

# **A World Elsewhere:**

## **A Critical and Biographical Study of the European Influence on the Life and Work of Charles Brasch**

*Sarah Quigley  
St. Hilda's College*

*D. Phil. Thesis  
Michaelmas 1996  
[i.e. 1997] <sup>11</sup>*

*University of Oxford*



## ABSTRACT

### *A World Elsewhere: A Critical and Biographical Study of the European Influence on the Life and Work of Charles Brasch*

Sarah Quigley  
St Hilda's College

D. Phil.  
Michaelmas 1996 [ie 1997] HT

When Charles Brasch died, in 1973, he specified that his private papers - his diaries, letters, and many of his manuscripts - be placed under embargo for thirty years after his death. The external details of his life were, by this time, well-known. He had become a high-profile figure in the field of New Zealand literature, through his critical writings, his role as 'patron', and particularly his twenty-year editorship of the periodical *Landfall*. Yet his reputation as a poet, although established, was neglected both then and now. His poetry is one of central relevance to a contemporary scene; as clearly as any, it reveals the difficulty of writing for, and about, a society which still laboured under the weight of a 'colonial' stigma.

By tracing the movement from his juvenilia to his mature poetry, from his teenage years to adulthood, this study examines the effect of Brasch's personal development on his writing. Partly because of the embargo on his papers, partly because of his secretive nature, his private life has remained a shadow behind poetry which is itself often ambiguous; yet his creative progression was largely determined by the events of this life, both external and internal. Previously, little has been known or written about the decade and a half he spent in Europe. These were crucial years, both in shaping his editorial vision, and in the discovery of his own poetic voice.

By means of personal interviews, and recourse to letters in private collections, his story is told: from his arrival in Oxford in 1927, to his final acceptance of New Zealand as his home, in 1945. The first chapter outlines the three years he spent at St John's College, and the general literary context in which he began to write. Chapter Two covers his brief foray into archaeology, and the resultant poetry and unpublished fiction. The importance of German literature - particularly that of Rilke - to his work becomes the focus of Chapter Three. As a direct result of this influence, the second half of the 1930s was dominated by his search for a voice, and a subject, of his own. Chapter Four details this struggle, and the first tentative New Zealand element in his work.

A teaching job at Great Missenden - the subject of Chapter Five - temporarily distracted Brasch from developing this theme, yet sources reveal that the country of his birth was never far from his mind. Chapters Six and Seven deal with the effect on his poetry of the growing unease in Europe, the difficult split of allegiances to two hemispheres, and his subsequent commitment to England for the duration of the war. Throughout 1944-5, he became involved in script-writing, and the eighth and final chapter examines the extent of his success in this new genre. His return to New Zealand, late in 1945, marked the apparent beginning of a career which, nonetheless, had its origins in experiences half a world away.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank all those on both sides of the world who have made it possible for me to complete this study. I am grateful to the Librarians and Staff of the Hocken and Turnbull Libraries, the Canterbury Public Library, and the Bodleian Library, for their able assistance; and to the many friends, relations, and acquaintances of Brasch's, in England and New Zealand, for welcoming me into their homes and their pasts.

My particular thanks must go to Professor Jon Stallworthy, for his kind and meticulous supervision; to Professor Don McKenzie, for his unstinting encouragement and advice; to Doctor Lyndall Gordon, for her support over the past four years; to Will Murray and Matt Macer-Wright, for their unflagging expertise in the final stages of editing; and to the NZVCC, the William Georgetti Trust, the New Zealand Law Society, the British Council, St Hilda's College, and the Oxford University Offices, whose generosity has made my research in England possible.

Finally, I wish to offer my thanks and love to Margie Quigley, whose endless emotional sustenance and lively literary conversations have carried me through this and many other projects; and to Dave Hepworth, without whose constant help, patience, and caring support I would not have reached this point.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS.....	
INTRODUCTION.....	i
<b>CHAPTER ONE <i>MEETING AND PARTING:1927-30</i> .....</b>	<b>1</b>
SECTION I.....	3
SECTION II.....	5
SECTION III .....	9
SECTION IV .....	14
SECTION V.....	22
SECTION VI.....	28
<b>CHAPTER TWO <i>RED SUN, REMEMBER:1932-4</i> .....</b>	<b>43</b>
SECTION I.....	45
SECTION II.....	47
SECTION III .....	51
SECTION IV .....	55
SECTION V.....	59
SECTION VI .....	66
SECTION VII.....	75
<b>CHAPTER THREE <i>MOUNTAIN-FACE AND HAWK'S CRY:1927-36</i> .....</b>	<b>86</b>
SECTION I.....	89
SECTION II.....	94
SECTION III .....	99
SECTION IV .....	104
SECTION V.....	114
<b>CHAPTER FOUR <i>TO SPEAK IN MY OWN VOICE:1936-9</i> .....</b>	<b>119</b>
SECTION I.....	119
SECTION II.....	125
SECTION III .....	141
SECTION IV .....	149
<b>CHAPTER FIVE <i>PUBLIC AND PERSONAL SPEECH-SONG:1936-8</i> .....</b>	<b>165</b>
SECTION I.....	168
SECTION II.....	178
SECTION III .....	191
SECTION IV .....	199
SECTION V.....	215
<b>CHAPTER SIX <i>MARKING TIME:1939-40</i> .....</b>	<b>220</b>
SECTION I.....	222
SECTION II.....	228
SECTION III .....	237
SECTION IV .....	246
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN <i>WORDS HAVE LOST THEIR TONGUES:1939-44</i> .....</b>	<b>260</b>
SECTION I.....	261
SECTION II.....	270
SECTION III .....	282
SECTION IV .....	293

<b>CHAPTER EIGHT A BARE STAGE, A TROUPE OF PLAYERS:1944-5</b> .....	<b>304</b>
SECTION I.....	306
SECTION II.....	317
SECTION III .....	328
<b>EPILOGUE</b> .....	<b>335</b>
<b>APPENDIX : SELECTED UNPUBLISHED POEMS</b> .....	<b>341</b>
CHAPTER THREE .....	341
CHAPTER FOUR .....	344
CHAPTER FIVE.....	349
CHAPTER SIX.....	357
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	359
<b>SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>365</b>
1. PRIMARY SOURCES.....	365
A. <i>Letters and Manuscripts</i> .....	365
B. <i>Interviews Conducted</i> .....	366
C. <i>Printed Work by Brasch</i> .....	367
2. SECONDARY SOURCES.....	368
A. <i>European Material</i> .....	368
B. <i>New Zealand Material</i> .....	370
C. <i>Journals Referred to Frequently</i> .....	372

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CB	Charles Brasch
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i> (1984)
DG	<i>Disputed Ground</i> (1948)
HG	<i>Home Ground</i> (1974)
Ind.	<i>Indirections</i> (1980)
Ind. MSS	Manuscripts of <i>Indirections</i>
JAWB	Jack Bennett
JB	James Bertram
JC	John Crockett
JS	Joy [E. J.] Scovell
NFO	<i>Not Far Off</i> (1969)
OO	<i>Oxford Outlook</i>
OP	<i>Oxford Poetry</i>
PC	<i>Present Company</i> (1966)
PR	Patrick Roberts
SQ	Sarah Quigley
RS	Rosemary Summers [née Roberts]
TE	<i>The Estate and other poems</i> (1957)
TLP	<i>The Land and the People</i> (1939)
TQ	<i>The Quest</i> (1946)

## INTRODUCTION

Editor, poet, patron, critic: on the stage of New Zealand cultural history, Charles Brasch played several parts. With all, he contributed to the shaping of a literary canon, a task for which he has been acclaimed, and denounced, and once more acclaimed, according to changes in the critical climate. If, in a review of the past century, the 1920s are seen as 'opening night', Brasch is conspicuous by his absence: but his is an influential absence, an ostensible negation of his origins which in effect becomes a positive factor in putting his home country on the cultural map. He was unconscious of it at the time, but the years he spent in Europe from 1927 to 1945 were background research for his future roles back in New Zealand.

Was he drawn to English literary circles because, like so many of his contemporaries, he was inherently Eurocentric? Or was he so influenced by these circles that he then attempted to import an English culture to New Zealand? The answer is both. Born in Dunedin in 1909, he was brought up by his widower father\* who - acutely aware of their Jewish ancestry - believed that an Oxford education for his son would provide the best possible social defence. In the meantime, for similar reasons, he was sent to Waitaki Boys', an exclusive boarding school just north of Oamaru. He had been spending most of his time with his head in a book, which made Hyam uneasy: school, it was hoped, would drive literary nonsense from his head and 'make a man' of him.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the four 'not exactly happy ... but not unhappy'<sup>†</sup> years at Waitaki strengthened Brasch's desire to write poetry, and write it well. Under the guidance of the eminent headmaster, Frank Milner, he immersed himself in English literature: Shakespeare, the

---

\* His mother, Helene, died from complications in childbirth when Brasch was four.

<sup>†</sup> From this point on, unless specified, ellipses in quotations from Brasch's writing are mine; he rarely used them, even in letters.

Romantic poets (whose influence on his own writing lasted well into his university years), the plays of Galsworthy, Synge, Yeats, and Drinkwater. Here, too, he met like-minded friends who became and remained central in his life, most importantly James Bertram and the Rector's son Ian Milner, both of whom followed him to Oxford. And he wrote continuously, at any opportunity: during long evenings of prep, in his dormitory after lights out, on games afternoons which he thankfully escaped through ill-health.

In his second year at school, a poem of his was published in *The Waitakian*.<sup>2</sup> He received a warning from his father: about 'the danger of deluding myself, and drifting, and wasting my life; I must not imagine that I was a born poet'.<sup>3</sup> But 'The Man' (as Frank Milner was generally known) encouraged him, as did Bertram, and he continued to nurse his dreams. His juvenilia is archaic in expression, conventional in form, and self-conscious in tone; it reveals Romantic-Georgian influences which were at odds with the modernist literary scene he was to encounter at Oxford three years later. But such writing was a necessary rite of passage in the slow process of discovering his own style.

The poets he encountered during his teenage years became his literary role-models: Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, early Yeats, Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare. At the time, he scarcely thought about his future: he 'lived increasingly in a climate of friendship and poetry'.<sup>4</sup> But his father became perturbed by his preoccupation with literature; he hoped that Oxford would involve his only son in healthy activity such as rowing, would focus him on a practical career in law or business. With the assistance of Esmond de Beer, a second cousin who had established a reputation as a scholar in Oxford, Brasch was accepted for St John's. At the end of 1926, a year earlier than he had expected to, he left Waitaki for six months of 'civilizing at home' before leaving for England.<sup>5</sup>

These months were largely spent, not with his father, but with his maternal grandfather, Willi Fels. More sympathetic than Hyam, Fels was an important influence in shaping Brasch's tastes; his interests, such as German poetry, were ones which Brasch also adopted

for life. Daily visits were made to Manono, a gracious red-brick house overlooking the harbour: hours were spent reading, or talking of books, painting, and music. Although Fels had lived more than half his life in New Zealand, he had travelled extensively, and had brought back with him vast and valuable collections of books, works of art, and plants. Although Brasch did not realize it at the time, Fels's aim became his own: 'to acclimatize in the new country ... the best ideas and products of older countries'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the first eighteen years of Brasch's life were a preparation for the next eighteen. The education he received, formal and informal, gave him a love of European culture which could only be strengthened by experiencing it first-hand. Throughout the decade and a half he spent in and around England, he slowly came to realize, as Fels had, that he considered New Zealand home. His poetry, which developed immeasurably during this period, reflected his divided interests: he was both excessively influenced by English trends, and indifferent to them. His best poetry was indigenous in focus and he was no less a New Zealander 'for having a patrician voice and a head full of the high arts'.<sup>7</sup> Yet his ideals for a colonial culture remained very much centred in European history, both classical and modern: a bias which became apparent once he returned to New Zealand and began his twenty-year-editorship of *Landfall*. In 1927, as *The Remuera* set sail from Auckland a few days before his eighteenth birthday, he had little idea of the difficulties implicit in reconciling attachments to two vastly different worlds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947* [hereafter referred to as *Ind.*] (Wellington, 1980), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Wind', in *The Waitakian*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (May 1924), p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind.*, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ind.*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Ind.*, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind.*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> MacD. P. Jackson, 'Poetry: Beginnings to 1945', *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland, 1991), ed. Terry Sturm, p. 343.

## CHRONOLOGY:

**A brief outline of significant events  
in Brasch's life, during the period 1927-45.**

<b>August 1927</b>	Arrives in England.
<b>October 1927</b>	Begins at Oxford.
<b>December 1927</b>	First trip to Italy (Rome).
<b>Summer 1928</b>	Trip to France and Germany; CB discovers Rilke.
<b>December 1928</b>	Second trip to Italy.
<b>March 1929</b>	Trip to Hanover and Berlin.
<b>Summer 1929</b>	Course at Sorbonne; third trip to Italy (Florence).
<b>Summer 1930</b>	Oxford finals; trip to Munich, Salzburg, Italy.
<b>October 1930</b>	Sails for New Zealand.
<b>January 1931- December 1931</b>	In New Zealand (Dunedin and Auckland).
<b>January 1932</b>	Planning of <i>Phoenix</i> , with Bertram and Milner.
<b>February 1932</b>	Sails for England.
<b>September 1932</b>	Bertram arrives in England.
<b>December 1932- January 1933</b>	First season in Egypt.
<b>December 1933- January 1934</b>	Second season in Egypt.
<b>July 1934</b>	Milner arrives in England.
<b>August 1934</b>	Trip to Russia with Bertram and Milner.
<b>December 1934- January 1935</b>	Third (and final) season in Egypt.
<b>Summer 1935</b>	Trip to Ireland with Hyam and Lesley.
<b>December 1935- January 1936</b>	To Treligga, Cornwall.
<b>January 1936</b>	Lesley taken ill.
<b>Summer 1936</b>	To Great Missenden with Lesley.
<b>April 1937</b>	Trip to Florence.

<b>May 1937</b>	To Great Missenden, to begin teaching at the Abbey.
<b>January 1938</b>	Sails for New Zealand with Lesley.
<b>Winter 1938</b>	In Christchurch, New Zealand.
<b>August 1938</b>	Sails for England via America, to meet Bertram and Milner.
<b>December 1938</b>	Moves to Grayshott with Lissie.
<b>January 1939</b>	Lesley dies.
<b>April 1939</b>	To Bishop's Barn, Wiltshire.
<b>30 June 1939</b>	Sails for America; intending to travel on to New Zealand.
<b>July 1939</b>	In New York.
<b>August 1939</b>	Meets Hyam in Hawaii.
<b>September 1939</b>	War begins; CB returns to New York.
<b>November 1939</b>	Arrives back in England.
<b>December 1939- January 1940</b>	At Binsted, with Lissie, Crockett, and Cox.
<b>July 1940</b>	Registration.
<b>September 1940</b>	Lawn Road flat bombed; CB moves to Hemel Hempstead.
<b>February 1941</b>	Medical examination.
<b>March 1941</b>	Begins firewatching.
<b>July 1941</b>	Begins at Foreign Office.
<b>Summer 1943- August 1944</b>	Writing script on Job ('The Chosen') for Adelphi Players.
<b>June 1945</b>	Holiday at Raasay with the de Beers.
<b>July 1945</b>	Begins writing mime-play, <i>The Quest</i> .
<b>August 1945</b>	War ends.
<b>December 1945</b>	Finishes <i>The Quest</i> .
<b>10 December 1945</b>	Sails for New Zealand, to live there permanently.

## **Chapter One**

*Meeting and Parting: 1927-30*

## CHAPTER ONE

### MEETING AND PARTING: 1927-30

‘We reached Waterloo’, Brasch wrote, ‘on a wet warm Saturday of August 1927’.<sup>1</sup> Just eighteen, fresh from the sheltered environment of a private New Zealand boarding school, his initial response was an immense bewilderment. ‘A brimming past, an impending future, and this overwhelming present’, he recalled, ‘met together in a flood which I could not take in; most of what I saw and heard touched me for a moment and was gone’. Although the arrival in London was a blur, that August afternoon proved to be a turning-point in his life. He was to spend the best part of the next two decades in England and Europe, and these years were to see him mature into that which he most longed to be: a poet of recognized standing.

Although he remained little known in English literary circles, it was during his time as a student at Oxford that he first began to work at his craft and to publish verse. His undergraduate years at St John’s seemed to him to be wasted, academically; in retrospect, he perceived them to be the beginning of the discovery of his own poetic ‘voice’. His lifelong friend, James Bertram, also believed this period to be of paramount importance to Brasch’s later poetry and prose, a period which represented the union of two very different civilizations: ‘If at first he moved uncertainly between these two worlds, by the end he was fully at home in both’.<sup>2</sup> The three years at Oxford provided him with literary models which, initially, he attempted to emulate: it was some years before he began to write poems which expressed his identity as a New Zealander.

The colonial dilemma was one which many of his compatriots were also struggling to resolve. The poet D'Arcy Cresswell, who had been in London for some years before Brasch's arrival, succinctly summed up the problem of divided and dividing influences:

The base of my blood is in New Zealand; I feel that when I have been in London too long. But the base of my taste is in London; and I feel that if I am in New Zealand for too long.<sup>3</sup>

Brasch faced such a conflict of loyalties earlier than most: he was still at his private boys' boarding school when his father, Hyam, wrote to him suggesting entrance to Oxford the following year:

[he] had never mentioned such a thing before, and as if I was being offered a weekend in Christchurch, I said yes. What going to Oxford meant, what it might lead to, I had no idea at all. Neither, I think, had he.... I cannot remember that my future was ever discussed at length in a rational manner, before then or afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

His father's ambitions for him, he believed, were self-motivated: '[all] related to what he wanted me to become, none of them to me as in fact I was'.<sup>5</sup> An Oxford education would procure success in sport (rowing in particular), a career in law or business, and a social standing which 'neither Dunedin society nor any other could dispute'.<sup>6</sup> And so Brasch left Waitaki Boys' a year earlier than his classmates, at the end of 1926. The six months before he sailed were spent in Dunedin with his grandfather, Willi Fels, who encouraged him to read widely as an informal preparation for what was to come.

## I

Shortly after beginning at St John's, Brasch's mind was made up as to why he was there: 'I had not come to Oxford to get a degree, but without any defined object, simply for a whim of my father's, on his side, and on mine, secretly, to confirm my tastes and interests, and become a poet'.<sup>7</sup> Literary talent certainly abounded around him. Oxford in the late 1920s boasted a generation of poets who, even then, were rising to prominence. Auden, a graduate of Christ Church, and Wadham student Day-Lewis were co-editing the renowned *Oxford Poetry*. Stephen Spender could be spotted at lectures and literary meetings; the flamboyant MacNeice, 'elegant and supercilious',<sup>8</sup> was observed from a distance, and Clare Parsons appeared to a diffident Brasch to be 'all intellect'.<sup>9</sup> These young poets provided obvious role-models, and he soon followed their example by submitting poems to the university journals of the time.

The newspaper *Cherwell* accepted poetry, but the two main forums for writing were the *Oxford Outlook* and *Oxford Poetry*, both published by Basil Blackwell of Broad Street. The latter was a slim volume published only once a year, but the *Outlook* appeared termly and cast its net wider, printing not only student fiction and poetry but also reviews and opinion pieces. By the time of its tenth anniversary, Parsons was able to list in his editorial an impressive array of past contributors, including Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden.<sup>10</sup> Other well-known names recurred on the contents pages of these magazines, both as contributors and editors: W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis, Clare Parsons,

---

\* In *Indirections*, Brasch has used 'Clere' for 'Clare' throughout.

Bernard Spencer, John Hilton, Arthur Calder-Marshall, Edouard Roditi, Richard Goodman, and Jonathan Curling. As MacNeice observed, 'the only serious activity was poetry'.<sup>11</sup>

This circle of talented and assured writers was intimidating to outsiders, particularly to a shy 'colonial'. Brasch had no publishing record, nor did he possess the advantage of belonging to what Valentine Cunningham, in his objective critique *British Writers of the Thirties*, labels as 'the Old Boy Network'.<sup>12</sup> In an appraisal of the *Outlook* in 1929, Parsons showed a consciousness of the domination of the literary scene by his cronies. 'Probably the best talent in Oxford', he wrote reasonably, 'does not obtrude itself beyond the narrow circle of fortunate acquaintance; all the more need, therefore, on the part of the editors, for patience, tact, and assiduity in digging it out'.<sup>13</sup>

Parsons' own editorial preference was for modernist techniques. Unless penned by a member of the clique, quiet, reflective Georgian-Romantic poems of the sort that Brasch was producing were unlikely to be accepted. Significantly, when the editorship of the *Oxford Outlook* changed from Parsons to Calder-Marshall in November 1929, Brasch's 'The Walker by Night' was chosen for publication. The following year Spender and Spencer selected two of his poems, 'Pyramid' and 'To Plautia', for *Oxford Poetry*. By this time, Brasch had been submitting poetry unsuccessfully to these journals for nearly three years. He later deprecated his university writings, but his lack of 'connections' in literary circles had contributed in part to his struggle.

---

\* He cites the case of Auden publishing one of Isherwood's poems in *Oxford Poetry* in 1927: Isherwood had never been at Oxford but was an old school-friend of Auden's, and the poem was published anonymously (*Oxford Poetry* [hereafter referred to as *OP*] (1927), p. 138).

## II

M. C. D'Arcy's review of the annual selection of *Oxford Poetry* for 1929 (edited by MacNeice and Spender) appeared in the *Oxford Outlook* in November of that year. The names he singled out for mention were largely, and not surprisingly, from Parsons' 'narrow circle of fortunate acquaintance'. MacNeice and Calder-Marshall are described as two of the 'most accomplished poets in this book', and Spender's work 'pleases most of all'.<sup>14</sup> D'Arcy's major criticism concerns the self-consciousness of this writing, the censorship of spontaneous expression which he sees as reflecting the 'prevalent mood of the age'.

