Paul's 'body of sin', Romans: 6.6.

[10] '... the fall is the birth of the soul into matter, which is its bondage'. (Prose 88-89), cited in McAuley, p. 28.

'I passionately hold ... that our cause is right and theirs is wrong. There is here no question of degrees: it is an absolute difference' (Prose 444).[11]

In Brennan's mind such views went hand-in-hand with a medievalist ambience. Two poems for Belgian Day (May 13, 1915) saw him in the *Sydney Morning Herald* invoking the Crusaders against the heathen Germans:

> Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay –
>
> Ay, verily: and by ministry of such men
>
> As did His will upon the Saracen:
>
> And Christendom owns not that man today
>
> Who deems it not the holiest task to slay,
>
> So utterly, that they rise not again
>
> Yon blatant heathenrie, past human ken
>
> Outlaw'd to Death, its raving spawn and prey. (Verse 177)

It was less than a month after the first Anzac landings, so mention of fight against the 'Saracen' was topical. Through a loose combination of Scripture, the Crusades, Spenser's 'Blatant (literally, "barking") Beast', and Milton's 'Death', Brennan makes his point that this is a Holy War in which 'Christendom' is united against atheist/nihilist Germany, so denying Germany's existence as a fellow-Christian country and his own post-Christian agnosticism.

For the eve of Bastille Day in 1916 and 1917, cautiously called 'France's Day', Brennan, like other contributors, pictured France as a wronged but undaunted woman, who may have committed regrettable excesses in the past ('terrible in bygone times / So burning red') but who deserved honourable support as she

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[11] From an essay, 'Methods of Love', originally printed in *Hermes*, August 1918.

resisted the 'reptile lust' of Germany. Her 'chivalry' at Verdun had saved our 'freedom'. Other *SMH* items on or around July 13 in 1917 included an editorial 'The Cause of France', 'France's Day. Le Jour de Gloire' by Professor D. A. Welsh, a long list of the French charity stalls in Sydney, and appeals for donations: 'Let us be glad that the coin boxes rattle in our streets today. They are surely the heartthrobs of a generous Australian people beating in sympathy for the stricken women of France.' There were other poems on the same theme: 'O skies of shining graciousness, / Today your golden glance / Throw warm upon the hearts that give / To France.' (''Help France', by [Miss] E. Beaufils Lamb, author of the 'Australian mother-song', 'My boy and your boy', lyrics originally published in the *SMH*);[12] there was also a better poem, highly medievalised, by Jean Curlewis (daughter of Ethel Turner), in which 'Roland', the 'Maid of War', and 'True Romance' all feature: 'And Roland rode from Roncesvalles to greet the Anzacs there'. Medieval reference not only invoked earlier Holy Wars, but repurified France as 'the sword without a stain' (Curlewis), probably to help British-oriented audiences get over their disquiet about Revolution, realist novels, and other degenerate French associations. Joan of Arc, as both maiden warrior and wronged woman, was the perfect 'face' of wartime France, and was already France's preferred international image. Australia had quite recently received in 1907 one of the several widely distributed copies of Emmanuel Frémiet's heroic equestrian statue of her, which stands outside the State Library of Victoria.

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[12] See National Library of Australia Digital Collections website: http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an13714095.

In 'A Chant of Doom', written in 1915 and first published in the war journal *The Lone Hand* on August 1, 1916, Brennan himself had represented France as Joan of Arc:

> Ring the shining soul of France,
>
> Steel and pennon on the lance
>
> Levell'd in the Maiden's hand
>
> Riding yet to save her land –
>
> ....
>
> Ring the cross that comes again
>
> To the Holy Wisdom's fane
>
> From the skies that Dante saw
>
> Where the sons of freedom's law
>
> Do the last crusaders' work
>
> On the bastard Teuton-Turk. (Verse 194)