Certainly the young Oxbridge poets saw themselves to be a generation carrying the flag for a progressive poetry. T. S. Eliot was their new master, and the experimental techniques of E. E. Cummings had become fashionable. The Georgian movement had had its heyday. In the disillusionment of the post-war years there was an increasing emphasis on realism, and a reaction against the escapist tendencies of Georgian pastoral school. A scathing summation of *Oxford Poetry 1928*, written by Peter Rose-Pulham, appeared in the rival periodical in November of that same year:

Why do all these AUNT poets scribble away so furiously about Spring, and larks! [...] And if they must why can they not make themselves comprehensible? For description they should study Mr Curling, Mr Brooke, and Mr Parsons, all of whose poems should be read at least ten times by everyone.<sup>15</sup>

'Mr Parsons', editor of the *Oxford Outlook* at that time, more moderately incorporated the same theme into his editorial of February 1929:

The genuine artist does not deny the forces of tradition, indeed (particularly in youth) he will scarcely be able to escape the influence of some forces; nevertheless, if he is sincere he will always be beginning again at the beginning, and he will aim at tackling afresh the difficult problem of expression in his own individual way.<sup>16</sup>

And MacNeice, in a review of the first number of the Cambridge magazine *The Venture*, jested satirically about the ‘tolerable Georgianisms’ of Drinkwater and Beaglehole.<sup>17</sup> The call by the leading Oxbridge poets was for ‘modern’ literature: for the disintegration of traditional form, and for realistic subject-matter.

Over the next few years, the focus of the ‘MacSpaunday’ group was on technique.<sup>18</sup> (This was particularly true of Parsons, who was vigorous in promoting the style of E. E. Cummings and who, MacNeice commented dryly, was ‘eager above all to be contemporary’.)<sup>19</sup> The Georgian ‘milk-and-soda’, they said, encouraged intellectual laziness.<sup>20</sup> Despite their poetical witch-hunt, for a while both the slim *Oxford Poetry* and its rival published a mix of the old and the new. Brasch was not the only one who continued to write in the Georgian-Romantic style which reflected the influence of Brooke, Flecker, and de la Mare. The 1928 edition of *Oxford Poetry* represented startlingly contrasting styles. Mary Crozier’s pastoral ‘Sonnet’ and W. M. Phillips’s ‘L’Après-Midi D’une Faune’, examples of high Georgian verse, are cheek-by-jowl with work such as Parsons’ ‘Dancing’, which represents the other end of Oxford’s literary spectrum:

opening and casting a  
shutting glance CHARLESTON her  
knees, wobbling CHARLESTON her  
head i hope she bites CHARLESTON her  
tongue[....]<sup>21</sup>



The Romantic poets whom he had discovered during his school years still provided the main inspiration for the verse of his early twenties, as is evident in the three formal, traditionally structured poems published during his time in Oxford. With a rare glint of objective humour, Brasch later wrote of the prevailing bent of his chosen sources and subject matter: ‘Shelley and water, Keats and water, sometimes Yeats and water, but mostly water’.<sup>24</sup>

A regular attender of literary meetings, and an avid reader of all poetry including the most recent, he could hardly have remained unaware of the growing unfashionableness of his poetical inclinations. By the end of 1929, however, the *Oxford Outlook* took a slight swing back to more traditional forms, when Arthur Calder-Marshall succeeded the ‘contemporary’ Parsons as editor. Consequently, in the November issue of that year, Brasch’s name appeared on the contributors’ page, preceded by the names of Bernard Spencer, Stephen Spender, and Jonathan Curling: not only three of Oxford’s most prominent poets but three who often displayed modernist tendencies. Brasch’s ‘The Walker by Night’ reveals no such influence. Facing Curling’s fast-paced and personal ‘Prolove’, it seems even quieter and more stately by contrast:

In the twilight  
 In the morning of the cloudy moon,  
 At the mingling of the silence-bounden trees  
 And the deep sky whose darkness wakes the stars  
 When the last bird has sung and taken flight  
 And the day-wind fled seaward from his forest home,  
 Comes one....<sup>25</sup>

The absolutes of this poem are the external ones of the natural world. Brasch’s ‘walker’ is an unnamed figure whose thoughts are released by the gathering darkness; this is the Romantic solitary whose reflections revolve around the harmonious relationship between man and earth. Brasch’s diction, too, is archaic in its Romanticism and reveals his poetic

immaturity. Phrases such as ‘unveilèd splendour’ and ‘the great lamps of heaven’ give the poem a stilted air. Yet it stands as testimony to the kind of poetry towards which he was already moving: reflective landscape pieces which relied on imagery rather than form for their effect.

### III

The following year, Brasch’s last at Oxford, *Oxford Poetry* accepted two other of his poems, ‘To Plautia’ and ‘Pyramid’. Although shorter and more lyrical than ‘The Walker’, they were once again written in traditional style, on Romantic subject matter:

Build the world up, O hands  
Against the falling days,  
And build it up O eyes  
With spoil from the heavenly hunt....<sup>26</sup>

Yet these poems reveal an already developing poetic maturity. There is more restraint in their slight forms, and certain lines prefigure the questing style which became a hallmark of Brasch’s later work:

And the brain stops, and the heart asks,  
Who is there?<sup>27</sup>

All three poems played a necessary part in what proved to be a 'long tedious painful apprenticeship'.<sup>28</sup> Contained in their stilted phrases were themes which became integral to his later work. The visual scene of 'The Night, Luxor', a poem in the first collection *The Land and the People* (1939),<sup>29</sup> is almost identical to that of 'The Walker'. Once again night is presented as a living spirit; once again, in the second half of the poem, a silent walker appears. But 'Luxor' is less than half the size of its earlier counterpart, and each of its lines is half the length. In its very simplicity, it effectively creates a mood of expectancy and mystery.

Phrases are now less conventional, and less clumsy. Trees are no longer 'silence-bounden' but are 'dumb'. The pedantic line 'the last bird has sung and taken flight' is replaced by a more evocative image: 'Heavy birds swing/ Darkly across the dark'. Language, too, is pared down for clean and effective lines. Brasch strips his writing of archaic Romanticisms, instead making use of repetition and alliteration. In the poem's conclusion, a hiatus in the penultimate line momentarily suspends the rhythm, and the reader is then dropped gently, inexorably, into the last line:

And there moves one  
Softly as water and wind  
Over their shoals and sand  
And moonlit trees and stone -  
A shadow slow among the still shadows.

The opening, too, shows Brasch dealing with familiar subject matter in a less predictable way. 'In the twilight/ In the morning of the cloudy moon' is replaced with three slight lines revealing a deft use of both personification and enjambment:

Wind breathes and water talks  
Softly, for the high moon walks  
Silencing the stars.

This poem and 'The Walker by Night', so similar in content, show the technical distance travelled in the ten years after Brasch's departure from Oxford. The Georgian-Romantic influences, so pervasive in his university years, are still evident, but the later poem speaks in a voice of its own.

In his indebtedness to Nature's provision of an exemplar for art, Brasch displayed not only an affinity with Wordsworth and Shelley but also with a more recent writer: Gerard Manley Hopkins. His was an influence which persisted as late as the 1970s. 'Queenstown Park', published posthumously in 1974, is reminiscent of Hopkins in its compounds, its compressed simplicity of expression, and its use of natural icons:

Waves that wind-ride  
With a volley of voices  
Sinking, sighing,  
Fondled in tree-fold  
Shade-slumbered,  
To leaf-voice, life-voice  
Summer sounding  
Or winter-mouthed warlock;  
Lambent leaf-pen  
Heart-still haven,  
Pointing, still.<sup>30</sup>

The influence of Eliot, however, so much more prevalent in the work of the young 'moderns', was one which Brasch consciously resisted. After graduating, he began to branch

away from his old poetic allegiances in favour of the later Yeats, Rilke, and Auden, but it was to be some time before he felt comfortable with Eliot's work:

I remember feeling distinctly inhibited by T. S. Eliot, because his work had been set up - so it seemed - as a model for poets writing today; people I knew at Oxford accepted it as such, but I did not yet understand it.<sup>31</sup>

But by the mid-1930s, he was forced to acknowledge that Eliot had already affected his development as a poet. Early in 1936, staying in a cottage at Treligga in Cornwall, he had the time and mental space to reassess his attitude. So radical had the change been that he now considered Eliot to be the 'presiding genius' of the time. He admitted his about-face in a letter to Scovell:

[now] there's ... a feeling of freedom and of serious spontaneous experiment in the air; while in our time at Oxford the deadening black cloud of Eliot's influence overhung everything. It was extremely actual to me. It was, finally, a sobering influence, I think without doubt, and enormously fruitful, like a hard winter ... but terrible to despair while it lasted. And now we are free of it, and the better for it.<sup>32</sup>

Thirty years later, his writing was still bearing the 'fruit' of this influence. His lecture on the nature of the arts, *Present Company* (1966),<sup>33</sup> refers several times to the *Four Quartets*, and turns on the same themes: the 'still point of the turning world', and the universal dance. Yet these had been central in his writing long before the 1960s: had appeared, in fact, in 'Pyramid', where the mind and the senses build a world to endure 'against the falling days':

And anchor it with bands  
Of dreams time cannot blunt,  
You thoughts that are most wise.

To have this poem accepted by *Oxford Poetry* in 1930 had been a triumph which nothing could blunt for him. The following March, he received a brief mention in a review by M. C. D'Arcy, who concludes his 'Homeric catalogue' with the words:

there are others (I should not have omitted Pyramid), but I have said enough to indicate the variety of 1930 Oxford Poetry and to show that despite inequalities, affectations, excessive attention to technical tricks and devices, there is much to read and enjoy.<sup>34</sup>

D'Arcy, as is evident from his review the previous year, favoured poetry which did not rely on deliberate literary cleverness for effect; the simplicity of 'Pyramid' clearly appealed to him.

Contributions to *Oxford Poetry* were arranged alphabetically, so it was luck rather than editorial decision which placed a piece by Burra opposite Brasch's other poem. Where Curling's 'Prolove' had accentuated the stilted expression of 'The Walker by Night', Burra's 'The Season' forms a pleasing pair with 'To Plautia'. Both poets use imagery from the natural world, creating colourful poems which glow on the page. But Burra simply portrays the waning of winter into spring, whereas Brasch uses external detail to convey an internal conviction: that art, like nature, has an enduring relevance. The link between the natural world and one of artifice, created by dramatists and poets, is deftly conveyed in a single phrase: 'like old masks/ Half bleached with the moth-white air'. Human knowledge is described as slipping away 'Like the strange marks of frost/ The sun melts from the wall'. In sleep, however, memory returns to '[bend] the grass of the lids'. Like 'Pyramid', this poem stands as early testimony to Brasch's conviction that a work of art both justifies and outlives

its creator's existence. Unlike 'Pyramid', it shows the beginnings of a preference for natural imagery in order to express human truths.

These truths, Brasch told Auckland Gallery Associates in 1965, had 'rattled' in his head for thirty-five years, ever since he had begun to write poetry and, 'from the age of eighteen, to drink in painting and sculpture and architecture'.<sup>35</sup> From this young age, he attempted to clarify creeds which were to become central in his art. Then and later, he believed the poetic form to be the ultimate expression of these creeds. 'Prose', he said, 'is the medium of those who have not been granted the gift of poetry'.<sup>36</sup> Many times during his university days, with so little poetry published, he wondered whether he possessed any gift at all. Yet warring with his extreme diffidence was a conviction in his work which kept him writing.

#### IV

The very lack of confidence which meant Brasch was overlooked by the main literary clique brought him to the notice of one of the few female writers at Oxford: E. J. Scovell. At a tea party in the rooms of Colin Roberts (a mutual friend),\* the two were drawn to each other by their mutual reserve. Their friendship grew slowly at first, but Brasch found Scovell's example inspiring from the start. An undergraduate at Somerville, she was already publishing in the university journals and was a close friend of Spender's. Small, slight, with a vivid face and brilliant eyes, she was undeniably attractive. She was not, however, intimidating in the

---

\* See Section VI, pp. 34-8.

way that the flamboyant MacNeice was, as he cut a colourful figure as he strode through the cobbled streets. Nor had she made a name for herself in the world of external publishing: whereas Auden published a private collection in 1928 and two years later had his *Poems* accepted by Eliot at Fabers, and Spender's first collection appeared while he was still at University College.

Her poetry, too, was of the sort that appealed to Brasch. She was singled out for mention in D'Arcy's review of *Oxford Poetry 1930* as producing work free from 'the regarding impulse'. Modest and quietly reflective, in fairly traditional forms, her poems bore little resemblance to the experimental work which was becoming increasingly prevalent in university publications. The fact that there were those who wrote conservative, personal work and still managed to achieve publication was encouraging.

In the late 1920s, there were several students at the women's college of Somerville who were considered 'writers': Mary Crozier, Phoebe Ashburner, E. M. Crawford, and Dorothea Matthews. Somewhat stereotypically, the work of these women tended to be in direct contrast to that of their (better-known) male counterparts. Much of it was traditional, structured, lyrical work, often based on the pastoral themes scorned by Parsons, MacNeice, and Curling. Once again, however, Joy Scovell stood apart. If she used natural imagery it was not as an end in itself but was to convey, and objectify, personal observations. Even at this relatively early stage, her poetry combined human and descriptive elements, and employed neither modernist techniques nor hackneyed Georgian expressions.

Scovell had, Brasch believed, already achieved her own distinct poetic voice, just as Auden, Spender, and MacNeice had. He saw its calm certainty as reflecting her steadfast personality. Later, when assessing the stifling effect Eliot's influence had had on his development, he compared himself unfavourably to Joy. He was 'fatally susceptible to influences of that kind'; she, on the other hand, had managed to keep her artistic integrity.

'Perhaps you were detached even there', he teased her gently, 'single-minded as you are, enviable one!'<sup>37</sup> And, writing from Great Missenden in 1936, he once again voiced this belief:

Thank you so much for the long letter and the poem.... [They are] so much an expression of you - of your vision which is so deeply, solely, your own.<sup>38</sup>

The ability to write in an inimitable way was one which he greatly envied. He felt himself to be trapped in a 'cloud of contradictions, not knowing what [he] wanted except ... to write poetry'.<sup>39</sup> His Oxford contemporaries, although young, already seemed assured. Tributes to MacNeice and Auden which Brasch wrote years later express admiration for their distinct voices. MacNeice's death, for example, is lamented as the passing of an 'unbribeable' poet:

Like no other, salty, himself,  
Unafraid to act himself only,  
To live his own life....<sup>40</sup>

'Paying my Devoirs', addressed to Auden, acknowledges a lifetime of inspiration which had its origins in the days at Oxford. Like MacNeice, Auden had the gift of expressing the multiplicity of life in a personal way:

Taking the whole language  
You make the hot world yours  
To speak of human kind....<sup>41</sup>

To Scovell, too, Brasch dedicated a poem. In 'To Joy Scovell',<sup>42</sup> he wrote of her skill in illuminating 'the inward parts, the locked/ Soul': a reference to both her reserve and her

ability to break through this reserve with words. He himself struggled to make the poetry sing his innermost feelings. He sent several drafts to Scovell during the 1930s, but continued to feel uncertain that he had captured the essence of his subject.

The poem was begun during the winter of 1935-6, which he spent in a cottage in Cornwall. He did not send it to Scovell for some months. After settling in Great Missenden the following summer, he copied out a draft by hand and enclosed it, without comment, in a letter.<sup>43</sup> This early version emphasizes, to a greater degree than the published poem, the distance which Scovell maintained from others. The ending expresses Brasch's own sense of being denied full knowledge of Joy's soul:

But where I lose you  
Slow over dead lands of silence and fear  
Freed now at your falling, breaks the day.

The following May, writing from New Zealand, he sent a revised draft of the poem on which he had been working for some time:

This morning I wrote another version of the last 6 lines of my poor poem to you.... I've had a proper outburst of writing - nothing like it since the winter I was in Cornwall. The final result may not be much; but if only 3 or 4 presentable poems come out of it that will be good, and I shall not feel I've quite dried up. Your poem I'm a little more satisfied with than before, but it will never be good enough, alas.<sup>44</sup>

In its final form the poem pays tribute to Scovell's 'serene clear-seeming' way. This, Brasch believed, was the key to success: poetry written without the distraction of external

influences. His poem to MacNeice admits the same, but is addressed to 'a man [he] admired never daring to know'. The homage to Auden twice mentions the fact that he was 'unknown' personally, and 'unknowing' of his importance to Brasch. In contrast, the poem for Scovell is written for a friend, although cryptic phrases disguise the strength of feeling:

From that slow ladder into silence, turn  
 For me once only, and silent, your vows intact,  
 Unseeing, without disquiet. Light upon  
 Your face illumines the inward parts, the locked  
 Soul, and earth's dance and steadfastness: again  
 Dulled sights grow living and related, the marked  
 Enemies or friends dissimulate, and tricked  
 Must change their roles, and hearts on sleeves are worn.

His regard for Scovell extended beyond the personal. Despite his admiration for the assured styles of Auden and Spender, Brasch was not influenced by those poets until much later - nor by MacNeice at any time.\* Their confidence and prowess impressed him more than their literary techniques: 'I admired them personally more than their poems'.<sup>45</sup> Of any contemporary influences, Scovell's work most affected his own developing style, and the themes she chose were close to his own. A poem such as her 'Angels Carved in the Church Roof'<sup>46</sup> focused on external detail both to express the passing of time, and to emphasize the similarly enduring qualities of stone and man-made art. Brasch saw the same enduring quality in her, and drew on the natural world for metaphors to describe her: 'she was a flower, frail and strong, a flower of wind-moulded rock'.<sup>47</sup>

---

\* By the mid-1930s, however, as with Eliot, he began to revise his opinion of MacNeice's work. He wrote to Scovell: 'oddly enough I think I may begin to find Louis MacNeice more sympathetic ... what interests me greatly is the exploration of language, using words almost as toys.... though the results may seldom be poetry, I think they are useful and not to be discouraged. I have to go back here on much of my own impatience and despair' (29 January [1936]).

Without adhering to the tired pastoral tradition, Scovell also turned to Nature for imagery which conveyed human truths. The technique appealed to Brasch, and he began to develop it in his own poetry. The touchstones of his first two volumes were the same elemental ones at the heart of a poem by Scovell published in the *Oxford Outlook* in 1929, entitled 'The Division':

For through this lucid day  
Deep in the tranquil and pale sea,  
Small native birds make free  
With the cool light, and tilt and play;  
But I am held apart  
And only feel the slow waves beat  
(Long flood, and long retreat)  
The rock partition of my heart.<sup>48</sup>

Although at this time Brasch was poetically unsure of himself, he felt a strong affinity with her 'complete, finished poems', which were 'traditional in form and expression'.<sup>49</sup> His tribute to Scovell appeared in *The Land and the People*, thirty years before his poems to Auden and MacNeice appeared. The lesser-known female writer provided him with a more immediate, though no less lasting, inspiration.

In the years after coming down from Oxford, Scovell lived near Brasch in Primrose Hill and became one of his most constant companions. She was, too, one of the few of his English friends to see the New Zealander in him. At St John's, he had been miserably conscious of being a 'colonial of no education ... wholly ignorant of England and English life and Oxford ways'.<sup>50</sup> The colonial tag was one which was prevalent in college circles at this time, and Scovell believed this to be one of the primary reasons for Brasch's personal and artistic diffidence. Yet gradually this identity became less of an embarrassment and, during the years

of 1934-5, Brasch's rooftop flat at No. 5 St Edmund's Terrace became a base for visiting New Zealanders.\* There was a 'continual coming and going of friends and relations, to meals, to stay ... always to talk'.<sup>51</sup> Scovell, living just across the park in the quiet, tree-lined Ainger Road, was one of the most frequent visitors and enjoyed becoming part of his 'island of New Zealand far from home'.<sup>52</sup> There she met various Hallenstein relations, including Brasch's schoolgirl cousins Elespie and Eunoe, who were to tour Europe with Aunts Kate and Emily - the younger sisters of Brasch's mother, Helene.

The flat in St Edmund's Terrace was shared with Brasch's own younger sister, Lesley, who arrived in England in May of 1934.† Although the practical 'Lel' shared much of his daily life, in both character and interests he had far more in common with Scovell. Hours were spent reading and commenting on each other's poetry (with the 'uncritical judgements of the young'),<sup>53</sup> at other times they explored London together. Through Joy, Brasch became acquainted with the city from a writer's perspective. Her quiet companionship and particular vision, he found, sharpened his own way of seeing, which in turn improved his poetry: 'She made me more aware of weather and light and atmosphere, of the trees and birds of the Park and Hill, of streets, houses, people and their lives'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet the friendship which enriched his life also highlighted his own failure. 'I felt my poems and myself', he wrote, 'trivial by comparison'.<sup>55</sup> His first memories of Scovell connected her with Spender and the 'other luminaries' of the university literary clique, from which he felt excluded. Although her work was published in the Oxford journals, and throughout the 1930s in *Time and Tide*, the *Weekend Review*, the *New Statesman*, *Life* and

---

\* The row of yellow stucco terrace houses in which Brasch's flat was situated has since been demolished and replaced with a grim concrete apartment-block. The view from No. 5, which used to take in 'the dome of St Paul's float[ing] on the green wave of the Park trees' (*Ind.*, p. 227), has been obscured by a similar building.

† In the winter of 1934-5, however, Brasch was to be in Egypt and Scovell needed lodgings; during these months she stayed in St Edmund's Terrace with Lesley.