Italy had only just entered the war against Germany in May, 1915. Belgium, England, Russia and Serbia also receive encouragement, and the medieval references to France and Italy help set up again the idea of a pan-European 'Christendom' with Germany-Turkey as the infidel. Brennan's war is purely about civilization *versus* barbarism; Muslim-slayers from Roland at Roncesvalles to Lord Byron at Missolonghi become fellow diggers. An epigraph from Brennan's favourite Greek poet, Aeschylus, preceded the title-poem, and was matched in the initial publication by the printed key-pattern ornament, as if to give classical culture the higher prestige, yet its anti-barbarian association fitted well with the medieval imagery. Jean Curlewis similarly conflated the Winged Victory of Samothrace (a

nineteenth-century French discovery exhibited in the Louvre) with Roland and the Maid. The same issue of *The Lone Hand* reprinted a cartoon from the Russian journal *Novi Satirikon*: 'The Teuton and Venus de Milo'. A fat Prussian officer holds the armless statue at gunpoint, with the caption 'Hands up! Or else I'll smash your head.' Whether as the barbarian 'Hun' or the 'Infidel', Germany/Turkey was depicted as the mutual enemy of both the classical and Christian traditions, in a way that blurred the cultural divisions usually seen to exist between Hellenism and Christianity (as in Norman Lindsay's views, for instance), and as a means of thematically linking the Gallipoli and Western Front campaigns. Part of the usefulness of medieval reference to Brennan was that it was pre-Reformation (or even pre-Christian), and so obscured the positive identification with Germany that Martin Luther and the Reformers would normally have provided a largely Protestant middle-class readership. It also obscured the dominant contemporary prestige of German classical scholarship.[13] Why else had Brennan gone to Berlin for postgraduate studies?

Pan-Europeanism also had a special significance for Brennan because it allowed him to write as the friend of European civilization and culture, rather than of England and Empire. As the son of Irish immigrants, (father a brewer from Kildare, mother from a farm in Tipperary), he was careful in negotiating his support for the war within a very sectarian climate, exacerbated by the conscription issue at home and the Home Rule issue in Ireland. Brennan's poetic statement of loyalty –

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[13] See Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 'Classical Scholarship', http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-29311, accessed March 27, 2006: 'Germany made so vast a contribution to 19th-century classical scholarship that it would be impossible to name all of the eminent scholars of the period.'

'Irish to English' – attacking Sinn Fein, was written on April 26, 1916, and appeared in the *SMH* on the next day, with the first full news accounts of 'Serious Disturbances in Dublin', the Easter Rising. He must have moved extremely quickly to condemn 'these men who blight our [i.e., Irish] fame', and he may also have had in mind the capture of the rebel Sir Roger Casement, a story which had broken earlier, and which the press at that time closely associated with the Easter events in Dublin.[14] Far from expressing a purely personal stance, 'Irish to English' chimed perfectly with the *SMH*'s line that the 'Disturbances' were the work of a few 'out-and-out irreconcileables' and that 'the regrets of the Nationalists will probably be no less keen than our own'.[15]

Brennan's point in the poem was that the true Irish might hate the English but were united with them by an even greater hatred of Germany. As for many other Catholics and/or Irish under English cultural dominance, the 'Christian Europe of the Middle Ages' provided him with both a non-English version of European cultural inheritance and 'a type and symbol' of 'a united Europe'; he credited the latter idea to the German Romantic Novalis (Prose 126).[16] At much the same time, G. K. Chesterton's 'Lepanto' in his *Poems* (1915) made a medievalised combat against the Turks into a celebration of European Catholicism. Throughout his life Brennan wrote rather more about classical, French, German and Italian writers than

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[14] *SMH*, April 27, 1916 writes that the Chief Secretary for Ireland had 'detailed an outbreak in Dublin, which was apparently in connection with Sir Roger Casement's raid'.

[15] *SMH*, April 27, 1916.

[16] Brennan's reference is probably to Novalis' *Christianity, or Europe* (1799), for which see Macainsh. For Novalis and other German Romantics as regressive idealisers of the medieval, see Lukács, pp 68ff. and 248.

English ones, and, with the notable exception of Blake, concentrated disproportionately on English Catholic writers like Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson. Just as he assuaged suspicions of 'red' France with Joan of Arc, so he got around his Catholic Irish difference by asserting a higher unity with England against 'the gates of hell', viz. Germany, alluding to Christ's promise to Peter in Matthew 16:18. It may have amused Brennan in this Irish expression of Christian solidarity with England to cite a text read by Catholics as the foundation of the papacy.

Virtually none of Brennan's poetry is conceivable without the lively presence of hell. The autobiographical poem '1908' mentions his break with Catholicism over the doctrine of eternal punishment — the 'grim maw / and lazar-pit that reek'd beneath' the Church (Verse 172) —, but hell makes a full comeback in the title-poem of *A Chant of Doom*. It is scarcely necessary to invoke Brennan's dislike of a Prussian mother-in-law[17] or boyish enthusiasm for the war (Clark 217-18) to explain its infernal scenario. It is merely a more politicised and medievalised version, with broader literary allusion, of the Gothic horrors painted in his symbolist verse. The most unusual aspect of the poem is his extensive use of old Norse myth, but even that had a precedent in 'Out of no quarter' from *Poems [1913]*, quoted above. Part of the 'Chant's' basic idea of 'poetic justice' is that the Germans should be paid out in their own coin. Death is not good enough for the Kaiser. He is toured through a veritable United Nations of Hell: first the Greek realms of Dis, then the

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[17] 'The old lady coming from an intensely proud Prussian family, C.J. rubbed it in with a vengeance … The devil never missed an opportunity to jolt and jab her.' (Biographical reminiscence by his son Rudolf Brennan, in the State Library of NSW.)

'Malebolge' and 'Giudecca' from Dante's *Inferno*, until, as a final irony, he is placed in the old Northern Underworld.

> Far beyond the northern cold,
>
> Where the Muspell-lords of old,
>
> Bedded in their lasting state,
>
> Sleep upon their glutted hate
>
> Of the life wherein they warr'd,
>
> Gray vindictive bulks abhorr'd
>
> – Odin's spear no more shall wake
>
> Fenris-wolf or Midgard-snake–
>
> Farther, where the roots of night
>
> Plunge in wells beyond all sight;
>
> Where the execrate caverns are,
>
> Sunk beneath the last dim star
>
> And its sisters' quickening breath;
>
> There the hag-wife Death-in-Death
>
> In her rigid sinful womb,
>
> Self-accurst hath made him room.
>
> Let the evil lie by her
>
> Straitened in that sepulchre,
>
> Where the evil round him craves
>
> Utter death to fill his graves
>
> Doomed to feed, by its own law,
>
> On the ravening of its maw. (Verse 202)

One might have assumed that 'A Chant of Doom' got its Norse flavouring second-hand, from sources like Thomas Gray's 'The Fatal Sisters'. Gray is probably an influence on Brennan's choice of metre, and perhaps on the general idea of a chanted vatic utterance, but according to Lionel Lindsay, Brennan was fond of saying 'The greatest thing in German is the first Edda, which is difficult'.[18] He seems to have consulted the original Norse text *Voluspa* ("The Seeress's Prophecy'), also quoted in Snorri Sturluson's later Prose Edda, for his references, and so used, as he thought, the Norse roots of German literature as a resource to punish German barbarism. The 'Muspell-lords' referred to are the sons of Muspell (fire-creatures) who will destroy the world by fire at Ragnarok, the last day, when the 'Fenris-wolf' and 'Midgard-snake' will also fight against the gods. They are mentioned in both the Poetic Edda and in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, and the word 'Muspell' seems to be related to the destruction of the world by fire in the ninth-century Old High German doomsday poem *Muspilli*. Brennan places hell in (or even beyond) the North, as Dante had, yet finally identifies it with the Norse Niflhel or Niflheim ('Abode-of-darkness'), at one of the roots of the world-tree Yggdrasil (Prose Edda 31-32). So this hell was an anti-German alliance of the classical, the Christian and the Northern pagan. The Furies from Aeschylus are matched in Norse terms by figures thought specially appropriate for a German offender, and there is the added symbolist touch, identifying Germany not only with the damned dwellers in Niflheim, but with the ultimate anti-life principle Death-in-Death, the enemy of the