*Letters*, and the *Adelphi*, like him she had difficulty in securing editorial approval. He persisted, however, in praising her writing, and denigrating his own. 'Charles was', Scovell said later, 'of a very humble nature, which made him possibly ready to exaggerate the qualities of his friends'.<sup>56</sup>

There were more parallels between the two than Brasch saw at the time. The reasons he ascribed to the rejection of Scovell's work were equally applicable to his own:

Editors did not like her work because it was quiet and unfashionable; its direct truthfulness and grace and beautiful economy made too little noise to win their attention, yet it seemed to me among the truest poetry then being written. Joy was too retiring to approach editors herself.... Nothing came to her easily, neither living nor writing ... poems were forced out of her, fruit of necessity.<sup>57</sup>

Brasch was equally retiring by nature, but in his third year at St John's he had summoned up enough courage to approach Basil Blackwell about publishing a collection of his verse. Blackwell was both tactful and kind to the white-faced undergraduate (who was supported faithfully by Colin Roberts). He advised, Brasch remembered,

to try publishing more poems in periodicals first, so that my work would become known and would interest readers, who would then be readier to buy and read a collection. It was sound advice, for which I cannot be too grateful. I should never have lived down the derision that book must have brought me, if it had been published.<sup>58</sup>

It was not until 1938 that his first volume of poetry was published, by which time he felt acutely that he had been left behind by his contemporaries: 'I was nearly thirty, and nothing

yet to show for my life'.<sup>59</sup> In fact, many of the leading lights from his Oxford days were now drifting in much the same way, as an assessment by MacNeice in the mid-1930s revealed:

I looked around at my friends. Graham [Shepard] was still writing captions for the *Illustrated London News* but he was not *writing*. John Hilton after taking architectural courses in Germany and London could not decide whether he would not prefer to be a university lecturer in philosophy. Adrian [Green-Armytage] owing to the Slump had failed to get his job in the British Museum and had consented to enter a stockbroker's office in Bath.<sup>60</sup>

Neither had Scovell published a collection, but this was of little consolation. For Brasch remained deeply convinced that, whether or not it was recognized, her work far surpassed his own.

## V

Although eventually overcoming the shyness with which he had struggled at Oxford, Brasch remained an essentially private man. Even with his closest friends he kept a part of himself secret, untouched. The paradox of his nature continually surprised two ex-New Zealand friends of his, Dan and Winnie Davin,\* who had him to stay several times in their Oxford home. Here was a man with a great gift for friendship but with a deep 'well of reserve'.<sup>61</sup>

---

\* Dan Davin worked for a number of years as Academic Publisher at the Oxford University Press. During Brasch's editorship of *Landfall*, he submitted prose contributions from England (refer Keith Ovenden, *A Fighting Withdrawal* (Oxford, 1996)).

Anne Crockett, the widow of the painter John Crockett, knew him even better but thought of him in a similar way. Even with her and John, he was 'an essentially solitary person, a great one for being by himself'.<sup>62</sup>

The instinct to maintain a distance between himself and others was one which Brasch had learnt during childhood. Forced to withdraw from his dominating father in order to preserve his own identity, he suffered conflicting feelings:

[My father] used to complain, to me and to others of the family, that when I was with him I shut up like an oyster, so that he had no idea what went on inside me, what I thought or what I wanted. The reproach shook me, at first; guilty again. But later I found some satisfaction, even if guilty satisfaction, in thinking of it. My desperate strategy had been successful, then: I had preserved my life, my real life: it was mine, and mine alone. But I had shut him out only because I was forced to, instinctively, in self-defence; he had made it impossible for me to be free and open with him, to be myself.<sup>63</sup>

Oxford represented a new freedom, but the earlier strategy took its toll, not only personally but poetically. While his contemporaries were discovering their own styles, he was still taking refuge in imitation. The problem lasted long after his university days. As late as 1969, he published a series of poems in *Not Far Off* focusing on this very theme:

To speak out is more desperate than to keep silence,  
To open the heart is to bleed to death surely.<sup>64</sup>

Ironically, although openly acknowledging the problem, by doing this very thing he neatly avoided exposing his inner self.

The Oxford poets of the late 1920s ‘spoke out’ in a bold and innovative way. By asserting the importance of the individual, they were returning to the doctrine of the Romantics, but theirs was less introspective work. They displayed - at times flaunted - their private feelings for public consumption. Few of those who later became known for their left-wing beliefs showed interest in writing political poetry during their time as undergraduates.\* Technically, their attention was turned toward experimental typography and vocabulary often designed to shock: thematically, toward the human and the social.† The tendency to write poetry which incorporated not only Romantic and spiritual but also physical love increased during the early 1930s. Writers such as Bernard Spencer gave their writing a new edge by expressing the heightening of the senses through sexuality:

I saw that in her love I would find  
Sharpness to cut the sun into  
This sensual tent in which I am blind.<sup>65</sup>

Brasch, shy of intimacy and far from comfortable with his own sexuality, was not yet ready to respond to this poetic trend. His mother having died when he was four, it was left to his father to explain to him the mysteries of biology. The uneasiness about sexual relationships which dogged him throughout his lifetime stemmed directly from Hyam’s reticence:

It was on conscious scientific premises ... that I was introduced to sex; but really because we understood each other so little that my father could not talk to me about it directly. He said to me

---

\* Clare Parsons was the exception but, never in good health, he died in 1931, some years before the Spanish war which became a cause with his contemporaries.

† MacNeice recalled conversations with the then Professor of Greek, E. R. Dodds, who would ‘deplore the importance that our generation attached to personal relationships’. He himself agreed that ‘this side-tracking was continuous, unfruitful, appalling’ (*The Strings are False*, p. 171).

one day that he wanted me to go to his office with him; as so often, he gave no reason, which as usual made me fearful and apprehensive. Without explanation he sat me down in a corner to read some squalid little book on elementary biology, which he no doubt assumed would teach me those facts of life that he did not feel able to tell me about; a wonderfully scientific procedure. I was frightened and mystified: the book meant nothing to me: I was not in a state of mind to take in coolly what it said, all the less since this was apparently intended to convey more than met the eye. So far as I remember, my father did not repeat this experiment, nor did he ever refer to sex again. The subject was obviously unmentionable, one that people like ourselves did not talk about, associated with shame and guilt; and so it became for me henceforth.<sup>66</sup>

Spending his teenage years at a private boys' school worsened the situation, so that by the time he reached Oxford he was in a pervasive fog of ignorance and embarrassment. Most of the friendships he made there were with males, the closest of which were fellow St John's students Colin Roberts and Rex ('Reggie') Howlett. Considering the relatively low percentage of female undergraduates during the 1920s, the absence of women within his small circle was not unusual. His close attachment to Scovell, whom he first thought 'as reserved as she was lovely',<sup>67</sup> was more surprising. Others, including Colin,<sup>68</sup> had fallen under the spell of her quiet charm. At an outdoor performance of *Twelfth Night* at Queen's, she seemed to Brasch to be 'more exquisite every time [he] saw her'.<sup>69</sup> If he had stronger feelings for her, however, she remained unaware of them; he habitually played his cards close to his chest.

Nor was there outward evidence of any romantic involvement during his three years at St John's. He later described his Oxford years as being marred by a 'failure' in love. He suffered a 'hopeless long-drawn-out devotion which came to nothing and left [him] defeated',<sup>70</sup> and was forced to recognize as impossible that 'perfect union of souls and bodies'. But in this, as with other emotional upsets, he betrayed nothing and his friends noticed no preoccupation with any one person. 'If he had been,' Joy later stated, 'we would have seen less of each

other'.<sup>71</sup> Although reticence was a habit, the secrecy with which this affair was surrounded makes it seem likely that his love interest was a male.\*

Homosexuality was widely acknowledged in Oxford university circles during the 1920s: indeed, was almost expected amongst the intelligentsia. MacNeice later discussed the matter with a candour which emphasizes further Brasch's evasiveness:

Oxford in 1926 was just at the end of its period of postwar deliberate decadence - the careful matching of would-be putrescent colours [...] I discovered that in Oxford homosexuality and 'intelligence', heterosexuality and brawn, were almost inexorably paired.<sup>72</sup>

If Brasch did have homosexual inclinations at this time, the thought of his father's reaction back in Dunedin would have been enough to ensure the utmost secrecy. Hyam was one of the most conservative men in a staunchly conservative town. He had sent his son to Oxford for sporting and social reasons, both of which would be invalidated by such a revelation.

Brasch's suppression of his sexuality ensured that, as young as twenty-one, he believed he 'was alone and would always be alone'.<sup>73</sup> His reluctant but stoical resignation to loneliness was to become a prevalent theme in his poetry.

In an article on Brasch's poetry in 1969, Vincent O'Sullivan suggested that not until that point had the poet 'successfully [brought] love into his verse'.<sup>74</sup> Brasch himself mildly rejected this statement:

---

\* John Crockett, who taught with Brasch for some years, was adamant that Charles was an 'inactive homosexual' (interview with Anne Crockett, 30 June 1993). Kai Jensen, in his recent book *Whole Men* (Auckland, 1996), also claims that Brasch was a 'closet' homosexual.

Well, I wouldn't care to dispute with a critic like Vincent O'Sullivan. You might say that love takes many forms. I thought I had always written about it.<sup>75</sup>

The compassion which is pleaded for in his landscape poems of the 1930s could be seen as one of his 'many forms' of love. But even in his later work, it is rarely that he directly tackles the topic of love between individuals.\* Certainly in the years following his arrival in England, he instinctively avoided writing about love. His sheltered upbringing, he saw later, had made him 'immature intellectually',<sup>76</sup> and emotionally naïve. Discovering Rilke in the course of his university study, he found his own instincts put into words. Both great suffering and great joy were necessary, Rilke pronounced, before poetry of any worth could be achieved:

Verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings [...] They are experiences. In order to write a single verse, one must see many cities and men and things; one must get to know animals and the flight of birds, and the gestures that the little flowers make when they open out in the morning [...] There must be memories of many nights of love, each unlike the others [...] One must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead. And still it is not yet enough to have memories [...] only when they have been turned to blood within us [...] only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.<sup>77</sup>

Although Brasch later dismissed his early writings as clichéd and mannered, in them he began to discover how to express and objectify emotion. From this point on, connections between the natural and personal worlds became both more frequent and more skilful. By the 1940s, he was able to write a poem such as 'Tryst by Water', which deals with sexual and

---

\* The title sequence of *The Estate* (1957) is the earliest example of what could be classified as 'love' poetry. Dedicated to the New Zealand psychologist and mountaineer, Harry Scott, both its effusiveness and its evasiveness suggest suppressed homosexual leanings.

emotional union. This is unfamiliar territory, but the imagery is reassuringly reminiscent of poems as early as 'The Walker by Night'. The surface of 'Tryst' is a similar one of moving shadows, growing darkness, and the sound of water and wind:

You lay like evening's  
Graven land,  
Stillness and light  
Of evening crystal;  
And I as shadow  
Crept from the rocks,  
Rose, hovered,  
And was the night.<sup>78</sup>

Such connections between the natural and personal worlds become more and more frequent in Brasch's work, in extended metaphor or imagery so slight that it is barely noticeable. Although the way in which he included landscapes and seascapes changed, the distancing effect evident in his earliest writing remains. Behind the later love poetry is a writer as private as ever - more assured but determined as in his Oxford days to maintain 'a certain space round myself within which I could lead my own life'.<sup>79</sup>

## VI

Before reaching England, Brasch had already made three of the closest friends he ever had: James Bertram, Ian Milner, and Jack Bennett.\* New friends at Oxford joined but could not

---

\* His first collection, *The Land and the People* (1939), is dedicated to these three friends.

replace his affection for these New Zealanders. All three were to follow him to Oxford a couple of years later, which strengthened his ties to that city.

For the burly, handsome Bertram, who had been at Waitaki with him, he felt a love and admiration which almost amounted to reverence. The dragging months of 1931, which he spent in Dunedin learning the family business, were made bearable by occasional meetings with James, and frequent correspondence. In these early letters, Brasch revealed an intensity of feeling not visible in his later, more guarded, writing:

I must confess I'm always a little apprehensive of meeting you again, in case you find me a terrible let-down; for if you did it would be impossible for you not to admit it and break, for both our sakes, and for the Truth (which you may have lost, for some time) - for one always recovers, of course, though often as a very different person. But I've not been able to imagine the hell it would be if it did happen so perhaps my doubts aren't in the utter depths. I am as certain as one can be on earth that I could not cease to love you on my side - you are something in my heart - one of those things which, if I ceased to believe in them, consciously, (as far as such can be conscious when you're still a spiritual puppy) something in me would snap and hell indeed be murky.<sup>80</sup>

Bertram was expected to gain a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, which provided Brasch with further motivation to return to England. As the leafy suburbs of Dunedin grew greener, and the harbour sparkled under a bolder sun, his thoughts turned wistfully towards his undergraduate summers. 'I had a daydream of going to Oxford with you', he wrote to Bertram,

and walking past the Castle to Carfax, the centre of the town, and down the High towards Merton; but the true Oxford is not in the streets, but in gardens and lanes, and on the Cherwell among summer-flowery meadows and rich elms - '... and May,

and June'.\* I am sentimental! But the place is an eternity for me - eternity in its medieval (and as I think right) sense, not infinite time, but the whole - past-present and future.<sup>81</sup>

In October it was announced that Bertram's application for a Rhodes had been successful. The knowledge of an imminent separation meant that Brasch scrutinized all contact between them even more closely:

Before your letter came I'd been wondering what on earth you saw in me to interest you or like. The letter stopped my doubts - as far as you are concerned (though indeed I darent impugn you for lack of taste).

Then last night I was seized, in the middle of one of Marvell's duller poems, with the thought that, as in the past, we were - perhaps - destined all our lives to see little of one another. From time to time I feel with some shame that not all my friendships are as spiritual as they ought to be - no, I am not transcendentalising, but I believe that without a spiritual bond two people can share very little of the 'cries and chance' of daily life. But I must, I need to assert that with you it is not so....

[However] far apart in the flesh we may be each will be to the other something immutable, an idea. You will always be an ideal to me - a beacon-light of all my seeing; for at times I've a desperate need to rush to recover my image of you and find there and drink, power, and light, and love - and to know it always with me. Even so I sweep back periodically to Shelley and Plato and Beethoven; yet they are further off. I pray that I may never be false to, nor ever lose, my image of you.<sup>82</sup>

Two weeks after writing this letter, influenced by Bertram's plans to begin at New College the following October, Brasch made up his mind. He would return to England early in the New Year, and would be settled in London by the time James arrived.

---

\* Brasch's own ellipsis.

His admiration for Bertram was partly due to his intellectual abilities. Bertram's progress at Oxford was as spectacular as Brasch's had been poor. In the space of three years he gained an impressive double degree: a First in English, and a Second in Modern Languages. His ambitions were more scholarly and less exclusively literature-orientated than Brasch's; the interests he pursued during his time at Oxford were more diverse. Like Auden and the other prominent young poets (most of whom had left just before he came up), Bertram became deeply involved in left-wing politics throughout the Thirties. His interest did not manifest itself poetically, but in a more active way. Starting an Independent Labour Party group in New College, he also worked at a camp for the unemployed just outside Oxford. In 1936 he left for China where, rather than the life of international journalism he appeared to have been preparing for, he moved towards social and relief work. Working for the China Defence League as a publicist, and helping to mobilize outside aid to oppose Japan's full-scale invasion in 1937, he made his way to Hong Kong. Here he encountered one of the most prominent figures of Brasch's university days: Auden, who was with *his* old school-friend, Isherwood. He was struck by their camp manner and general air of frivolity which contrasted sharply with the tension of the time.\*

Jack Bennett, a close friend of Bertram's from Auckland University, also gained a post-graduate scholarship to Oxford in the early Thirties. He entered Merton which, because of him (Brasch believed), 'took to itself later a succession of promising English scholars from New Zealand'.<sup>83</sup> He, too, took a First in English but, unlike Bertram, did not return to New Zealand to live. A 'scholar born', he remained in Oxford to pursue an academic career, taking up a fellowship at Queen's. Dark, slightly stooping, with an open face but a faraway expression, he loved literature and the classics, and his presence in Oxford meant that Brasch

---

\* Bertram's autobiography, *Capes of China Slide Away* (Auckland, 1993), takes its title from one of the poems Auden wrote during this time.

visited frequently in the early 1930s. Not only was his company stimulating, but Brasch was interested, too, in the work of another Merton student: the American poet Paul Engle who, with his wife Mary, shared a flat with Bennett. Engle had already published a collection of verse before coming to Oxford, comprised of 'fresh agreeable poems in a loose romantic style, far removed from the more compelling English poetry of the time'.<sup>84</sup> Despite the fact that both he and Brasch were outsiders in a closed literary scene, Brasch remained wary of the American, whose expansive style was the opposite of his own restrained poems. He maintained his distance, thereby failing to develop a possibly valuable contact into the world of American publishing.

In July of 1934, Milner (also an ex-Waitakian) arrived in England and took up residence with Bennett in a house in Bainton Road. In looks, he resembled Brasch: both were dark, of medium height, with long faces, but his attitude to life was considerably more relaxed. Despite his sanguine nature, he took a First at New College in Modern Greats and then won a Commonwealth Fellowship to Berkeley. Although he and Brasch were always close, he had more in common with Bertram. Both had won prestigious Rhodes scholarships, and both were more interested in public affairs than literature. They felt themselves, Brasch thought, to be 'called to action, to work directly if they could to make a better world'.<sup>85</sup>

Although these three contributed greatly to Brasch's sense of belonging in England, their successful degrees and subsequent achievements increased his sense of personal failure. In character, he was more similar to Bennett, who was not interested in taking a part in the feverish political activity which characterized the 1930s. Yet Jack was so strongly committed to his work, and such a gifted scholar, that an academic career filled his life with a valid purpose. Brasch increasingly felt himself to be a passive onlooker in life, watching his friends working for the benefit of themselves and their society:

[this] left me, much of the time, feeling helpless, guilty, stifled with frustration, fiddling while Rome burned. And I could not even fiddle well. Yet I thought somehow I should one day make a noise in the world, a noise of my own.<sup>86</sup>

Although contributing to his feeling of worthlessness, his three oldest friends supported as much as anyone his literary ambitions. Early in 1936, when he began writing an ode about New Zealand,<sup>\*</sup> Brasch sent the middle section to Scovell in London. 'I am somewhat anxious about the whole piece', he wrote, 'and as soon as you've seen it ... I want to send it to Jack Bennett, one of my New Zealand friends at Oxford'.<sup>87</sup> This he did; Bennett duly read it and returned it with an encouraging comment: that it was 'the first real poem about New Zealand' to have been written.<sup>88</sup> Later that year he came to stay at St Edmund's Terrace, and his 'patient advice through continued revisions' gave Brasch much needed 'support and courage'.<sup>89</sup>

The small circle of New Zealanders grew as others made their way to Oxford to pursue academic, literary, or political interests. John Mulgan took a First at Merton at the same time as Bennett, later sharing the Bainton Road house with him and Milner.<sup>†</sup> He stayed on in England during the Thirties, and during the Spanish war edited an anthology called *Poems of Freedom*, with an introduction by Auden. Geoffrey Cox, also from Otago, was another with whom Brasch met regularly in Oxford and London. A student at Oriel College, his literary inclination was towards journalism, a field which he entered immediately after graduation. He, too, seemed to have 'found his chosen life as though it was waiting for him'.<sup>90</sup> As in the case of Bennett (who married a graduate of Somerville in 1937), his marriage in 1935 strengthened his ties with England.

---

<sup>\*</sup> See also Chapter Three, Section IV, pp. 108-10; Chapter Four, Section I, p. 121; and Appendix, pp. 341-4.

<sup>†</sup> Mulgan is best known for his novel *Man Alone* which became a landmark in New Zealand literature.

Brasch was grounded neither by a relationship nor a job. The three years at Oxford constituted the longest settled period in the eighteen years he spent in and around England. The rootlessness of his personal life caused, in part, the difficulty he had in writing from some 'immovable' centre. After taking his degree, he lasted only a few months in Dunedin before announcing (not without trepidation) that he was returning to England. He saw the rest of the year out (staying most often in Manono, for his grandfather was sympathetic to his literary plans in a way that his father was not); then, on a sparkling summer's day in February 1932, he sailed for England. The best part of the next fifteen years was spent in England and Europe.

Arriving in April, he stayed with his cousins, the de Beers, until finding lodgings of his own in Pimlico.\* After a few months, he moved to West Kensington, to Oxford, and then back to London to take up a flat in Primrose Hill.† But his journeying continued. A trip to Cairo in October 1932 marked the beginning of a decade of travel: Greece, Crete, Palestine, Russia, America. It is hardly surprising that, casting about for some direction during these unsettled years, he was influenced in his decisions by his friendships. With Bertram's departure from Oxford in 1936, and Milner's the following year, his secure circle of friends fragmented.‡ Bertram, his closest friend since their school-days, was slightly older than Charles, and he had remained a 'touchstone in so many things'.<sup>91</sup> Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, however, the two drifted apart both geographically and emotionally. It was an Englishman, Colin Roberts, who during this time provided the most important relationship in Brasch's life.

---

\* Esmond de Beer was a cousin of Brasch's mother, and was a respected Oxford scholar. His two older sisters, Mary and Dora, lived with him for most of their lives. Brasch became very fond of them, and stayed with them often.

† This was not the flat in St Edmund's Terrace, but a flat at No. 12 Primrose Hill Road.

‡ The four New Zealanders were not together again for another thirty-five years, although occasionally two or three of them linked up.

The two had met at St John's soon after term began in 1927. Academically brilliant, Roberts was Senior Scholar of the college that year. Tall, thin, with a composed air, he nonetheless displayed the same reserve as Bertram. In hindsight, Brasch recognized this as the same shyness with which he himself was plagued. 'I think', he wrote of Colin long afterwards, 'he had still to force himself, when meeting anyone and everyone'.<sup>92</sup> Both had, too, what Colin's younger brother Patrick described as 'a rather prim attitude towards the less refined aspects of humanity [...] a certain 'correctness' about [them] which could be restricting in [their] relations with others'.<sup>93</sup> Their similar temperaments and a shared love of literature drew them together and soon, reassuringly, Roberts filled the role played previously by James, that of

an elder brother, deeply loved and looked up to, of firm convictions and settled habits, and plainly bound already ... for a life of learning and distinction.<sup>94</sup>

Throughout their time at St John's, the two were constant companions, exploring on foot or by cycle the country around Oxford. Intellectually, Roberts had a great impact on the young 'colonial':\*

My formal education proved no education at all. If it had not been for ... Colin, I should have gone down from Oxford as ignorant and untutored as I went up.<sup>95</sup>

His support was not only academic but emotional; he encouraged Brasch's literary ambitions about which few others knew. This, more than anything, inspired devotion; Colin appeared an 'eager and beautiful fellow'.<sup>96</sup> Five years after their first meeting, his friendship had become 'the dearest thing to [Brasch] in the world'.<sup>97</sup>

---

\* Esmond, then living in Oxford, was the other main influence in Brasch's learning.