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[18] Harry F. Chaplin, *A Brennan Collection*, p. 77. (Held in the State Library of New South Wales). According to Chisholm, *Verse*, p. 19, Brennan could also write fluently in Middle High German.

search for what Brennan called '"the life of life"' (Prose 17).[19] The Belgian Day poem 'Quis pro Domino II', May 13, 1915, had explained that opposition more fully:

> The metaphysic Death-in-Death that lurks
>
> Within our world and from its grisly haunt
>
> With breath of chill misgiving seeks to daunt
>
> In vain, the immortal mind its challenge irks,
>
> Incarnate for this time of power, murks
>
> Our human heaven, whereo'er its banners flaunt
>
> Annihilation, while its legions vaunt Destruction.
>
> As their creed is, so their works. (Verse 178)

As a 'hag-wife' in 'A Chant of Doom', Death-in-Death seems a hyper-version of Coleridge's 'Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH / who thicks man's blood with cold'.[20] She stands specifically here for the 'creed' of German atheistic nihilism, supposedly evidenced in the violation of Belgian neutrality and the mass-publicised atrocities of the invasion. 'A Chant of Doom' was accompanied in *The Lone Hand* by a photograph of 'The Ruins of Ypres—Where Fighting Still Continues'. Brennan, looks forward prophetically – much of the poem seems based on the Sibylline *Voluspa* – to promise an eternal post-Apocalyptic doom for Germany, as the poetic and prose Edda commit 'men who swore false oaths and murderers' to a hall on

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[19] In Brennan's introduction to *From Blake to Arnold—Selections from English Poetry, 1783-1853*. The passage is commented on by McAuley, pp. 8-11. The Shelley phrase 'Life of Life' is best known from a lyric in *Prometheus Bound* II.v.47.

[20] S. T. Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Part III.

'Corpse-strand' where they wade through rivers of poison, or, worst of all, to the well Hvergelmir in Niflheim where 'Nidhogg sucks the bodies of the dead' (Poetic Edda 9). Nidhogg ('Striker-that-destroys') is the serpent who gnaws from below at a root of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. Whatever the precise reference, if there is one, Brennan remains preoccupied with the idea of self-devouring punishments, in which German evil feeds voraciously on itself. In his earlier verse, the evil inevitably encountered through desire for Eden is also symbolised by images of horrific consumption: 'shapes of snaky horror, grisly jaw, / cold fear, and scaly fold, and endless maw' (Verse 130). In the war poems, both the dragonish appetite and its victim are unholy manifestations of Germany alone.

For all Brennan's display of knowledge, the extensive medieval references add very little to the thought of his war verse; they merely supply symbolic persons, landscapes and scenarios to dignify commonplace invective, within an unthinkingly polarised understanding of the war as Good *versus* Evil: 'To slay the evil, the will behind that evil, they, who have given themselves to be its flesh and bone, must be slain, their wives and children starved' (Prose 231). The result perfectly realises an analysis Brennan himself had given in 1904 of the corruption of consciousness that results when good and evil are treated as ultimates:

> war is perpetuated once more by the conversion of contraries into contradictions, Good and Evil. The evil is to be restrained. But this is again a law of abstraction and generalization, a violation of the rights of those minute particulars in which life resides. (Prose 92)