Although able to write of this later in life, at the time Brasch found his love for Roberts difficult to express, both personally or poetically.\* Much later, in relation to *Indirections*, the critic W. H. Oliver made the observation that art 'is often a kind of protective coloration', and that Brasch's most frequent stance of passivity was 'the ultimate' protection.<sup>98</sup> Thus, even when his poetry had progressed from his early 'Georgian-Romantic' verse to include specific personal references, his tributes to friends were obscure. His poem to Scovell was the first of such examples; his offering to Colin, which opens his second volume *Disputed Ground* (1948), displays the same curious blend of strong emotion overlaid with restraint. The intimacy which should be central to the poem is curiously absent, and is replaced by an awkward formality.

Simply entitled 'To C. H. Roberts', and dated August 1947, it marks the twentieth year of a friendship which has increased rather than diminished in importance. Within its lines Brasch acknowledges the long-lasting influence of Roberts on his life:

... you  
 Are never silent in me, never seem  
 Less near than when I watched you and longed to grow  
 Your equal; because no day, no night can come  
 That does not bring some echo of a word or thought  
 Once ours....<sup>99</sup>

Yet there is a stiltedness, a reticence, to the poem, part of which is deliberate. Brasch disliked excessively self-revelatory poetry,<sup>†</sup> a problem which he later overcame by using natural imagery to objectify the 'landscape of the heart'.<sup>100</sup> But the remote quality of this poem, and

---

\* The same barrier of reserve prevented him from revealing his feelings when, at the end of 1935, Bertram left England for China: 'I wanted to take him in my arms and exchange a word of blessing, and could not' (*Ind.*, p. 256).

† His editorial practices bore this out; he tended to select work of a visual and descriptive nature in which personal material was carefully monitored. In 1960, he returned Alistair Campbell's five 'Personal Sonnets' on the grounds that their 'immediacy and nakedness' made them 'too raw to print'. (For further discussion of this, refer to John Geraets' doctoral thesis "'Landfall" Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey' (Auckland, 1982), pp. 158-9.)

its formal tone, seem at variance with its subject-matter. There is no use of a specific location with which to symbolize personal characteristics: a technique extensively employed later in his career. In the absence of an objectifying visual focus, this testimony is indeed, as he himself admits, 'oblique'. Human existence is presented in general terms rather than in the presence of a much-loved friend: 'We are that mortal ground/ The spiritual and temporal powers dispute'.

The only ways of avoiding self-revelation, Brasch writes, are to take refuge in silence or to shelter behind the words of another:

I set your name upon the page, but have no words  
 To express what silence best perhaps can say,  
 Unless I borrow Dante's to the shades  
 Of mount and ditch - *cosi com'io t'amai ...*  
*m'insegnavate come....\**

Although he admits to being lost for words, Brasch's conclusion is unequivocal. Twenty years after their first meeting, although physically separated, he carries Colin's influence with him: 'you/ Are never silent in me'. His friend's earlier support holds him in good stead:

I still turn towards you when I cannot stand  
 Alone, as in those years that are most my theme,  
 Oxford, Soulbury, Llanthony, Trier, Venice, Kôm Aushim.

Roberts provided him, then, with a security otherwise lacking in those unsettled years: the security of being established in the eyes of another. Brasch's constant vacillations of emotions made him feel that he had no identity, and the consequent desire for self-definition

---

\* Brasch's own ellipses.

was voiced repeatedly in his letters.\* By recognizing his intrinsic qualities, his closest friends bestowed on him a personality. His gratitude for this, hinted at in the poem for Colin, is more clearly expressed in his poem for Bertram, 'To J. B. at Forty':

To myself I seem more shadow than substance, one  
Who slipped through life and found no living-space  
Except in his friends' love and the momentary grace  
Of real identity they lent him who had none,  
Perpetually dissolving into time and place....<sup>101</sup>

Such a validation of his existence, he felt, was not only gained from friendship, but also from his own writing. During his time in Oxford, he had realized (just as Scovell had) that he felt he had 'no *raison d'être* except to write'.<sup>102</sup> This realization was to remain with him for the rest of his life.† The setting-down of words represented something tangible which provided stability amidst the flux of the human condition. To create something able to endure against 'the falling days'<sup>103</sup> would, he felt, validate his life.

Art and human relationships became his touchstones in a transient world. In fact, the two became almost inseparable, for the friends he was closest to shared his love of painting, music, and above all literature. Joy and Colin shared his particular love of poetry; for him it held a significance which went beyond artistic or scholarly appreciation. He saw it in direct relation to himself; it helped him define the external world and his own changeable nature. 'For me', he wrote,

---

\* Poetically, this theme was explored in a cycle of poems in *Not Far Off*.

† Two years before his death, in an interview with Ian Milner (*Landfall* 25 (1971), p. 368), he admitted: 'I often have the feeling that I don't exist personally except in the poems I write'.

poetry was also exploratory, a vehicle of knowledge, a principal means of discovering and interpreting reality. That was why new poetry was always more important to me than to Colin.<sup>104</sup>

The personal importance he attached to poetry had much to do with the despair he felt on leaving Oxford. His 'ignominious Third' did not worry him as much as his failure to realize his dreams:

I had no doubt where my tastes and interests lay, but what was there, outwardly, to show I was a poet? No book, and the merest handful of poems published.<sup>105</sup>

For confirming these interests, however, and for witnessing the birth of a new poetry, he could not have been in a better environment than 1920s Oxford. And although three poems published in university magazines in no way guaranteed success, they were a measure of the commitment he had employed in learning his craft. During his three years at St John's he acquired habits which, later, he saw to be beneficial:

It may have been a waste of time to write so much bad verse, but I think it increased my facility, even in stricter rhymed forms which I was seldom to find easy.<sup>106</sup>

The automatic response to what he 'saw and felt and did by writing about it'<sup>107</sup> was also developed during this 'apprenticeship' at Oxford. The poems he published there reveal little influence of his surroundings. But the impressions of his university years - personalities,

English and European landscapes, works of art - made their way into his later poetry. Such writing, stemming from particular locations or occasions, is visual and immediate. His first laborious attempts to write of what he saw and felt led to the successful transmutation of the personal into the universal. The Oxford years were the starting-point for two decades of emotional and creative self-discovery.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ind.*, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.*, 'Editorial Note', xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *The Press*, Christchurch, New Zealand, 27 January 1932.

<sup>4</sup> *Ind.*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ind.*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind.*, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> *Ind.*, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> *Ind.*, p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> *Ind.*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford Outlook* [hereafter referred to as *OO*], x (June 1929), p. 258.

<sup>11</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False* (London, 1965), p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, *OO*, x (June 1929), p. 258.

<sup>14</sup> *OO*, x (November 1929), p. 380.

<sup>15</sup> *OO*, x (November 1928), p. 175.

<sup>16</sup> *OO*, x (February 1929), p. 189.

<sup>17</sup> *OO*, x (November 1928), p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble, 5th edn. (Oxford, 1985), p. 259: 'The nickname MacSpaunday was coined by R. Campbell'.

<sup>19</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Parsons, Editorial, *OP* (1928), pp. v-vi.

<sup>21</sup> Parsons, 'Dancing', *OP* (1928), p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Spender, 'I. THE MORNING SMELLS CHASTE', from 'Two Poems', *OO*, x (June 1929), p. 315.

<sup>23</sup> *Ind.*, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup> *Ind.*, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Brasch, 'The Walker by Night', *OO*, x (November 1929), p. 375.

<sup>26</sup> 'Pyramid', *OP* (1930), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> 'To Plautia', *OP* (1930), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Night, Luxor', *The Land and the People* [hereafter referred to as *TLP*] (1939) in *Collected Poems* [hereafter referred to as *CP*], ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> 'Queenstown Park', *Home Ground* [hereafter referred to as *HG*] (1974) in *CP*, p. 207.

<sup>31</sup> *Ind.*, p. 190.

<sup>32</sup> CB to JS, 29 January [1936].

<sup>33</sup> Brasch, *Present Company: Reflections on the Arts* (Auckland, 1966).

<sup>34</sup> *OO*, xi (March 1931), pp. 58-9.

<sup>35</sup> Foreword to *Present Company*.

<sup>36</sup> Foreword to *Ind.*

<sup>37</sup> CB to JS, 29 January [1936].

<sup>38</sup> CB to JS, 'Little Abbey Cottage, Gt. Missenden, Thursday' [summer, 1936].

<sup>39</sup> *Ind.*, p. 147.

- <sup>40</sup> 'Discord for Louis MacNeice', *Not Far Off* [hereafter referred to as *NFO*] in *CP*, p. 164.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Paying my Devoirs', *NFO* in *CP*, p. 130.
- <sup>42</sup> 'To Joy Scovell', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 6.
- <sup>43</sup> CB to JS, 'Little Abbey Cottage, Gt. Missenden, Thursday' [summer, 1936].
- <sup>44</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1937].
- <sup>45</sup> *Ind.*, p. 145.
- <sup>46</sup> Scovell, 'Angels Carved in the Church Roof', *OP* (1928), p. 49.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ind.*, p. 246.
- <sup>48</sup> Scovell, 'The Division', *OO*, x (February 1929), p. 206.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ind.*, p. 146.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ind.*, p. 139.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 227.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ind.*, p. 227.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with Joy Scovell, 23 June 1993.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ind.*, p. 247.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind.*, p. 246.
- <sup>56</sup> Interview with Joy Scovell, 23 June 1993.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ind.*, p. 245.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ind.*, p. 151.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 343-4.
- <sup>60</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 145.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with Winnie Davin, 17 May 1993.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview with Anne Crockett, 30 June 1993.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ind.*, p. 90.
- <sup>64</sup> Brasch, 'Open the Heart', *NFO* in *CP*, p. 137.
- <sup>65</sup> Spencer, No. II of 'Two Poems', *OO*, xii (February 1932), p. 43.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ind.*, p. 80.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ind.*, p. 146.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview with Professor C. Mitchell, 25 May 1993; interview with Patrick Roberts, 13 July 1993.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ind.*, p. 170.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ind.*, p. 171.
- <sup>71</sup> Interview with Joy Scovell, 23 June 1993.
- <sup>72</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 103.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ind.*, p. 171.
- <sup>74</sup> O'Sullivan, "'Brief Permitted Morning": Notes on the Poetry of Charles Brasch', *Landfall*, 23 (1969), p. 343. This was written on the occasion of the publication of Brasch's fifth collection, *Not Far Off*.
- <sup>75</sup> Ian Milner, 'Conversation with Charles Brasch', *Landfall*, 25 (1971), p. 368.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ind.*, p. 149.
- <sup>77</sup> Rilke, cit. Eric Gill, 'Sculpture and the Living Model', *OO*, xii (May 1932), p. 118.
- <sup>78</sup> Brasch, 'Tryst by Water', *Disputed Ground* [hereafter referred to as *DG*] (1948) in *CP*, p. 38.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ind.*, p. 74.
- <sup>80</sup> CB to JB, 'Dunedin, Thursday' [1931].
- <sup>81</sup> CB to JB, 8 October [1931].
- <sup>82</sup> CB to JB, 15 November [1931].
- <sup>83</sup> *Ind.*, p. 230.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ind.*, p. 231.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ind.*, p. 232.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ind.*, p. 232.
- <sup>87</sup> CB to JS, 29 January [1936].
- <sup>88</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ind.*, p. 233.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ind.*, p. 230.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ind.*, p. 139.
- <sup>93</sup> Patrick Roberts, '[Personal memories of] Colin Roberts', January 1996.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ind.*, p. 139.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 149-50.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ind.*, p. 139.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ind.*, p. 203.
- <sup>98</sup> Review by W. H. Oliver, *The New Zealand Listener*, 9 August 1980, p. 76.
- <sup>99</sup> 'To C. H. Roberts', *DG* in *CP*, p. 15.

<sup>100</sup> Brasch, 'Wartime Snow, London', *DG* in *CP*, p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> 'To J. B. at Forty', *The Estate and other poems* [hereafter referred to as *TE*] (1957) in *CP*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ind.*, p. 246.

<sup>103</sup> Brasch, 'Pyramid'.

<sup>104</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>105</sup> *Ind.*, p. 171.

<sup>106</sup> *Ind.*, p. 190.

<sup>107</sup> *Ind.*, p. 190.

## **Chapter Two**

***Red Sun, Remember:1932-4***

## CHAPTER TWO

### RED SUN, REMEMBER: 1932-4

Following his arrival back in England, after a largely wasted year in New Zealand, Brasch took a room in Pimlico overlooking a leafy garden. Throughout a dry, dusty London summer, these lodgings in St George's Square provided him with a cool refuge in which to read, write letters, and think: welcome space after too many months of constant family pressure.

By no means, however, did he closet himself away. One of his first priorities was to make contact with old friends. Of these it was Colin Roberts whom he first sought out, and who became his most constant companion in the weeks immediately after his return. Although Brasch was at leisure, Roberts was travelling back and forth between London and Oxford, working in both the British Museum and the Bodleian. He had become interested in papyrology, encouraged by Hugh Last, his former tutor at St John's. Now, finding no one suitable in England to teach him in such an exacting field, he made plans to go to Berlin. With the aid of a research scholarship, he left to spend the summer months studying under an eminent German Professor, Wilhelm Schubart.

After weeks spent in Colin's company, and frequent visits to the lively Roberts household, Brasch was left somewhat disconsolate in England. Although his ostensible reason for turning his back on the family business was to write, he lacked both the conviction and the discipline to do so. Typically, he made no mention of his misgivings to those around him, preferring to express them on paper. 'I am feeling rather bad about myself', he wrote to Bertram in May:

whether I'm not a colossal fraud and myself the chief victim. I've not written a line since arriving, and don't want to - have nothing to say.<sup>1</sup>

Bertram, like Roberts, was already well on the way to marking out a successful career path for himself. Having been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship just after his twenty-first birthday, he was to start at New College in October of that year. Brasch's pleasure for his friend was, understandably, tempered by the negative light shed on his own lack of achievement. 'If I am a fraud', his letter finished dismally, 'you may arrive about the time of my exposure'.

Ironically, the way he looked to his friends for guidance indirectly served to diminish his self-confidence and increase his indecision. The major events in his life so far had been determined by other people: Waitaki, Oxford, the return to New Zealand. Although he had chosen to break away from his grandfather's business, the decision was still one which revolved around others. He could not bring himself to return to England until it was certain that Ian Milner and James Bertram would be following him: he looked ahead and saw his time there lasting only until these two settled back in New Zealand. Their friendship had helped him through the uncertain months early in 1931:

Their support, the knowledge that they still counted me one of themselves, gave me my only strength.... With them, I was a New Zealander, whatever else I might be as well.<sup>2</sup>

Colin exerted an equally strong influence on him, both at St John's and in the years following his return to England. As Bertram gave him a New Zealand identity, Roberts appeared to hold the key to an established life in Europe. And so it was that Brasch, putting his vague plans of becoming a writer on hold, followed his English friend into the field of Egyptology.

## I

The close bond that he felt existed with Colin had much to do with his sudden decision to join an expedition to Egypt later that year. Yet the country exerted a strong and romantic fascination of its own: 'the power of that ancient name loomed in my mind'.<sup>3</sup> One day shortly after Colin's return from Berlin, during afternoon tea with the de Beers in Mansfield Street, a discussion on excavation sites took place between Colin and Dora.\* It was then that Brasch, quietly listening in a corner, began to think that Egyptology might also provide him with a reputable career.

Although this decision was scarcely a decision at all - it was yet another postponement of confronting possible failure as a writer - he worked hard at his new career. While Roberts obligingly sorted out the formalities with Hugh Last (who sat on the committee of the Egypt Exploration Society), he set about learning all he could to prepare him for the months ahead. Never having had a facility with languages, he nonetheless tackled colloquial Egyptian Arabic, taking daily classes at the school of Oriental Studies. (Impressed by classical Arabic on his first trip to Egypt, once back in London he made an unsuccessful attempt at also learning this language; he put his failure down to the same lack of application he had shown at Oxford.)

Upon arriving at Tell el Amarna - a ruined city in the wide Nile valley, midway between Cairo and Luxor - he found that Arabic was spoken by only a few of the party. A kind of coded 'pidgin Arabic' quickly became the accepted language. Looking back he felt that,

---

\* Of the two de Beer sisters, Dora was the keener traveller; Mary preferred to read.

instead of bringing the Englishmen closer to the local labourers, it emphasized the gulf between the two groups. 'We showed little respect for the language in this familiar everyday talk', he reflected later; '[it] was and was meant to be a private language'.<sup>4</sup>

Although he felt his attempts at Arabic to be shamefully desultory, he did at least study Egyptian history in detail: before he had been there, out of a sense of duty; afterwards, because he was captivated by the country's ancient beauty and legends. Throughout September and the first weeks of October 1932, his previously leisurely life became a round of classes and private study. By tube and bus he travelled between No 12 Primrose Hill Road, the Oriental Studies School, and the Exploration Society's rooms in Manchester Square. In the Society's quiet rooms he researched both general Egyptian history and the recent history of past digs (published in the form of reports in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*). By the second week in October, he was able to write to Bertram that he had finished the reports of the Amarna excavations, and that he had the time for a day-trip to Oxford to say goodbye to his friends.

Bertram, struggling to adjust to a very different university environment from the relaxed campus life in Auckland, was only too pleased at the prospect. He offered his rooms for a tea-party on the Saturday afternoon and Brasch, always anxious for those he knew to like one another, invited a few guests whom he thought would be good company. The list of 'eligibles' included fellow New Zealander Geoffrey Cox, and three of the Roberts family: Rosemary, Roger, and Brian. 'A large dose', he wrote to Bertram anxiously, 'but I would like you to meet them all'.<sup>5</sup>

The leave-taking was hard. Colin, moreover, although travelling as far as Cairo with him, was to work at another camp. In spite of being academically prepared for his trip, Brasch confessed to Bertram that he regarded the months ahead with trepidation:

I'm in a dozen minds about Egypt as about everything; only one rock there is to it, that the life will be healthy and the place (from all I hear) beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

He followed this sentence with the rueful (and self-aware) phrase, 'Cursed be he who wants more!' Yet the trip was far more important to him than his undergraduate sightseeing jaunts. Although he was joining the expedition as an unpaid cadet (he had, as always, sufficient family funds to cover travel costs), his living expenses were to be paid by the Society. Clearly more was expected of him than if he was simply an interested observer. Quite apart from this, and apart from his gratitude to Colin for giving him the opportunity, he desired to do well for his own sake. He had personal demons to rout, having failed dismally in academia and business, and being still unproved in his literary career. The trip to Egypt, he hoped, would mark the start of a new and successful phase of his life.

## II

On the night before his departure, a dirty and tired Brasch sat among his half-packed trunks and wrote a brief letter to Bertram, as if needing the reassurance of contact with his past. The tone of finality about his closing lines indicated a portentous state of mind: this was to be the end of a shamefully indolent era and the start of a new direction. 'There is nothing to say to you, mon cher,' he finished solemnly, 'except au revoir and much happiness'.<sup>7</sup>

Bertram's studies prevented him from coming up to London to see the travellers off, but distant relations of Brasch's, Alfredo and Enid Cianchi,<sup>\*</sup> drove him to Victoria station. Also there to see him and Colin onto the 2 o'clock train was Uncle Archie Hart from Sussex.<sup>†</sup> The

---

<sup>\*</sup> Enid was one of the Hallenstein family.

<sup>†</sup> Archie Hart was often referred to in Brasch's letters as the 'pig-uncle', both because of his penchant for pig-breeding and for what fastidious Brasch saw to be his uncouth manners (see *Ind.*, p. 169).

Roberts family turned out in force, and so it was with the memory of familiar faces that the Oxford friends made the first leg of their lengthy journey.

They sailed from Folkestone to Boulogne on a calm sea. Brasch was never a good sailor, however, so it was a relief to step onto firm, though foreign, soil. Fortified by biscuits and chocolate prudently bought in London, he and Colin changed trains in Paris and journeyed through the Alps into his beloved Italy. It would have been unthinkable for him not to spend a couple of days here, where he seemed to 'live more fully ... be alert and responsive to a degree [he] had not known before'.<sup>8</sup> The last weeks of October brought long golden days to Italy, and Venice once again worked its magic on him. The forty-eight hours they had allowed themselves were a tantalising reminder of the delights hidden in the canal city.

Just as Germany had appeared in a comparatively negative light during his undergraduate trips abroad, now he expected Egypt to suffer a similar fate. 'I fear Egypt will be a horrid anti-climax', he wrote in a pessimistic postcard to James.<sup>9</sup> His first sightings of the country did nothing to dispel his preconceptions. Travelling by boat from Venice, he and Colin stopped briefly at Brindisi, Piraeus, and Rhodes. Although he found the last town 'medieval and lovely',<sup>10</sup> on the whole he thought Greece 'dreadfully barren'. Yet this was nothing compared to the vast, dry, 'entirely bare' Egyptian landscape confronting him four days later when they disembarked at Alexandria. The city itself provided a sharp contrast to the empty desert spaces beyond its edges. Bustling, noisy, cluttered, after the quiet charms of Venice it failed to impress.

On arriving in Cairo, Brasch concluded that there was little to choose between the two Egyptian cities. Alexandria was cleaner, he conceded, but it was also uglier. This was less than complimentary, considering a description of Cairo he had scribbled on a postcard to Bertram on the last day of October. At first sight, it appeared to him nothing more than a 'large modern town of ugly buildings'.<sup>11</sup> As happened frequently with him, however, familiarity changed his viewpoint. In the days preceding each season at Amarna, the party met there and stayed at the plain but adequate Victoria Hotel. And at the end of a season (which lasted roughly two months), Brasch stayed alone in various pensions before embarking on his homeward journey. So it was that the city which he had initially hated for its 'shallow cosmopolitanism',<sup>12</sup> became, like Oxford and Venice, a place of particular

fascination for him. The burnt sienna of its buildings, which had initially struck him as 'rather repellent',<sup>13</sup> became an effectively contrasting backdrop to the white modern quarters with their pockets of greenery. Its humming, thronging crowds were a perfect foil to the silent wastelands of desert stretching away to the east.

After a week spent sightseeing and meeting archaeological contacts of Colin's, the two travelled together to Kôm Aushim where Colin was to begin work under the American E. E. Peterson. Brasch stayed only a few days here before travelling on to Luxor, but the great space and strange beauty of the deserts had already made a forcible impression. Three weeks alone in Luxor held no anxieties for him: he was used to travelling, and was perhaps happiest in solitude. He spent his time there profitably, immersing himself in the wealth of ancient history, and visiting innumerable temples and tombs. Between sightseeing, he rested on the shady terrace of the Savoy Hotel, where he read *War and Peace* and worked on his shaky Arabic.

He also wrote letters to friends in England and New Zealand. In a long letter to Bertram, he revealed how captivated he was, after only a few weeks, by the Egyptian landscape:

Did I tell you I had been at Colin's desert camp for a few days; it was real desert though near the cultivation, wide low hills at the horizon, stone and sand, grey and dust yellow and mauve and rose - and one deep blue line of lake ... this was beautiful - not in retrospect, it is unrecapturable, and not for any of the reasons that usually make one think places beautiful; but free, bare, mysterious.<sup>14</sup>

In Luxor particularly, he experienced a feeling of restfulness new to him. This was an interim period, and as such held no pressing responsibilities. 'Here it is very peaceful', he confided to James:

the river, fields, the desert, the birds and the sun, men calling, boats with white sails crossed high up like wings arrested at half beat, and a clean, soft, wonderfully sweet air.<sup>15</sup>

The description of his surroundings was both simple and evocative - yet this was supposed to be time away from the pressures of 'becoming' a writer. His images of Egypt, both in their lucidity and their depth, already foreshadowed his later landscape poetry. But this was 1932: the year which would mark the beginning of a useful and 'respectable' career - or so he hoped.

He happily engaged in the sort of work he liked best: bookish research in an area of interest, without academic obligations. Such research, he felt, had a validity, an external stamp of approval, which his poetry did not. During his time in Luxor he had enough confidence to use the facilities of the Library of Chicago House, a large American institute. Here he read widely: ancient history, Eastern art, archaeology. Perhaps because of his feeling of freedom, he found a new easiness with strangers. The Americans he met he described as 'very kind and generous and wonderfully efficient'.<sup>16</sup> Not only did they assist him with his work, he told James, but they had even invited him to their Thanksgiving party, which was rumoured to be a real 'binge'.

Enjoyable as this acclimatisation was, by the end of his third week he was ready to leave. He felt well prepared for the two months ahead. In the last week of November, he joined up with John Pendlebury\* and the four other members of the party to make the slow trip to their camp: first by train, then up the Nile by boat to the isolated Tell el Amarna. Excavations were to begin on the first day of December, in a world which to a newcomer seemed 'as strange as [he] could conceive on mother earth'.<sup>17</sup>

---

\* He had already met Pendlebury over lunch in London, and both liked and respected him.

### III

Of the six members of the Amarna party, Brasch was the least experienced archaeologically. At twenty-three he was also the youngest. Both factors made him more than usually willing to suspend judgement, and more than usually accommodating as he and his fellow workers took up residence in the North House and prepared to begin excavations. During this first season, he thoroughly enjoyed being part of a working group. Apart from the few unhappy months spent in the Hallenstein warehouse working alongside men with whom he had nothing in common, team work was a new experience for him.

Good relations in the camp were helped by headquarters spacious enough to allow separate bedrooms for all (except Pendlebury and Ralph Lavers, the architect of the party, who shared a large double room). Situated within the ancient city walls, the house was made of mud-bricks and plaster, and was thatched with palm-branches. Once the dwelling of a nobleman, it had been dug out and repaired by the Egypt Exploration Society, who had leased the site from the First World War onwards. Three walls surrounded a courtyard where the party sat on warm evenings. Here they talked over the day's finds, looking out on the refreshing green of palm trees and fields of crops.

Inside, the rooms were high-ceilinged and cool. Woven mats covered the sand floors, and rough wooden shutters kept the fierce desert heat at bay. Everything was 'plain, workmanlike and decent, without refinements',<sup>18</sup> although servants brought hot water in tin basins for washing and shaving. The life-style at Amarna quickly became routine for Brasch, and proved to be ideal. Most meals were taken together, and every evening the party met around the long wooden table for a much-needed cold beer. Yet there was time, too, for solitary

walks in a desert landscape flushed with the rose pink of sunrise, or mysteriously shadowed by dusk.

There was less opportunity to write, however. Hours were snatched here and there to scribble letters to friends and family (all correspondence was taken out once a week to be posted in Mellawi). Brasch also made the time to update his journals; these he kept regularly and meticulously, wherever he was. But the hours on site were long. Before he had even arrived at Amarna, he had heard rumours that work began at six in the morning and finished at ten at night. In the days before leaving for the camp, he wrote to Bertram of the grind awaiting him, concluding wryly: 'you know how good for me that would be'.<sup>19</sup> And certainly, he was kept so busy at Amarna that the months there were largely free of the doubts which plagued him in his more leisurely London life.

Much of his work was routine. As an unpaid and inexperienced cadet he was often left to supervise the local labour and to collect any finds, leaving the skilled men free for more specialized work. The Amarna dig of 1932-3 was the third for Pendlebury. Like Brasch, he was from a wealthy family, and worked from interest rather than necessity. At twenty-eight, he had already carved out a career for himself in classical archaeology. Twenty-five-year-old Ralph Levers, plump and untidy, was an Australian who had trained as an architect in London; Philip Chubb, in the same field, was the oldest of the group at thirty-four. The remaining two were the rakish engineer Stephen Sherman - 'the practical man of the party'<sup>20</sup> - and Tommy Fairman, a bespectacled professional scholar from Liverpool. With 'everything to learn',<sup>21</sup> Brasch uncomplainingly adopted the role of dogsbody. There were times when the chilly dark of an early morning weighed heavily on his spirits, or when the lack of stimulating work palled, but on the whole he was content.

Just before Christmas he was moved from the main headquarters to supervise the digging of an area on the south plains. Because all finds were taken to the North House to be catalogued, there was no work to be done after digging ceased due to fading light. Having the

evenings to himself (he was sharing quarters with only two others, who were a couple), he was able to write lengthier letters to his friends at home. To James, he indulged in an objective overview of Amarna life which, until then, he had had little time to assess:

The actual digging - so far - is not very difficult; there are good trained men and excellent foremen, and there has been little for me to do except watch, tell them where to dig, ask a few questions, and collect the finds. Watching - and often there is absolutely nothing else to do - becomes intolerably dull, and becomes watch out for the postman (our private one who comes daily) and the next meal - breakfast when I'm up early, and lunch and tea every day, I have on the Dig. The uncovering of miserable walls of broken, slum like and unintelligible houses, when nothing comes up except a few beads and pottery moulds for ornaments, especially in this vile wind, is not interesting or pleasant to watch. Yet I often feel more than compensated, and I am fairly contented even with myself. Sometimes the loveliness of the day, or the men, or some more interesting find, or letters, make it all rosy. I do like to see the world outside, and here one does.<sup>22</sup>

Living with new people in an unfamiliar setting gave him a growing sense of maturity. Through his work at Amarna he was redefining his relationship with the 'world outside'; he no longer saw himself as parasitic, indolent, or ineffectual, but instead felt a welcome sense of purpose. His days were divided up by externally-imposed deadlines. For one who liked order but lamented his lack of self-discipline, a controlled regime was welcomed rather than resented.

Having to rise at 5.30 a.m. every second or third day was no hardship for him. A light sleeper,\* he would wake early to drink the tea brought to his room by one of the servants. Dressing in several layers to ward off the frosty air outside, he then accompanied one of the other men on the two-mile walk to the city centre (where, for each of his seasons, the main

---

\* He always rose early to read or write, and at Oxford had often worked through the night.

dig was situated). At eight o'clock a whistle blew, signalling a half-hour stop for egg sandwiches and piping hot tea: a welcome breakfast on January days when the site was still shrouded in cold river fog. The monotony of the work, the routine pattern of the days, the 'perishingly cold' north wind which gave a bitter edge to even the sunniest days: all these were minor drawbacks in a world which was so vast that human problems shrank into perspective.

Yet, during the first month of his stay, Brasch suffered what he described to Bertram as 'great [emotional] shocks',

floodings in which I most passionately knew the semblance of  
the lines

"Love from which the world began  
Hath the secret of the sun;  
Love can tell and love alone....",\*<sup>23</sup>

There is no hint in subsequent letters, nor in the manuscripts of his memoirs, as to who had inspired this passion. If he had decided that he was a homosexual by this time, it was not known by any other than himself. In a conversation with Pendlebury, the leader expressed surprise that Brasch and his Oxford friends had not made use of the town's waitresses to work off their 'inconvenient [sexual] appetites', as he and his Cambridge colleagues had done.<sup>24</sup>

But even such personal matters as love affairs (or the lack of them) inspired less despondency than they would have elsewhere. For now, it was enough to be rid of familial tension, and that sense of disappointment in himself which had weighed increasingly heavily on him since his finals at Oxford. 'To be alive in the freedom of the open air under that great sky', he wrote later, 'was good'.<sup>25</sup> For a time, despite the burden of his perfectionist nature, such simple pleasures brought him peace and a rare happiness.

---

\* Brasch's own ellipsis.

## IV

Although he had little time to keep up with his correspondence, let alone carry on with his writing, the creative effect Egypt had on Brasch was significant. The manuscripts of his memoirs contain detailed descriptions of the desert landscapes he grew to love. White cliffs, sandy river flats, scorching blue skies, lush fields of lucerne: all were evoked over thirty years later with immediacy and colour. The sheer immensity of the country, both in its history and its physical forms, was awe-inspiring:

Climb the cliffs and you see nothing except endless desert hills, utterly barren. The sky overhead is always the same blue clear sky of Egypt. The river, higher or lower, is the one everlasting Nile. It seems that this is the whole world, that nothing else exists.<sup>26</sup>

Yet he noticed, too, the minutiae which could easily become lost in these vast landscapes. The prose stemming from this period is full of vivid thumbnail sketches of plants, animal, and bird life:

Swallows ... were everywhere in Egypt.... They set off the immovable gravity of the great temples as they flitted round them with such breathtaking speed: plump little missiles with glossy blue-black wings and red-brown breast: they skimmed the Nile and the canals, darting round our *filuka*, soaring overhead, streaking down, flashing back and forth in diamond turns, in check and reverse and lightning pirouette - I laughed in amazement trying to follow them.<sup>27</sup>

In the foreword to his memoirs, Brasch writes that the following pages contain memories which he has been unable to shape into poems, 'although they have lived with [him] for many years'. There is a substantial section on Egypt, but in the whole of his collected poems there are only four which overtly refer to this formative time in his life. Three of the four use Egyptian material to introduce the theme of the passage of time. They are successful, just as the fourth is, primarily because of their visual quality.

'The Night, Luxor' is a short descriptive piece, which conjures up the world of night-shadows which Brasch experienced in his first few weeks in that city:

Wind breathes and water talks  
Softly, for the high moon walks  
Silencing the stars.<sup>28</sup>

There are echoes here of 'The Walker by Night', especially with the inclusion of a slow-moving figure amongst the moonlit trees. But, although the more recent poem is simpler, it is also more evocative, revealing the development of a surer touch in the intervening three years.

The wind which whispers through this poem was something which Brasch perceived to be a characteristic of the Egyptian climate, much like the light in Italy. In 'The Iconoclasts', he reiterates this awareness. Here nature is portrayed as a relentless force undermining the 'massive patience' of an ancient land:

Wind and wave and rain are bent  
To wear the frowning mountains down,  
Effacing feature, rubbing blunt  
The pyramid and the homeless stone  
Whose cheek the moonlight lingers on.<sup>29</sup>

Such personification of landscape was to become one of the most successful techniques in his New Zealand poems a few years later.

The remaining two Egyptian poems, 'The Colossi of Memnon' and 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt',<sup>30</sup> are lengthier, work on several levels, and represent a later stage in Brasch's poetry.\* In the case of the former, links to material in the prose memoirs are obvious. The group of huge figures was one of the sights he had marvelled at during his three weeks of sightseeing in and around Luxor in November 1932. Simple in form, stately in tone, the technical aspects of the 'The Colossi' are perfectly suited to its subject.

The initial image is of the imposing forms facing the rising sun, with 'the great land of the dead' dreaming behind them. Touches of colour highlight the setting of sand and rock. The bare earth is clad by 'green hissing/ Waves of the sugar-cane'; men are 'earth-brown'; a 'dark flight of shadows' circle the vast heads. Yet beneath the visual surface is an aching awareness of man's mortality, countered by a belief in the endurance of his creations. These are

Immovable sunlit presences that cannot  
Share or speak or mitigate, and yet  
By their mere neighbourhood to man endue him  
With more than human stature.

The immense stability which Egypt represented for Brasch becomes the theme of 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt'. The honing of technique has continued: this is a more complex poem than its three predecessors, both in inspiration and in form (it consists of three sections, irregular in lines and length). It too has a tangible starting point, but the poetic process from this point onwards is noticeably more sophisticated.

---

\* 'The Colossi' was published in 1948, and 'Rest on the Flight' in 1957.

While in Egypt Brasch was frequently reminded of visual art that he had seen elsewhere. The rich cobalt and dusky violet of the local glass in the Cairo markets, for instance, reminded him of ‘some of the blues in Renoir’s “The Umbrellas” in the National Gallery’.<sup>31</sup> Now, in a kind of reversal of this process, he takes Caravaggio’s work as the point of departure for his poem and into it infuses his intimate knowledge of the land it portrayed. And so the picture is presented as if in a gallery. Reader becomes viewer, and is offered a Biblical tableau of mother, father and child on a hillside of silvered lichens. A distant boat crosses ‘plains of sea’, a farmhouse shelters among ‘huddling trees’. Once again, the images are strikingly unexpected, and landscape details pertain to the central human figures.

The device of using a visual work of art to create a literary equivalent is strongly reminiscent of Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, a poem which Brasch knew well. The echoes of the English poet’s voice add a further dimension to ‘Rest on the Flight’ without diminishing its intrinsic worth. Brasch breathes life into his chosen world with an unassuming skill of his own. Just as Auden allows us to hear the splash and cry as Icarus plummets to his fate, this picture is similarly infused with sound and motion. The elements become not only alive but receptive to the plight of the exhausted family:

Listen, the sea below falling in a clear bay  
Has dropped its voice, and no  
Echo out of time touches their resting place.  
Only at intervals a sleeping wind  
Sighs above in the cave of macrocarpas,  
As if to lull the wide-eyed child....

As the world continues unaware of Icarus’s fate, so too do the inhabitants of this landscape exist in ‘safest ignorance’. With the description of these peripheral figures comes an understated awareness of the literal boundaries of canvas and frame. The ‘tiny barking of dogs, and cowman calling’ can be detected just ‘at the picture’s edge’. With the juxtaposition

of danger and safety, knowledge and ignorance, the subtle meanings of the poem filter through. Brasch conveys the isolation of individual existence which contradicts, yet co-exists with, the essential universality of human experience. His portrayal of ancient myths contains those paradoxes which he saw Egypt to represent: the simultaneous existence of past and present, the weight of centuries held lightly in a single moment.

## V

Effective as they are, Brasch's Egyptian poems seem a small output in light of the wealth of related material in *Indirections*. At the time, he found it difficult to write in a medium which would do justice to the flood of new experiences and impressions. He was still unsure of his ability as a poet: his publishing record consisted only of the few pieces which had appeared in the Oxford magazines and in the newly-born *Phoenix*.

His uncertainty manifested itself in the uneven writing of his memoirs. The manuscript sections on Egypt are a hybrid mixture of historical treatises (the result of extensive reading in London), straight narrative, character sketches, and lyrical description. In places his tone is better suited to poetry, and the shifts from concrete detail to meditation further suggest a stylistic indecision:

Completeness, order, stability, everlastingness, the long, slow, unbroken rhythms of a predominantly horizontal world, the orderliness and everlastingness even of time and decay - everything in Egypt expresses this sense of age and permanence: the landscape, the climate, temples and statues and reliefs, the even tempo of work in the fields and of life of the

villages. At night the sky is thick with stars blazing large and alive as if chanting in a language of light some all-powerful compelling ritual - a contemplative active world raised far above the silent subjected earth, more vital and beautiful than earth. In the night silence, that silence seems the first of all created things, out of which everything rises, to play upon its surface, and sink back into it again. My own breathing is an event, and I hush my breath; then, when there is no other sound, I am on the shore of this fathomless ocean of silence and I hear it, not loud but filling the world. Second of created things is the wind, which has there an overwhelming reality, although it only runs and falters upon the face of the silence. Wherever you go in that land of stone, the essentials are the same.<sup>32</sup>

Not only does the authorial voice in such passages 'float', but Brasch seems undecided about his very position. Part alien observer, part integrated inhabitant, his relationship with Egypt is here, and remained, one marked by ambiguity.

The powerful immediacy of its effect on him was the main cause of his bewilderment. Unable for some time to craft the accumulating bulk of material into poetry, he poured all details into his diaries and letters. But, although his literary ambitions had been pushed aside (and the respite from his nagging conscience was a relief), he still had a compulsion not only to write but to write in a form suitable for public consumption. And so his first attempts at ordering his Egyptian material into readable shape were represented by a genre he had rarely attempted before: the short story.\*

Of the four surviving stories dating from the early 1930s, all are so polished as to suggest a considerable investment of time and energy. But all, too, provide evidence that Brasch's talent lay in description rather than narrative. The one which most noticeably bears this out is 'The Upper Room', which has the strongest plot and is also the longest.<sup>33</sup> Matter-of-fact in tone, it is reminiscent of Mansfield's 'The Woman at the Store',<sup>†</sup> yet the setting is not New

---

\* He had made one earlier attempt at the age of seventeen: 'The Mustering', which was based on a fortnight he had spent on Minaret Station, on the shores of Lake Wanaka. The story is evocative and already shows a flair for descriptive detail, but the characters of the musterers are no more than types, and the plot is weak and sluggish (refer Brasch MS Papers 996, 16).

<sup>†</sup> Like Milner and Bertram, Brasch greatly admired Mansfield, and had read a good deal of her work at Oxford.

Zealand but Crete. The story, which tells of a party of friends walking across rugged hill country to the south coast, is drawn directly from Brasch's own visit to the island in March 1933.

Early in February he had written to Bertram from Cairo in 'a tremble of excitement'.<sup>34</sup> That morning he had received two invitations, one to return to Amarna the following season, and one to join John Pendlebury (at that time Curator of the Palace at Knossos) and his wife on Crete. Accepting both, he returned to the drab Armenian pension where he was staying in high spirits. He just had time to dash off a jubilant postcard before he left to meet Colin, whom he had not seen since November.

And so, after a couple of weeks in Athens (which he found 'wonderfully beautiful' after Cairo),<sup>35</sup> he sailed from Piraeus on an overnight crossing. The sea was so choppy that not only he but almost all the passengers on the small overcrowded ship were ill. On Crete, however, the weather was fair; and the Villa Ariadne, a tranquil vine-clad house next to the palace, offered an ideal place to rest before he and his companions set out on a hike across the island.\* Their party was small, consisting only of John and Hilda Pendlebury, Ralph, and Brasch himself; they were accompanied by one of John's retainers.

In 'The Upper Room', the five members of the group are clearly identifiable, with little attempt made to disguise them. Charles is the narrator, Con; Ralph becomes Race; the name of Kronis, the guide, remains the same. Hilda, whom Brasch disliked for her domineering tendencies, transmutes into an archetypal English spinster called Edna, and John is the dependable and efficient Duncan. But the dialogue is too wooden to bring the characters to life. They speak in short stilted phrases ('O I am tired') or are used as mouthpieces for Brasch's own reflections, often with unconvincing results:

---

\* Refer Dilys Powell, *The Villa Ariadne* (London, 1973).

‘One always is sorry for the defeated,’ Race said. ‘But that is largely regret because of the crudity of victory; one would fear and hate them just as much if they grew strong again. If you think they are evil why pity them?... We can’t not hate, or we haven’t learned to yet; the scientists will teach us, if they can, and then we’ll be completely reasonable beings’.

As in ‘The Woman at the Store’, tension mounts as the weather becomes more ominous. Unlike Mansfield’s work, however, ‘The Upper Room’ has an unsatisfying, anti-climactic ending, as the plot trails off with no revelation. The most memorable parts of the story are those which are obviously directly transposed from real life, such as the description of the travellers’ arrival at Kasteli:

When we reached the inn, its café was full, and lamps outside where Kronis had just finished unloading the mules lit up a whitewashed church opposite and the blue-painted sills of its rose windows, one above each door. Close beyond, darkness swallowed the street again.

Although the other three stories are set in Egypt, in both their strengths and weaknesses they are strikingly similar to ‘The Upper Room’. Once again, Brasch draws heavily on his own experiences for material. In his letters from Amarna several occasions are mentioned on which he and the rest of the party were invited to *fantasiya*: Arab ceremonies at which the locals entertained with song and dance. Christmas 1932 was his first at the site, and was marked by a day of such activities. There were games such as stick-fighting for the men and the children during the day, singing and dancing as the night drew in. The strange falsetto singing, accompanied by the eerie music of pipe and drums, fascinated him. Later he described the sound as ‘the rhythm of the night’. As he sat by an open fire under a vast black sky, his blood ‘pulsed’ with the beat of the drum and he felt both fulfilled and ‘expectant’.<sup>36</sup>

Such an occasion is the subject of 'The Trance'.<sup>37</sup> Again, the relationship between fact and fiction is not worked through to any satisfactory conclusion. The theatrical beginning, which describes villagers sitting round a blazing fire, promises a development which never arrives. Instead, Brasch adopts the persona of an onlooker (who is in a trance-like state) to portray the nature of the locals. After a series of rather sweeping pronouncements, on not only this topic but the entire history of mankind, he then clumsily returns the reader to the present.