Intellectually, Brennan might as well have relied on Christian tradition and Aeschylus for hell, or Revelations, Spenser and Tennyson's *Idylls* for his rhetoric of

the German 'Beast'. Positive medieval figures – Roland, Joan of Arc, Crusaders – are of the Victorian and Edwardian stained-glass variety, semi-allegorical, timeless, and endlessly applicable to present occasions. The most 'medieval' thing about them for Brennan was their ability to illustrate absolute and abstract ideas, and so to fit in seamlessly with his other classical, Renaissance and modern references of the same kind. Part of Brennan's attempt to suggest a pan-European cultural alliance against the Germans is to include images from all eras of Western civilisation in his set of archetypes and oppositions. Hence his Middle Ages offer no resistance to or critique of the past or present. They are used to distract from historical analysis, to give modern causes the appearance of ideological certainty and inevitability, as based upon age-old truths.

In other contexts Brennan was much shrewder about such distortions, including the intellectual dangers of medievalism itself, which he considered a particularly German foible. In a critique of German Romanticism, made around 1909,[21] he wrote that 'the Middle Ages, in themselves, are not romantic, and Romanticism, in itself, is not medieval: but later Romanticism did commit the error of making the Middle Ages into a Golden Age, of identifying them with the ideal synthesis (just as the eighteenth century had romanticized the Greeks)'. Brennan presciently compared as nostalgic fallacies the 'glorification of the "sanity" of Greek art or the *"fromme Innigkeit"* ['pious intimacy'] of medieval art, … [along with]

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[21] 'German Romanticism: A Progressive Definition', *Modern Language Review of New South* Wales, January 1920, in *Prose*, ed. Chisholm, pp. 379-395. Chisholm, pp. 394-95, explains that it was written 'about 1909 or 1910' and 'handed round among his senior German students at the university as a sort of introduction to his lectures on German Romanticism'.

theories of a "pure" Aryan race and language in which the idea of God was revealed through the forms of speech – these are some of the innumerable variations of the one theme' (Prose 385-86). Brennan was teaching this to his students well before 1914, but in the war poems the careful academic distinctions fell apart, and present history was treated as the inevitable outcome of age-old cultural continuities, e.g., German barbarism *versus* French love of liberty.

By Brennan's own analysis, the problems of *A Chant of Doom*, including its stultified medievalism, betray their origins in aspects of his romanticism. One might have expected that the evident presence of the medieval in Australia as an accident of colonialism would disable narratives of pure cultural continuity, deep national character and spontaneous racial self-expression, such as took hold in Europe, and which are well illustrated by Simon Schama's analysis of German memorialisation in his *Landscape and Memory*. Yet Brennan was in no way inhibited by his Australianness from replicating the essentialist medievalism of the European nineteenth century, just as the carnage of the Great War in no way led him to see the European tradition of heroic battle literature as invalidated.[22] His argument for the value of medieval culture was based on the idea of its timelessness: 'medievalism and romanticism stand for that eternal element ... of rapture and ecstasy'. 'Whatever has once deeply interested men, whatever has once possessed their minds and hearts, however imperfect it may be, arises from some eternal energy, it is the effect and impression of a mood' (Prose 127-28).[23] Reading the war poems in the context of

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[22] For an analysis of Australian war literature as 'parochial, conformist and exceptionally heroic', see Gerster, p. 337.

[23] 'Mood' for Brennan means 'a fusion of ... [experience] into a spiritual unity' (McAuley 9) See also Barnes, pp.

Brennan's earlier thought suggests that the eternalising, ahistorical habit of mind fostered by nineteenth-century romanticism encouraged there an incipient racial and cultural discourse that he had earlier restrained, leading him to melt down Blakean 'contraries' into allegorical oppositions couched in the idiom of popular medievalism. The medieval became a medium through which the esoteric complexity of his romantic symbolism could be mutated for the simpler purposes of propaganda.

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161: 'a union of the emotional and the intellectual'. Brennan's second statement in the passage quoted here may be indebted to John Ruskin's comment in *The Stones of Venice*, 1851-53, 10.42, that medieval legends deserve attention 'on this ground, if on no other, that they have once been sincerely believed by good men, and have had no ineffective agency in the formation of the existent European mind'.

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