A similar conflict between the trivial and the significant arises when he attempts to describe the physical manifestations of the singer Abderrahman's nature. His desire to convey the man's impact on his onlookers results in overwriting worthy of a romantic novel:

His handsome sullen faintly puzzled face came alive when he smiled, but was harsh, fanatical, fatalistic; cruel when he had to act as foreman and quite incapable of compromise or persuasiveness.

A similar uneasiness lies at the centre of 'The Blockhouse'.<sup>38</sup> The origins of this story, too, lie in the concrete details of life at Amarna - and this too is marred by an insistence on meaningful philosophizing, which clutters and confuses rather than clarifies. The opening is straight-forward, suggesting a non-fictional rather than fictional text to follow. 'Beyond our house', it begins, 'there was one other; a square grey blockhouse that stood some way off on the stony plain'. Yet once again the writing disintegrates into a peculiar blend of 'real-life' and imagined detail. Although the first person pronoun is initially used, after the second paragraph it is replaced by the vague use of 'one'. Halfway through the story this also disappears, and an omniscient narrator brings the piece to a solemn close:

The camel track led back out of this world, past the barrier, and far into that wide emptiness. It was the outside of the world, a place where the seeds of things hung formless in air awaiting their creation. To gaze into it was to be silenced with expectations; almost to hear winged legions of the future slumbering there, in that brightness and swimming haze. And at its edge stood the square plain walls of the blockhouse, watching so that nothing should stir before its time, nothing could be betrayed. It was like a boundary stone whose presence inexplicably caused the emptiness of space to bear.

The repeated personification of the blockhouse (it is described, for example, as not abandoning its post) forces upon it a symbolic significance which is not justified. As in 'The Upper Room', Brasch adopts an ominous tone for little conceivable purpose. In striving for 'meaningful' writing, he renders it meaningless.

The slightest of his four stories is, in fact, the most successful. In 'A song at nightfall', he is less anxious to supply his reader with a plot, is more content to adhere to the descriptive detail which gives a successful edge to his poetry. The real-life incident around which 'A song' revolves took place during one of several visits Brasch made to the camp at Kôm Aushim. It became a habit with him and Colin to walk on the hills at the end of a day, 'talking of everything under heaven'.<sup>39</sup> One evening they were passed by a young boy, calling for his stray goats on a wooden pipe. The sound of the pipe seemed one of 'utter strangeness', and they listened transfixed until the goatherd was swallowed up by the dusk.

Many years later, Brasch described the sound as 'a persistent, lingering, clinging note, clear, thin, a trickle of water, which seemed not to belong to this age at all'.<sup>40</sup> The (much earlier) short story contains a parallel image of music as water. And in both accounts, the unearthly sound of the pipe conjures up a vision of centuries past and future. In 'A song at nightfall', however, the younger Brasch indulges his passion for philosophizing to the extent that the initial narrative line is lost. 'We know that we have not reduced the world to the level of our rational explanation of it', he prosed:

and that even what is familiar may betray us. This knowledge was much stronger there, where man's mark upon the earth is so light that he can make no pretence of controlling it and even his existence is in doubt.

It is only when he returns to 'the small definite world of men' that his writing regains a sense of clarity. The greater success of this story in comparison to the other three lies in a greater adherence to the world of physicalities: the 'dust-coloured hills', the bright moonlight, the braying of a donkey.

During the months at Amarna, with their crisp frosty mornings and scorching afternoons, Brasch was not only working harder than ever before, but he was trying out a new way of life. Although he had put his writer's dreams aside, his writer's instincts were still at work: even at the time he realized the potential of the wealth of material around him. His initial attempts to wrest this material into short story form show him striving both for too much and too little. By aiming for lofty philosophies he muffles the clear lines of his vision; by confining himself to pedestrian story lines he drains this vision of colour.

Most of what he had read about Egypt, he felt, was unsuccessful in capturing the essence of the country:

Egypt was failing to attract minds that its grandeur and its rich art deserved; sound scholars, yes, but not men of imagination able to convey what they knew and bring it to life in words.<sup>41</sup>

It was this task - to bring Egypt to life in words - that he was attempting to achieve in his stories. Although the intention was commendable, the outcome was less than successful. This

was the first time he had found a subject about which he felt passionately, but it was to be some years before he found a medium to do it justice.

## VI

The empty deserts and wide skies of Egypt remained with him long after his three seasons at Amarna. On his first two visits in particular, in the winters of 1932 and 1933, personal anxieties receded in the face of such immensity. Trying to express this to Bertram, he wrote of a peaceful earth

so unchanging it would fold us in its own steadfastness. Silence here is a live thing; the wind is louder but the wind tires and after it is silence. The sun is fierce, and the stars bristle; man has created nothing (here) to compete with these, and they dwarf him; everywhere over Egypt the sky is wider and vaster than the earth....<sup>42</sup>

Although appreciation of the beauty around him gave him perspective, it could not make him immune to the pettier side of human existence. Letters dating from his second and third seasons hold increasingly frequent references to the monotony of Amarna life: long days under baking sun, digging which was often fruitless. A growing dissatisfaction with the work was mirrored by increasing irritation with his companions. By December 1933, hypercritically sensitive to changes in his relationships, he was already 'sicken[ed] - sometimes almost to revolt - of trivial and bawdy talk'.<sup>43</sup>

His initial reaction to his colleagues had been one of compliance, but his unquestioning acceptance of their general attitude had lasted only a few weeks. It was not in his nature to be what he described as ‘unreflecting’ and, although this trait in Pendlebury’s group meant that he was also unconditionally accepted, he saw it as leading to a deplorable insularity:

We made little attempt at Amarna to come close to the reality of Egyptian life.... How could we have done so, a group of healthy comfortable unreflective young Englishmen tightly bound within the conventions of their upbringing and education and brief experience of the world?<sup>44</sup>

Even during his first season he recognized that his fellow workers were far from soulmates. After little more than a month, the long days spent working beside them, the evenings spent drinking and talking with them, had begun to pall. He wrote to Bertram of his longing for days ‘with books only’ and his even greater longing to see his friends: ‘for none of these people, though I like them well enough, are or could be friends’.<sup>45</sup>

A year later his attitude had become noticeably less tolerant. Colin visited Amarna for a couple of days in the middle of December, an event which Brasch had eagerly anticipated after his own trips to Kôm Aushim. On these visits, he had found Peterson (Colin’s expedition leader) and his party to be generous and intelligent men, capable of adult conversation rather than the public-school humour of his own party. Now he hoped that Colin would receive a warm welcome in return.

The visit, which lasted only two days, was a disaster. The rest of the party, he believed, had failed to appreciate his friend’s many fine qualities; they treated him with scant respect and, after his departure, it was as if he might never have been there. Years later, the hurt and annoyance Brasch felt after the event emerged in the manuscripts of *Indirections*:

Perhaps it was evident that [Colin] and I were very close to each other, perhaps our closeness seemed to exclude the Amarna party, so that they responded coldly as if to exclude him. Or did they simply feel Colin too different from them, and different in a way they rejected? Of course everyone was polite, of course John acted the civil host, and there were matters of common interest for us to talk about. But no warmth flowed, and John and the others seemed to wish for no relationship at all. I was puzzled, disappointed, saddened, and also indignant.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the tension existed nowhere but in his own mind. Certainly his colleagues continued to treat him exactly as they always had, suggesting that they were oblivious to any problem. The strain of those two days, however, had a lasting influence on his attitude towards the idea of an archaeological career. Once 'unwelcome comparisons' between his present companions and his friends back in England made themselves clear, he began to doubt that this work was fulfilling him. Was his interest in Egyptology simply a stop-gap measure? Despite his indignation with the group at Amarna, he made no attempt to look for other openings with more compatible people.

His acceptance of Pendlebury's invitation to return for a second season certainly stemmed more from a desire for direction than from ambition. In January 1933 he wrote to Bertram from Amarna, begging him to keep a lookout for possible job opportunities in England. He was eager to travel after excavations ended, and once again his motives were mixed. As always, he had a genuine desire to make the most of travel opportunities, but he was also reluctant to return to the 'real' world where career decisions awaited him. 'Probably I shall contrive to stay out of England for 6 months', he hedged:

I have no further prospects and rather want them; whether this [the archaeological dig] involves any work in London on results, I do not yet know, but certainly I shall not return at once from so far for that alone. If you hear of jobs, anything at all that I might possibly be fit for, please tell me.<sup>47</sup>

These few sentences explain his subsequent reactions to events. A good deal of his excitement at Pendlebury's reissued invitation was relief: for the next twelve months, at least, he had definite plans. Even better, these plans were ones which others - particularly his father - would regard as socially and educationally acceptable. Yet his off-hand comment about not cancelling travel plans for Egypt Society work 'alone' was proof that, consciously or not, he had already decided to jettison archaeology.

In the same confessional vein, he told Bertram of his 'annoyance' at the way he had spent the previous six months in London. With both sufficient financial support, and unlimited time to write, he felt he had wasted a valuable opportunity. A large part of his reluctance to return to England was reluctance to re-engage in the ongoing battle with his conscience. Yet, confusingly, he also wanted to, for to opt out was to relinquish his literary dreams.

Caught between inclination and logic, he remained committed to neither. He spent many months between seasons in further travelling. During the sweltering summer of 1933, he accompanied the Roberts family on a holiday to Robin Hood's Bay, near Whitby; spent a week in a cottage in Kent with Alfredo and Enid; and a further week touring the Lake District. Weekend visits were made to Oxford to see not only Bertram but also Bennett, newly-arrived to begin postgraduate studies at Merton. Their presence in England gave him yet another excuse for putting off decisions on his future. Any journey to New Zealand could not be contemplated until they too were ready to return.

It was to meet Bertram and Milner that he took a trip to Russia in the summer of 1934. Travelling by train instead of boat so that he could visit relations in Amsterdam and Hanover, he then spent several days with Colin in Berlin. He met up with his New Zealand friends in Leningrad, but their ultimate destination was Moscow and its art festival. For ten nights in a row they attended plays, opera, and ballet; by day they explored the city, both by themselves or with a guide.

Even at this stage, Milner and Bertram were passionately interested in politics; they were there 'above all to see the land of socialism'.<sup>48</sup> The terms in which Brasch saw Russia were related to literature. The waiters in their hotel, the New Moscow, seemed to him to be 'the dumb patient oxen of the class society':

I recalled Yeats's lines, 'Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man: "Ireland shall get her freedom, and you still break stone."' And Frost's 'I bid you to a one-man revolution - The only revolution that is coming.'<sup>49</sup>

After three weeks he returned to England, but spent barely a month there before he departed once again, this time for France. His (perfectly valid) excuse was to act as chaperone for Lel, who was to board with a family in Bourges to improve her French. And in November he made his way once more to Cairo, to prepare for the new season's dig.

The constant activity of these years was an effective way of prolonging the interim between a dismal foray into business and the establishment of a 'suitable' career. For as long as he was involved with the Egypt Exploration Society, he did at least work steadily and read widely: ancient history, philosophy, religion. At the end of his first season, Colin encouraged him to learn hieroglyphics, and he wrote immediately to Bertram to tell him of the plan. Its greatest attraction was that, if a teacher could be found, he would be able to spend a term at Oxford. The subject itself, he gloomily predicted, was 'sure to be the devil-an'-all, dull and very difficult'; but he was determined to have plenty of time 'to read and talk and luxuriate' with James.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, when word came - less than a month later - that a Professor Trendall was willing to help him, he seemed more dismayed than delighted. Writing from Athens to tell James of the offer, he burst out with the news:

Oxford is ON - I heard yesterday; the retiring Professor of Egyptology has offered to help me, and he is keen to do so - which is rather terrifying, meaning work, whereas I'd thought of an idyllically idle term with spots of hieroglyphics.<sup>51</sup>

Despite his misgivings, he settled to work with Trendall and continued his studies the following year, taking lectures at University College, London. Although still describing it as 'stupid stuff',<sup>52</sup> he was a diligent scholar. At the start of the summer term, he was reading little other than hieroglyphics (although also succumbing to the pleasure of 'rediscovering' Keats).

In July 1933, an exhibition of the E. E. S. finds was mounted in London, and once again he felt obligated to do his duty, ensuring he remained in town for the duration of the show. In the meantime, he continued with his own reading and by the end of that month was able to make the claim, 'I don't do much except archaeologize'.<sup>53</sup> The summer that year was particularly humid, and the high temperatures made London an unpleasant place to be. In the name of duty, he resisted the temptation of a break abroad.

Such a sense of duty - to family, friends, and colleagues - had been drilled into him since he was very young. His father's strict moral code had been a source of guilt and anxiety to both him and Lel throughout their childhood. Although he would have been horrified at the suggestion that he was similar to his parent, his increasingly frequent criticisms of his colleagues sounded more than a little Hyam-like. He liked the men at Amarna well enough on a personal level,<sup>a</sup> but he felt they did not take their work seriously enough. Their 'tight little enclave' compared unfavourably to Colin's camp, where open-mindedness prevailed and the atmosphere seemed 'receptive to men, to history, to ideas'.<sup>54</sup> And the lack of sentiment they showed over important finds emphasized for him the essential differences between them and himself:

as archaeologists, [we were] doing a job professionally, in which the nature of the material, although without doubt of interest in itself, remained in the material, confined there, and did not reflect back on us or touch us. But to me it seemed that what I dealt in, alive in the air I breathed, was becoming part of my life, as the dye colours the dyer's hand.<sup>55</sup>

The truth was that, despite a new dedication to the practical rather than the literary, he was looking at the world with the eyes of a writer. His reproving attitude was that which he had adopted towards the 'hearties' at Oxford: they were oafs unappreciative of a finer plane of existence. Ralph Lavers, for example, was eminently likeable, but what was his purpose on the dig? Brasch disapproved of his frivolous nature:

What he knew of archaeology, Egyptology, Arabic, was what he had picked up in one season at Amarna, and he showed little sign of wanting to add to it ... he came, it seemed, chiefly as John's drinking companion.<sup>56</sup>

Besides this lamentable lack of discipline, the Australian was untidy and, at only twenty-five, had a 'sadly jaded' palate. Even Stephen Sherman, the experienced engineer who was indispensable, failed to fit the mould of an ideal archaeologist. His RAF background was decidedly seedy, and he had in him a wild and unpredictable streak.

The party at Kôm Aushim, by contrast, made available

an experience far wider than that of the recovery of papyri from the rubbish of time; as well as taking [Colin] back to the ancient world it was bringing him in new ways into touch with the present.<sup>57</sup>

Amarna, with its insular attitudes, he felt, did not offer the same life-enhancing experience.

There was truth in his criticisms but, on the whole, his expectations of what he would gain from the seasons at Amarna were unrealistic. He came to the field willing to learn, and put in much hard work during 1933 and 1934. Ultimately, however, his interests were those of an historian rather than a field archaeologist, something which he did not admit to himself until his third season. His reading of Egyptian history contributed to his notion of the past as a 'momentous, breathing reality', and he relished the sensation of personal boundaries expanding:

My world - and it was the real world of history - grew immensely larger. Behind the flat facade of the sunlit day, within that day lay the vast universe of a starry past which day's brightness made invisible.<sup>58</sup>

His letters, and an unpublished article which he wrote on Egypt,<sup>59</sup> displayed an impressively wide factual knowledge but also a view of history which was essentially romanticized.

And so his dissatisfaction with the exacting field work grew, while the reasons for this dissatisfaction went unacknowledged for many months. At first, a large part of his boredom was simply because he was too inexperienced to tackle any but the most routine chores: 'For me as a novice, there was often little to do on the dig except walk about and keep an eye on

the work'.<sup>60</sup> After only a few weeks, this became monotonous; on bitter mornings or in blazing afternoon heat, it was also extremely uncomfortable.

To make matters worse, his awareness of his inexperience was - typically - acute. His memoirs stress the continuing sense he had of being 'a greenhorn', one who could be 'of no use at all' on the more interesting projects, such as the excavation of the Great Temple which engrossed Pendlebury, Fairman, Lavers, and several of the chief Quftis. Even recording the day's finds made him feel inadequate, for each item had to be sketched and he 'drew so badly that [he] was trusted to enter only objects of the simplest shape which even [his] drawing could not make unrecognizable'.<sup>61</sup> Occasionally (and this was worse than boredom) he was put in a supervisory position where he had to make the sort of 'urgent decisions' for which he did not feel competent. 'That,' he wrote to James feelingly towards the end of his second season, 'not very frequent thank goodness, makes me sweat hot and cold'.<sup>62</sup>

By this time, he knew roughly what he was doing and, in fact, had many peaceful and even 'proprietary' days on site. But as his experience increased, so too did his sense of being unfulfilled. With the arrival of Hilda Pendlebury halfway through the season of 1933-4, his dissatisfaction with camp life grew even greater. Her domineering presence, then and for the whole of the next season, caused such tension in the camp that early in 1935 he was writing to Bertram of 'veiled domestic war', adding wryly, 'O woman, woman!'.<sup>63</sup>

That January was to be his last month on site, and he turned his back on life at Amarna with few regrets. He described himself as having 'grown tired' of the people there, and of becoming more critical of them after each interim period with his friends in London.<sup>64</sup> Yet he later acknowledged that a large part of this was caused not by their flaws but his own. Referring to his inability to grasp the technical rudiments of a project, he described his lack of concentration as a 'typical' fault of his: 'due in part to impatience and laziness, but more deeply to lack of faith related I think to my insecurity'.<sup>65</sup> Such insecurity was not so much social as vocational. Despite his desire for a stable and 'respectable' career, his allegiance had

remained with literature. And so, at the end of his third season, he severed his connections with Pendlebury and the Society to follow once more the demands of his heart rather than his head.

## VII

Hyam's reaction to the news that his son had yet again given up a stable career was predictable. He was already feeling betrayed by Lesley's departure for London the previous year, after which he had sold the family home in Dunedin and moved into rooms at his club. Brasch's defection from archaeology stoked his anger once more, and he accused his son of being an 'idler' and a 'dilettante'.<sup>66</sup> Even Willi Fels was disappointed; he had hoped archaeology would provide a happier and more secure future for his grandson than would the vague pursuit of literary aims.

This time Brasch felt unable to give any convincing reason for his change in direction. It was ironic that his sudden swerve away from the safe world of archaeological research made him seem wilfully unreliable, when in fact it was caused by renewed recognition of his long-standing literary hopes. Over the past two and a half years he had realized that any kind of demanding preoccupation precluded a serious writing career:

I had no wish, even supposing I had had the capacity[,] to become an Egyptologist, to give myself to it wholly and for life, which I should have to do. Too many other things drew me, poetry above all, to which every interest and all knowledge must contribute. Clearly I was not yet near to poetry, to

becoming a poet. That lay ahead somewhere - possibly. I had to leave the possibility open, and not commit myself elsewhere.<sup>67</sup>

Just as he had looked back on 1932 as a wasted year, due to his inability to concentrate on his poetry, now he berated himself for not making the most of his Egyptian experience. He had learned the Arabic script and some of the grammar, but patchily. In retrospect he saw this, too, as a 'dreadful waste':

I put [it] down to my general lack of application, a kind of frivolity, and on top of that to the variety of matters always competing for my attention. I could easily have taken lessons in the weeks I spent each year in Cairo, where I wasted opportunities too.<sup>68</sup>

It was, in fact, serious-mindedness rather than frivolity which caused his continued indecision. Rather than forging ahead with whatever interested him at the time (as the happy-go-lucky Milner did), he mulled over the implications of each career choice for so long that they took on vast proportions, and seemed irrevocable.

His feeling that significance must reside in even the most routine occupations was another reason why he was not suited to archaeology. Although his exacting nature meant that he was good at work such as the detailed cataloguing of finds, the actual field work - often fruitless - weighed heavily on his spirits. The site of an occupied dig came to be, for him, merely a symbol of man's transience. Such disillusionment had been made apparent in his story 'A song at nightfall':

This was technically desert. Yet men come to study the habits of their long-dead fellows had again occupied it, building a house that looked permanent enough if only because its smooth walls were as pale as the sand.... But [as] soon as their trenches and

pits had destroyed the solidity of the mound, for so long just another big hillock in the landscape, exposing a jumble of skeleton houses, lanes, squares, and meaningless walls, they would go away again and leave their house to the same fate as these others. Neither life nor death was in secure possession.<sup>69</sup>

Literature, he came to believe, *would* ensure possession by transcending mortality. Such a vision had remained, flickering, within him during his three years of archaeologizing. This period appeared to him immediately afterwards as a distraction from the pursuit of his vision, its daily routine having prevented him from capturing the experience in words.

The greater understanding of history he had gained, however, proved invaluable a few years later. The New Zealand poetry he wrote during the late 1930s and early 1940s was rich in its description of enduring natural icons, redolent with the knowledge of mankind's transience. Yet at the time the hope of creating good poetry seemed very slight. Although he knew he must leave the Egypt Society, it had given a reassuring shape to his formless future and he felt unable to cut himself adrift entirely. Throughout 1935 he continued to work intermittently at the Society's rooms. His concentration was fragmented, however, and this proved detrimental to his own writing.

Life at 5 St Edmund's Terrace also served to disrupt any established work routine. Not only was he sharing the top floor of the yellow stucco flats with the exuberant Lel, but the two were surrounded by New Zealand relations. The de Beers, of course, were living just across Regent's Park, and in April Willi and Emily Fels, Hyam and Eunoe (Kate's extrovert daughter), arrived in London. In consequence, Brasch spent much of his time entertaining, theatre-going, and visiting galleries and museums. These were enjoyable and 'intensely social' days.<sup>70</sup> He could not remain unaware, however, of the increasing political and social turmoil. Unemployment was rising, the Nazis growing in strength. And always, beneath the glittering surface of his privileged London life, lurked the fear that he would never succeed in

his writing; he could not help fretting 'because [he] was not writing, and always thinking about it'.<sup>71</sup>

Lel knew little of his troubles, for he rarely confided in her. Hyam knew even less, and was a disturbing presence to have in London throughout 1935. The fear of his father's scorn which had paralysed Brasch in the past now took hold once again; his hopes of becoming a published writer were now guarded more closely than ever. The project he did admit to incurred Hyam's wrath all the same. He had given up archaeology, Brasch told his family, in order to edit the works of the seventeenth-century poet Fulke Greville.

Looking back on his brief flirtation with Greville's work, he was under no illusions regarding his reasons for adopting this task. Early in 1935, he had received in the weekly post a present from Mary de Beer: the newly published *Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*. His enthusiasm for archaeological work had been waning for some time, and by now he was casting about for other possible occupations. After happily browsing for some hours through Mary's gift, he was struck by the idea that he might make an edition of Fulke Greville, an undertaking which (according to Esmond) had never been done well.

Searching for direction, he was only too willing to read a 'meaning' into his choice. 'It was significant, for me,' he wrote to James on 12 January, 'that the [*Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*] should begin with Fulke Greville'.<sup>72</sup> His knowledge of the poet had previously been limited to an undergraduate reading of 'O wearisome condition of humanity', which had greatly impressed him with its solemnity. Esmond, who had first steered him in this direction, now endorsed this new project, and his enthusiasm about its possibilities grew. It would give him academic credibility, would allow him to make a dignified exit from the dull world of archaeology and, most importantly, would not interfere with his own poetry.

Although in retrospect he saw his commitment to the task as only partial, at the time he convinced himself that he greatly desired to do it. 'I was able to persuade myself sufficiently.'

he wrote wryly in *Indirections*, 'to persuade other people that this would be an adequate occupation, on which pretext I said goodbye to the Society and Pendlebury'.<sup>73</sup> Bertram, like Esmond, thought this an excellent undertaking, but he wrote to Amarna with the warning that he had heard of another scholar currently working in this area. By the time his letter arrived, early in February, Brasch had already left for Cairo and, from there, had made his way to Haifa to meet up with the sprightly Great-Aunt Agnes. Bertram's letter, forwarded from Amarna, caught up with him there, and he wrote a reply from a German pension at Tabgha. High above the indigo waters of Lake Galilee, far away from the world of English academics, he was relatively undaunted by the thought of editorial opposition, although also typically diffident:

Do you know the people who are working on Fulke Greville, or know their names, so that I could find out just what they are doing-? I wonder if the woman who means to edit him has a publisher, and whether she has tried to trace the Warwick mss which Grosart used and were lost later.

I still want to do F.G. in spite of your people - or not less, because of them; but I should not be surprised to have to give way to them. I am not yet an Elizabethan scholar - far from it - and the thing must be done properly.<sup>74</sup>

A month later, from a Vienna where the Nazi influence was already alarmingly prevalent, he wrote again to Bertram (who had now applied for a position at the *Times*). He planned to arrive back in England in the first week of April: 'My first occupations will be Fulke Greville,' he informed James: 'and getting clothes, which I have to do in the 10 days before my family arrives'.<sup>75</sup>

During the spring of 1935, despite living in a social whirl, he managed to cram in a substantial amount of research on his new subject. The previous summer Mary and Esmond had offered him a subscription to the London Library, a gift which he had gratefully accepted

(although feeling a 'fraud' at the thought of joining its impressive membership).<sup>76</sup> After a few weeks of hurrying back and forwards between his rooftop flat and the impressive building in St James Square, he had managed to plough through a good deal of general background reading, displaying the same mixture of dogged diligence and real enjoyment as he had in his Egyptology work. But, before long, he became aware that Geoffrey Bullough, a co-editor of the *Oxford Book* which had first caught his interest, was well advanced in his own research on Greville.

His reaction to this discovery was, typically, mixed; his relief (which he kept secret) was equal to, or greater than, his disappointment. Although enjoying his reading, he had been finding Greville's writing a hard slog. 'Only a little of it is poetry', he wrote some years later: 'the long didactic poems and plays are pretty monotonous reading, their steady heavy rhythms befog the mind'.<sup>77</sup> Besides this, his own work had been suffering from a lack of time and concentration. The alleviation of this burden, particularly in a manner which could in no way be seen as his fault, was welcome.

Hyam, who thought the study of literature a poor hobby anyway,\* was neither surprised nor displeased that this project had fallen through. He decided to take Charles as well as Lesley on a tour of Ireland. Both were reluctant, although Brasch could not help but be interested in a country which had bred one of his most admired poets. Bumping along winding lanes, squashed uncomfortably close to Hyam in a hired charabanc, he took refuge in Yeats's *Collected Poems* of 1933. He had first become acquainted with the volume at Amarna; the pressure of daily routine had allowed only snatched hours of reading, so that poetry had best suited camp life. Now, as the grey streets and green hills unfolded before him, the familiar words took on a new significance: here was the commonplace rendered extraordinary, the mundane made magical. And this transformation was one which suddenly

---

\* He had read poetry, mostly Newbolt and Browning, to Charles and Lesley when they were small, but had stopped when they were old enough to read for themselves (ref. *Ind.*, pp. 45-7).

made sense of the role of literature in life, although exactly where his own role lay within this remained unclear for some time:

The countryside was full of detail; but it was Yeats's imagination, working on what he found, that made Ireland rich, dramatic, and noble. What did words do to cast such a light upon the world? how did the poet forge such words? is a poet born or made? and how must he live? These and other questions I continued to put to myself - as I felt - aimlessly and vainly, because I could not answer them, and in any case whatever answer I might give hung clearly on one condition: 'We receive but what we give.' And what had I to give? I could not tell. There was no answer; but having come so far, I told myself, I had to go on, trying to write poetry, preparing myself to write.<sup>78</sup>

While Brasch was deciding to be more resolute in the pursuit of his literary dreams, Hyam had still not given up hope of an archaeological career for his son. Lesley's defection he was prepared to overlook; both her sex and her ill health excused her disruption of their settled life in Dunedin. But Charles was twenty-six and, despite the best possible education, had stuck at nothing. It was high time, Hyam concluded, that he began to show both application and dedication. With father and son silently making directly opposing resolutions, an explosion was inevitable. One night at Sligo matters came to a head.

Although Charles had continued to work intermittently at the Egypt Excavation Society in London, he had known since April that he had no intention of returning to Amarna for a fourth season. He had neither 'the courage or conviction to avow [his] secret hopes',<sup>79</sup> however, and to his father he appeared little more than lazy and directionless. Now Hyam demanded to know his intentions; the decision not to return to Egypt seemed incomprehensible. After years of assiduously avoiding revealing his literary plans, Brasch was in a difficult position. He was dependent on his father's hospitality for the duration of the trip, and he realized that his explanations for giving up archaeology sounded lame and

unconvincing. But with Yeats's words ringing in his head, he summoned up the courage to state his purpose: 'I replied that I would write and write well'.<sup>80</sup> Despite Hyam's predictably scornful reaction, he felt for the first time that achieving this ambition was at least a possibility. 'I had not felt such confidence', he reflected, 'since returning from New Zealand three years before'.<sup>81</sup>

Although he considered his years in Egyptology wasted, something about the place had set in motion a thought-process which prepared him to write about another country. Egypt was 'a world to itself, physically and historically',<sup>82</sup> but the impressions he brought away after each season at Amarna had turned his mind towards New Zealand. Both countries were characterized by space and light. The main attributes of the Egyptian landscape were those which he most appreciated in New Zealand: starkly beautiful lines, the 'clear, soft, wonderfully sweet air'. In both, the natural forms of the landscape dwarfed and gave historical perspective to the creations of man.

The writing inspired by his time in Egypt - not the formal historical and geographical pieces, diligently researched and planned, but the spontaneous descriptions in his journals and letters - directly influenced his later, more creative writing. It was in Egypt that he developed his eye for detail, and there that he began to compare this detail to other, more familiar scenes. When he admired the 'unflawed beauty' of the stones in the Nile valley,<sup>83</sup> he was reminded of sitting on the shores of the South Island's Lake Wakatipu. In both locations, the stones were perfect; they symbolized individualism and endurance. Egypt's vegetation, too, brought his home country to the forefront of his mind, and the reminder was both poignant and reassuring:

On still mornings I found occasionally as we breakfasted small white flowers that must have blown from the cultivation; they brought back to me vividly the small waxy ngaio flowers, grainy white with a pink blush, that used to lie in similar

troughs of the high sand waves beneath the cliffs at Long Beach. Then these two worlds were present to me at once and made one world in my mind.<sup>84</sup>

On his travels after his second and third seasons, he continued to make unconscious comparisons with New Zealand. In Palestine he felt immediately at ease, with his adequate grasp of Arabic, his Christian upbringing, and his Jewish blood. But above all the country seemed familiar because its landscapes reminded him of his roots. 'The strong light,' he realized later, '[the] clear air, the hot rich rocky barrenness, were such as I knew and loved at home'.<sup>85</sup> The high Tekoa hills south of Bethlehem made him recall 'the sharp-pointed Tekoa somewhere north of Amberley, snowy in winter'.<sup>86</sup> The red rock reminded him of Central Otago, as did the rugged hills behind Antioch.

He was not yet ready to commit himself to New Zealand, either physically or creatively, but his experiences of other countries were widening his outlook in such a way that he began to see his home country with new eyes. The months spent in Egypt did not culminate in a career, as his father had hoped, but they gave him a maturity which fed his writing. In his letters there was already a noticeable tendency towards visual writing: a drawing on the landscape for inspiration which became the key to his most successful poetry. Above all, his years in that alien world helped him to an understanding of what New Zealand meant to him. More than four years after leaving the quiet isolation of Amarna, he wrote to Bertram from the glitter of New York about the importance of belonging to one place:

though, I think, one might enjoy living in America, it would be hard to become rooted here - rooted in the land so that one responded with a sort of sixth sense to its shapes and colours and texture - once one has already matured. I know I am so rooted in ... N.Z., and I suspect that any other country, even Italy, even Egypt, much as I love them, would come to seem a place of exile after a few years.<sup>87</sup>

He maintained a deep affection for Egypt, but already he recognized that his career as a writer depended on his identity as a New Zealander.

---

<sup>1</sup> CB to JB, 9 May [1932].

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.*, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind.*, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Manuscripts of *Indirections* [hereafter *Ind. MSS*], Brasch MS Papers 2148, Fols. 1-6, p. 310. These manuscripts consist of material omitted by Bertram in his editing of Brasch's memoirs.

<sup>5</sup> CB to JB, '12 Primrose Hill, NW3. Tuesday' [October 1932].

<sup>6</sup> CB to JB, '12 Primrose Hill, NW3. Tuesday' [October 1932].

<sup>7</sup> CB to JB, 'London. Tuesday evening' [mid-October, 1932].

<sup>8</sup> *Ind.*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> CB to JB, 22 October 1932.

<sup>10</sup> CB to JB, 31 October 1932.

<sup>11</sup> CB to JB, 31 October 1932.

<sup>12</sup> *Ind.*, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> CB to JB, 31 October 1932.

<sup>14</sup> CB to JB, 22 November [1932].

<sup>15</sup> CB to JB, 22 November [1932].

<sup>16</sup> CB to JB, 22 November [1932].

<sup>17</sup> *Ind.*, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 261.

<sup>19</sup> CB to JB, 22 November 1932.

<sup>20</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 285.

<sup>21</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 281.

<sup>22</sup> CB to JB, 6 January 1933.

<sup>23</sup> CB to JB, 6 January 1933.

<sup>24</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 281.

<sup>25</sup> *Ind.*, p. 200.

<sup>26</sup> *Ind.*, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> *Ind.*, p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Night, Luxor', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Iconoclasts', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Colossi of Memnon', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 21-2; 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt', *TE* in *CP*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 256.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Upper Room', Brasch MS Papers 996, 16.

<sup>34</sup> CB to JB, 5 February [1933].

<sup>35</sup> CB to JB, 5 March [1933].

<sup>36</sup> *Ind.*, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Trance', Brasch MS Papers 996, 16.

<sup>38</sup> 'The Blockhouse', Brasch MS Papers 996, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ind.*, p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> *Ind.*, p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> *Ind.*, p. 205.

<sup>42</sup> CB to JB, 12 December [1933].

<sup>43</sup> CB to JB, 14 December [1933].

<sup>44</sup> *Ind.*, p. 200.

<sup>45</sup> CB to JB, 6 January 1933.

<sup>46</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 294.

<sup>47</sup> CB to JB, 6 January 1933.

<sup>48</sup> *Ind.*, p. 235.

- <sup>49</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 351.
- <sup>50</sup> CB to JB, 13 February [1933].
- <sup>51</sup> CB to JB, 5 March [1933].
- <sup>52</sup> CB to JB [8 May 1934].
- <sup>53</sup> CB to JB, 24 July [1933].
- <sup>54</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 292.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 296.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ind.*, p. 284.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 292.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ind. MSS*, pp. 296-7.
- <sup>59</sup> Brasch MS Papers 996, 16. The article deals at length with the reign of Akhenaten, the founder of Amarna.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 268.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 280.
- <sup>62</sup> CB to JB, 26 January [1934].
- <sup>63</sup> CB to JB, 12 January 1935.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ind.*, p. 225.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 271.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ind.*, p. 226.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 335.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ind.*, p. 208.
- <sup>69</sup> 'A song at nightfall', Brasch MS Papers 996, 16.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ind.*, p. 228.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ind.*, p. 338.
- <sup>72</sup> CB to JB, 12 January 1935.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ind.*, p. 225.
- <sup>74</sup> CB to JB, 21 February [1935].
- <sup>75</sup> CB to JB, 29 March [1935].
- <sup>76</sup> CB to JB, 'Flat 7, 5 St Edmund's Terrace NW8. Friday' [summer, 1934].
- <sup>77</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 335.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ind.*, p. 255-6.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ind.*, p. 226.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 382.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 382.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ind.*, p. 194.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 279.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 267.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ind.*, p. 215.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 216-7.
- <sup>87</sup> CB to JB, 10-23 July 1939.

## **Chapter Three**

*Mountain-Face and Hawk's Cry:1927-36*

## CHAPTER THREE

### MOUNTAIN-FACE AND HAWK'S CRY: 1927-36

The wide deserts and mysterious valleys of Egypt had exerted a strong power over Brasch, yet its myths could never come to mean as much to him as the literature of Europe. Not only the English landscapes but those of other countries came alive for him because of their connections with the great masters. The first European country with which he became familiar was Italy, with its wealth of visual art and natural beauty. For him it became, and remained, the paragon of all countries.

The opportunity for a visit arose very soon after his arrival in England. A trip to Rome was an annual event for Great-Aunt Agnes and the de Beers, who were accustomed to escaping the worst weeks of the dark London winter. In 1927, with typical generosity, they included both Charles and Lesley in their travel plans. Just as on his arrival in England some months earlier, Brasch was overwhelmed on his first visit to Italy. Yet the six months with his grandfather had at least given him some knowledge of European art and literature. Although he professed to judging all he saw 'immediately, without reflection, without reason', he was 'as ready for Italy as pictures and books and talk at Manono' could make him.<sup>1</sup>

During the five weeks in Rome, he was too distracted to make any attempt to learn the language, but he delighted in the richness of everyday Italian life: the novelty of continental food and coffee, the snatches of lively conversation and songs. Each day was filled with sight-seeing, ruins and treasured works of art alike capturing his heart and imagination.

A year later, he returned to Rome with his German cousin Erik Hallenstein (who had come up to Wadham at the beginning of 1928). This time they stayed with Agnes, who had

now taken an apartment in the city. While this holiday reaffirmed Brasch's initial response to Italy, it was not until the long vacation of 1929 that he saw the countryside bathed in golden summer light. It was then that he was captivated completely, and he began to learn its literature and history, and the language of its poets. Staying with a Florentine family as part of his course for History Honours, he was tutored by a Professore Scarafia, who taught him enough Italian to read the poetry of Dante, Leopardi, Michelangelo, and others.

An increasing knowledge of its cultural history deepened his love of Italy, but did nothing to diminish the importance of the English Romantics to him. In fact, his devotion to these writers became an inextricable part of the magic Italy was working on him:

Falling in love with Italy on my first visit, I found further reasons for loving it on each later visit, more to interest and excite and satisfy me. It seemed to anticipate, and to answer abundantly, all the urgencies springing up in me; the hunger for beauty of every kind, for proportion, for meaning; the need to understand. Involvement with Italy also brought me closer to Grandfather and my aunts, to all that Manono stood for. The very sound and rhythm of the name Italy rang and sang with its concentrated meaning. Its hold on me was strengthened because wherever I went lines of the English poets who had gone before me came to my mind. I could never enter Piazza di Spagna nor climb the Spanish Steps unaware of Keats's house, as if its windows were still watching with his eyes. 'Go then to Rome': and Shelley's spirit started up again and again, from the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, Palazzo Cenci, the Baths of Caracalla... Byron, Shelley, Browning, with Wordsworth, Tennyson, Arnold and Swinburne, and a few lines of Milton, and in a different way Shakespeare, had given to countless Italian scenes and events a life which made them English too, whether in England or New Zealand. I saw early in mind that 'castle, precipice-encurled/ In a gash of the wind-grieved Apennine', imagined the 'palace in Florence, the world knows well', loved the world with Pippa at Asolo. I loved it especially in Arnold's *Empedocles*, in the morning-clear freshness of those descriptive passages which put on me a particular spell of their own, and which I repeated to myself again and again like bars of music in the Otago mountains, identifying Sicily with New Zealand. Shelley went with me at almost every step. I took

in his 'Paradise of exiles', from the Venice of *Julian and Maddalo* and 'the quenchless ashes of Milan', to the Naples of the 'Stanzas written in Dejection'.<sup>2</sup>

It was perfectly timed: his appetite and capacity for learning were at their peak. An entire world was opening up for him - a world rich in inherited history and art in a way in which his own young country was not, and for which he was partially prepared by his reading. Its impact was to last throughout his life; no other country visited subsequently was to have quite such an effect on him. 'Italy', he stated with youthful fervour,

drew me more strongly and persistently than any other country; it was unthinkable not to go to Italy at least once every year, to renew one's own life by drinking deep of its intenser life.<sup>3</sup>

His first choice of destination remained Italy, but his first long vacation - the summer of 1928 - was spent in France and Germany. His feelings about France were mixed. On this visit he stayed in Tours with a French family, and saw the château country which he admired but was unmoved by. A year later (again with Erik) he returned to France, this time to Paris where he was to take a course at the Sorbonne in French history.\* Paris was another city he came to know well; he enjoyed its museums and art-galleries, but found it self-absorbed to the point of excluding non-citizens. France did not touch him in the same way as Italy, nor did it inspire him creatively, featuring neither in *Present Company* nor his series of foreign pieces in *Not Far Off* (1969) where other early travel impressions appeared.

Yet, in a way which pleased him with his desire for unity, he came to see that France had, in fact, influenced his development as a writer. Italy's landscapes had captured his heart, as (a few years later) did those of Egypt. But, interestingly, neither country became central to his

---

\* By his own account, his French remained sketchy: 'I soon learned to follow, and even to speak, fairly fast in the end although very badly' (*Ind.*, p. 163).

poetry. It was to a different cultural heritage that he turned for direction in his quest for a poetic voice. In the museums of Paris, he grew to love sculpture as an art-form, and began to formulate his creed of visual art providing inspiration for poetry. During the visit of 1928 he encountered for the first time the work of Rodin, who had had such a profound effect on Rainer Maria Rilke. Although at this time he had read little or nothing of Rilke, the German lyric poet became more and more important to him from this time onwards, and was to supersede (though never to replace entirely) the Romantics in his affections.

## I

In his memoirs, Brasch is vague about how and when Rilke first caught his interest. As an undergraduate, he dismissed Eliot as inhibiting, and difficult to understand. He already knew Yeats's early work, closer to his favourite poets Shelley and Wordsworth. By the time he started at St John's, new collections of Yeats featuring a less Romantic style were being printed. Although at first he found it hard to appreciate this poetry, his literary tastes matured and the Irish writer soon became for him 'the one great living poet, whose work [he] drank in and made part of [himself]'.<sup>4</sup> In his second year at Oxford *The Tower* was published, and he bought it immediately.

Of poets in other languages he knew little, but his discovery of Rilke prompted a lifelong interest in German lyric poetry.\* During his first visit to Germany, late in August, he stayed with Erik's family at Krempe, near Holstein. Erik's mother, Hilda Hallenstein (who was a

---

\* James Bertram's article, 'Joining in the Universal Dance of Art - Charles Brasch and German Lyric' (*Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, Nr.189, 1987, pp. 17-23), provides a brief analysis of the German influence on Brasch's poetry.

niece of Willi Fels), recommended Rilke to him and, after an initial reading, his interest was already captured:

I bought a copy of Rilke's selected poems in the Insel Verlag pocket edition.... Two years later, on the way from Cologne to Trier, I bought in the same edition his *Briefe an einen Jungen Dichter* (yes, they were addressed to me!), a few passages of which I translated - stiffly, with my halting German - for the second number of *Phoenix*. And when I returned from New Zealand I found at Bumpus's (then still occupying an old building in Oxford Street...) a copy of the *Duino Elegies*, in fact a first edition of 1923.<sup>5</sup>

The poet, who had died less than a year before Brasch's arrival in Oxford, was already renowned, although most of his extensive correspondence was as yet unpublished. Even the small collection of 1903-8 which constituted *Letters to a Young Poet*, however, was sufficient to convince Brasch that Rilke's writing was directly relevant to his own life. The first letter to the young Austrian lieutenant Kappus addressed two problems which were particularly preoccupying Brasch: first, poetic intention and secondly, the development of a personal style:

Nobody can advise and help you, nobody. There is only one single means. Go inside yourself. Discover the motive that bids you write; examine whether it sends its roots down to the deepest places of your heart, confess to yourself whether you would have to die if writing were denied you. This before all: ask yourself in the quietest hour of your night: *must* I write? Dig down into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be in the affirmative, if you may meet this solemn question with a strong and simple "*I must*", then build your life according to this necessity; your life must, right to its most unimportant and insignificant hour, become a token and a witness of this impulse.<sup>6</sup>

As an undergraduate Brasch had read widely, and the work which most appealed to him was that of a subjective nature. While others at Oxford strove to widen their academic scope, his preoccupation was with the development of himself, as a person and a poet. Poetry was for him 'a vehicle of knowledge, a principal means of discovering and interpreting reality';<sup>7</sup> yet his reality was still very much a circumscribed world, consisting only of what directly affected him and his creative ambitions. A dreamer rather than a realist, he disliked the modernist approach of writing for the intellect, preferring instead an emotional response. The feeling of deriving a private significance from a poet was what had drawn him, at the age of sixteen, to Keats. Now Rilke became real to him in the same way, speaking 'intimately' to him for years to come.

During the time he unwillingly spent in New Zealand in 1930, his reading greatly affected his personal decisions and his attitudes to people and places. He found himself to be 'excited and moved' by the physical beauty of his home country,<sup>8</sup> but after the rich art and culture he had experienced abroad, he felt New Zealand to be stifling, narrow and above all 'formless': a word which clearly revealed the influence of Yeats. The authors whom he had read on the voyage out had been an eclectic bunch: Jane Austen, Dostoievsky, Kafka, Auden, and Rilke. It was Rilke who most sustained him in the dreary months which followed, and with whom, in his unsettled state, he most strongly identified. He later described himself as 'drinking in by a sort of osmosis' Rilke's poetry:<sup>9</sup> a metaphor he frequently used for any sensuous experience, from viewing a landscape to appreciating a painting.

In a bookshop in Sydney during the voyage home, he discovered Rilke's prose, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The appeal of this full-scale work, written some twenty years earlier, is obvious: the narrative focus of the *Sketches* is the relationship between a sensitive poet and a forbidding environment. In the months following the discovery of this work, Brasch drew from it not only parallels but comfort. After three years of living and travelling in Europe, he found life in a small New Zealand city a very real shock. His

expectations were so low, moreover, that they inevitably coloured his judgement. He proceeded to apply the word 'formless' to all aspects of his environment:

It meant mindlessness and torpor; failure to distinguish and discriminate; the ugliness of living content with the second-best. It applied to standards generally, to behaviour and manners, to the raw shapeless towns, scattered thinly about the country like an unrelated, unassimilable scum of human tide-wrack, with their bleeding colour and unhuman corrugated iron.<sup>10</sup>

Later in life, although his vision of developing the arts remained very much a Eurocentric one, he came to see this 'formlessness' as a necessary part of any young country. But in his early twenties, he saw such an environment to be hostile to his literary ambitions. New Zealand society and its laissez faire attitude seemed to denote the antithesis of Rilke's creed, that any good in art or in life could only spring from a sense of purpose almost ruthless in its strength.

Thus Rilke spoke to him of all that he had left behind, all that he wanted to achieve, and all that he felt he was suffering at the time:

although removed by the veil of language his work seemed so close to me, an astonishing discovery of the familiar, the once known and forgotten; poems, *Malte*, the *Letters to a Young Poet*: with all their strangeness, their circumstances so remote from mine, they were written, undoubtedly, for me. And that I think I felt of no other writer except, a little later, Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup>

Such an influence is evident in the first poems Brasch wrote which deal with the difficulty of coming to terms with his home country. The title pieces of *The Land and the People* lament man's hasty occupation of the land: the usurper takes no time to 'listen for its

heart', and disregards the greater powers of sea and wind and time, caring only about 'the momentarily/ Event'.<sup>12</sup> The context of these poems is relevant to an Antipodean audience, the images firmly based in time and place; but into them Brasch smoothly inserts a couplet of German poetry which acknowledges his debt to Rilke:

*Wer jetzt weint irgendwo in der Welt  
ohne Grund weint in der Welt...*

*Rilke*

For the *Collected Poems*, Brasch's literary executor Alan Roddick provides a translation and reference for these lines:

Anyone who weeps now anywhere in the world  
weeps without cause....<sup>13</sup>

Brasch (as becomes his practice) offers no translation. He simply proceeds to echo the phrases of the couplet in his own language, continuing:

Without cause, without cause  
Who weeps? the burning days  
Fallen, and the withered sun  
Constrained to pause.

The two concluding verses also grow out of Rilke's lines. The first, less obviously, plays with sound in the opening phrase: 'Winds that creep, strike, numb the bone'. The final verse returns to refute swiftly the sentiment expressed in the German: in this situation, in the seizing and despoiling of a natural world, there is certainly cause to lament. Brasch directly

addresses all those who are blindly complacent, and finishes in the foreboding tone which prevails throughout the collection:

Yes weep, for you have cause: the burden  
Is on you, who cannot break -  
And still world-strange, self-ignorant: vision  
Ails you: and no truce, no pardon.

The guilt redolent in this ending was one which he felt personally. The responsibility of an individual towards not only his country but also himself, he felt, was a heavy burden. A line he came across in Rilke's 'Der Nachbar': *Und warum trifft es immer mich?* struck him as particularly apt and remained a touchstone for life. This line, which he translated as 'And why does it always come back to me?', was 'a question [he] was to put to [himself] time and again, in bitterness or resignation'.<sup>14</sup> It became an essential part of the vision of loneliness which lay at the centre of his later work: a vision which had been prompted, partly at least, by Rilke.

## II

The intensely subjective reading which Brasch brought to Rilke's writings was partly attributable to his youth. Yet even at this early age his tastes were decided: a characteristic about which he wrote, much later, in 'Sing to the Deaf':

There are only certain poets I can hear,  
Those few  
Who pitch their notes to my eccentric ear.  
The rest - sublime, mellifluous, heady, love-true,  
Ice-keen, making-it-new -  
Might as well sing to the deaf, as I do.<sup>15</sup>

The affinity he felt with Rilke's work stayed with him. He saw it as relevant not only to himself but to others in his life: in particular, a friend of his named Leonie Zuntz.

Leonie's parents were the German-Jews with whom Colin had boarded in Berlin. They had maintained contact when Colin returned to England, and each of the three children in turn had visited the Roberts household. The friendship between families was cemented by the marriage of Dora, the elder of the Zuntz sisters, and Colin's older brother Brian. As the rise of the Nazis threatened the Jewish family's safety, Leonie and her brother Gunter also came to live in England.

They soon became part of the group of friends Brasch was seeing regularly in the years after Oxford: Colin and Rosemary Roberts, Hal Summers (to whom Rosemary became engaged), and Joy Scovell. As newly-arrived refugees, both Leonie and Gunter had difficulty in finding work. Gunter, a brilliant classical scholar, unsuccessfully sought a university position.\* Leonie, after many months, found employment as a proof-reader at the Clarendon Press (where Brasch's compatriots John Mulgan and Dan Davin were also working).

Only two passages in *Indirections* discuss Leonie at any length. Both praise her musical talents and her aptitude for modern languages, gifts which were accompanied by 'extraordinary vitality and gaiety'.<sup>16</sup> The glowing terms Brasch uses bring to mind his descriptions of Scovell; the same detachment is also present. The result is a detailed character miniature drawn by an impartial artist rather than a close friend.

---

\* Some years later he became Professor of Greek at the University of Manchester.

In the first description of Leonie, there is a cryptic aside about a proposal of marriage received:

With her beautiful vitality and lovingness of nature she made good friends, but no one sprang to marry her - or no one she could accept.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, it was Brasch himself who proposed to her. Rosemary Roberts recalled that, 'at one point, Charles offered to go through the form of marriage with [Leonie] in order to give her New Zealand citizenship - on the lines of Auden's marriage with Erika Mann'.<sup>18</sup> The proposal, which was duly refused, did not arise from sexual or romantic love. Brasch felt Leonie's situation to be similar to his own in several ways and acted out of compassion and consideration.

The most obvious parallel was their shared Jewish background. In both his letters and his poetry, Brasch raises the subject of his heritage rarely, but his interest in genealogy had grown throughout his teenage years as he met various Brasch relations, in both New Zealand and Australia. In *Indirections* he briefly summarizes his paternal family history:

My father's forebears on his father's side ...[lived] in that disputed ground that was sometimes called Germany and sometimes Poland. His father was born in 1831 in the village of Schwersenz near Posen or Poznan. I have not found the names of his father's parents; but about the year 1800 seven Brasch brothers are said to have come from a village not far north of that. Was one of them my grandfather's father? According to an American descendant of one of the seven, they may have taken their name from an abbreviation of Ben Rabbi Asch, the children of Rabbi Asch - presumably a well-known rabbi; but of him nothing seems to have come down. I like to think that some of my grandfather's family may have belonged to the Hasids, the Pious Ones, followers of that God-intoxicated Blakean mystic of the mid-eighteenth century the Baal Shem Tov....<sup>19</sup>

Despite his typically 'Jewish' looks - the lean sensitive face, the large nose, the dark hair and swarthy skin - his early life was affected little by this part of his heritage. The discrimination his father complained of in conservative Dunedin society troubled him less than what he saw as a general refusal amongst New Zealanders to accept any kind of unconformity. His sense of being on the fringe of social circles may have been heightened by the hypersensitivity of his father, but was certainly not caused by it. In fact, like Rilke, he believed that the archetypal wandering Jew was fortunate in the 'tremendous freedom' that his very deprivation gave him. 'The mobility and nomadism of man's centre,' Rilke had written in 1922,

its independence (but at the same time its rootlessness, unless the mind be rooted in God) - this *spiritual vagrancy* came into the world through the fortunes of the Jews....<sup>20</sup>

Rilke himself had felt something of the same rootlessness. He grew to hate Prague, where he had been born; never considered himself a German or an Austrian; spent much time in Paris but found it claustrophobic, and not conducive to writing. As with so many of his views expressed in his letters, his statement on spiritual vagrancy was adopted as a personal dictum by Brasch who, after the war, was to reflect:

I had moved about too much ever to be able to belong wholly and solely to one place and community; I would be both of it and not of it - in my own view as well as in that of the community.<sup>21</sup>

The very terms in which he described his yearning for unattainable security were significant. New Zealand became fused in his mind, 'quite unintentionally ... with the promised land of

Moses, Joshua and Caleb'. His sense of homelessness was constant and acute; it brought him grief but also bestowed on him a certain freedom.

Leonie, he saw, was suffering a similar plight, without the benefit of his own financial privileges. Because she was a Jew, because of the machinations of political history, she had become a victim through no reason but an accident of birth. With the onset of war, the implications of a Jewish birthright became more actual, and his empathy for her grew. 'In Nazi Germany there had been no place for her', he wrote:

in exile in wartime England refugees were accepted grudgingly  
- she was tolerated, hardly wanted. I had a good idea of what  
she felt and suffered alone.<sup>22</sup>

Rilke's 'Der Nachbar' seemed as applicable to her as to himself. After her tragically early death, from a heart defect, in the middle of the war, he wrote of her 'ardour, her impulsiveness and tenderness, the way in which her moods blazed and sank down', and linked her musical talent with the poem:

Rilke's 'Der Nachbar' might have been written for her, whose music followed me as that strange violin had followed him:

Fremde Geige, gehst du mir nach?  
In wieviel fernen Städten schon sprach  
deine einsame Nacht zu meiner?  
Spielen dich Hunderte? Spielt dich einer?

Gibt es in allen grossen Städten  
solche, die sich ohne dich  
schon in den Flüssen verloren hätten?  
Und warum trifft es immer mich?

Strange violin, are you following me?  
In how many distant towns already  
Has your lonely night spoken to mine?  
Do hundreds play you? Or one alone?

Can there be in every great city  
So many, had it not been for you,  
Who would have lost themselves in the rivers?  
And why does it always come back to me?

She was that strange violin; she was also one of those who had given themselves to death, whom the rivers had taken. Her music was silent, but for all who knew her it continued to sound.<sup>23</sup>

The extended metaphor masks the depth of emotion. Brasch's empathy with Leonie was all the greater because (as with many of his friends) she did not belong to the 'mainstream of life':

The [friend] I feared for most was Leonie Zuntz, impulsive, tender, her laughter always near to tears, her strength as light as her violin's and as easy to break; alone, for her mother would not be with her indefinitely, and having to suffer the extra disability of being counted a foreigner.<sup>24</sup>

In her he sensed a common separateness of nature: that aloneness which lay at the heart of, and attracted him to, Rilke's philosophy.

### III

Leonie and he, it seemed, were two who 'suffered alone'. A marriage to her - a companionable but not intimate relationship - would have alleviated this suffering without jeopardizing the personal space which Brasch craved. By this time he had read some of

Rilke's letters, published in five volumes up to 1935 by the *Inselverlag*, and the sentiments about marriage expressed in them concurred with his own. In 1911 Rilke had written to Lou Andreas-Salomé:

often since Malte I have hoped for somebody who would be there for me; why is it? I had an incessant longing to lodge my aloneness with some person, to place it in [Rodin's] protection: as you can imagine nothing came of it.<sup>25</sup>

Only a few weeks after marrying Rodin's former pupil Clara Westhoff, he had written about the impossibility of ideal love in a human relationship:

A togetherness of two human beings is an impossibility and, where it does seem to exist, a limitation, a mutual compromise which robs one side or both sides of their fullest freedom and development.<sup>26</sup>

As an undergraduate, Brasch had also articulated the impossibility of such a Lawrentian union. Like Rilke, he 'chose solitude, and took the grief of his own loneliness as his teacher'.<sup>27</sup> But there was, he came to see, a distinction between the states of *loneliness* and *solitude*. For Rilke, the former pertained to the personal, the latter to the artistic, self. In the months after he and Clara married, he continued to assert that marriage could, in fact, preserve one's solitude:

I hold this to be the highest task for a union of two people: that one shall guard the other's solitude. For if it is the nature of indifference and of the multitude to acknowledge no solitude, love and friendship exists to give continually opportunity for solitude.<sup>28</sup>

Yet however strongly he asserted these pronouncements, they did not prevent him from feeling so stifled by marriage that he lived for less than two years with Clara at Westerwede, before leaving for Paris and beginning his work on Rodin. 'The ultimate love', he wrote in 1904 to Kappus, 'consists in the mutual guarding, bordering and saluting of two solitudes'.<sup>29</sup>

Brasch's attitude to human relationships was one of equal ambivalence. In order to write, he needed solitude; but solitude carried with it the burden of loneliness which, by providing a subjective impulse, made it difficult to write balanced and objective poetry. To achieve an equilibrium amidst the warring of these two states was a lifelong struggle, and an exhausting one: '*And why does it always come back to me?*' It also meant that the preservation of self took first priority: living too close to another took its toll creatively. Like Rilke, he did not have the capacity for extended emotional relationships; yet like Rilke he retained a belief in human communion.

The awareness of the inescapable dichotomy of life is voiced in Rilke's Ninth Elegy, which of all his poems affected Brasch most deeply. The elegy succeeds in both diminishing and celebrating human existence:

[...] why then  
have to be human - and, escaping from fate,  
keep longing for fate? [...]

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,  
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.  
Not out of curiosity, not as practice for the heart [...]

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here  
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way  
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.<sup>30</sup>

In *Present Company*, some decades after the first impact of Rilke on his writing, Brasch quoted from the Ninth Elegy. In this poem, he had found not only comfort but justification for

his existence as an artist. Other poets whose work he was reading with enthusiasm throughout the 1930s are mentioned: Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats. But it is from Rilke that he quotes at greatest length, selecting (and giving his own translation for) a passage which had held great significance for him:

Can it be that we are here simply on purpose to *say*: House  
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit-tree, Window -  
even Pillar, Tower? [...] but to say, you see,  
Oh to say them in such a way as they themselves had  
never dreamed might be.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1930s, in the face of Hyam's scorn, Brasch needed to believe that his writing was a worthwhile occupation. Rilke validated poetry by assigning to it a purpose which was almost a duty: to interpret the world of tangible objects in a way which Brasch later described as 'at once creation and discovery'.<sup>32</sup> Reassured that solitude was not only 'normal' but necessary for a writer, confirmed in his opinion that poetry had relevance to the external world, as the end of 1935 approached he decided on a winter of self-imposed exile, hoping to find the beginnings of his own poetic voice.

Apart from his Egyptology work, he had spent most of the past three years enjoying London culture to the full. His life there seemed to him like an 'elaborate dance ... whose figures from moment to moment absorbed [him] fully, concealing any larger pattern the whole dance might have had'.<sup>33</sup> Despite his privileged existence, as his self-knowledge grew, so too did his anxiety about his future. Until the trip to Ireland in the middle of 1935, his ambitions to write had remained a secret known only to his closest friends: Joy Scovell, Jack Bennett, Colin, and Esmond. Now he became increasingly conscious of his under-achievement. After giving up archaeology, his feelings of uselessness obsessed him:

Nearly everything I read forced on me in one form or other the questions, What am I? What must I do?, which rang through me hollowly, and I had no answer.<sup>34</sup>

His reading during these three years had been all-encompassing: ancient history and religion, Latin and Greek philosophy and drama, the great Russian novels, recent English prose. But poetry had remained the ultimate form of expression for him, and this was both a solace and a thorn in his side. Reading Rilke and, appropriately, Yeats on that tense summer excursion to Ireland finally motivated him to work at his writing. Musing on Rilke's theory that to name reality was to redefine it, he applied it first to Yeats and then to himself:

The countryside was full of detail; but it was Yeats's imagination, working on what he found, that made Ireland rich, dramatic, and noble. What did words do to cast such a light on the world? how did the poet forge such words? is a poet born or made? and how must he live? These and other questions I continued to put to myself - as I felt - aimlessly and vainly, because I could not answer them, and in any case whatever answer I might give hung clearly on one condition: 'We receive but what we give.' And what had I to give? I could not tell. There was no answer; but having come so far, I told myself now, I had to go on, trying to write poetry, preparing myself to write.<sup>35</sup>

The curious last phrase reveals the lack of confidence he still had in his own talent, despite seven or eight years of writing.\*

Ironically, the increased pressure brought its own relief. His growing unhappiness, which came to a climax over the ten days in Ireland, at last spurred him into a decision:

---

\* Even in his sixties, he described his life as an 'undeclared examination' in which he suffered daily the penalties for 'inadequacy and unpreparedness' ('Home Ground', viii, *HG* in *CP*, pp. 190-91).

One thing I needed was some continuous quiet time to ruminate and read and (I hoped) write, free of the daily demands of family and friends, which made concentration and continuity of thought and feeling impossible. I must go and live by myself in the country for a month or two, and see what came of that.<sup>36</sup>

Upon his return to London, he set about putting his plans in motion. At the end of 1935, when Hyam had departed for New Zealand, his aunts for Switzerland, Lesley for Gibraltar, and Bertram for China, he left for Cornwall.

#### IV

The cottage he took for these few months was on the north coast of Cornwall, near the small village of Treligga.\* Having neither driver's licence nor a car at this stage, he travelled by rail and on foot (he was an indefatigable walker) to reach his remote cottage. Small, built of stone, it was 'one room below with a kitchen annex (hardly more than a lean-to), and one above, dunny down the garden'.<sup>37</sup> His choice of location had been prompted by the fact that, six months earlier, Milner and Bennett had stayed just out of Treligga. Their holiday had lasted only a week, however, and was in mid-summer;† now it was mid-winter and the countryside took on a very different character:

---

\* Today this village is signposted, although so modestly that it is easily missed, on the northbound road from Port Isaac to Tintagel.

† Despite the fact that this was a 'summer' holiday, Bennett's copy of *Indirections* bears the handwritten scrawl that, for most of their time there, 'it was wet, and sea mist gave a sense of autumnal mystery'.

Walking every afternoon the weather allowed, but seldom far in those short days when dark fell so early (at midwinter it was dark by 4.30), I soon felt myself becoming part of the spare wintry country, its sunken stony lanes and low hedges, the bare fields, rough poor pasture, headlands and cliffs and rocks where the sea licked, heaved, raged unceasingly.<sup>38</sup>

Despite a characteristic awareness of his physical surroundings, he now found them curiously irrelevant. His primary focus was an inward one, and the vast expanse of the Bodmin moors provided him not so much with direct inspiration as with space to think and write. This was as close to being completely alone as he had ever been, and it gave him a new freedom simply by being unknown: an advantage of which Rilke had written in a letter to the von der Heydts:

You alone know what complete solitude, to be unnoticed, unseen, invisible, means to me. For those days in Naples I carried it around like a treasure in that gloriously strange world.<sup>39</sup>

Brasch had always been acutely aware of how others saw him and, until now, had accepted their views of himself, unconsciously resisting personal development to remain consistent in their eyes. He was son, brother, nephew, grandson, school-friend, colonial, Oxonian; to no one but Scovell did he appear a proven writer. Now, for the first time, he achieved the space to create his identity as he wished it to be. He hoped to leave Cornwall with enough concrete evidence to prove and establish his identity as a poet.

‘To everyone that gazes there comes some time the longing to go into the wilderness’, Rilke had written in 1900: ‘With little nourishment, to sit upon a stone and to think difficult thoughts, so difficult that they lie heavily on the eyelids’.<sup>40</sup> Four years later, ostensibly to

Kappus but characteristically using his letter-writing as an outlet for a private train of thought, he asserted:

We know little, but that we must hold to the difficult is a certainty that will not leave us; it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; the fact that a thing is difficult must be one more reason for our doing it.<sup>41</sup>

Brasch stayed in his chosen 'wilderness' for just over a month, but Rilke's words rang true during these weeks, which were as difficult as they were rewarding. He now learnt the dual-edged nature of solitude, experienced it both as a 'treasure' and a burden. The weeks in Cornwall were the first in which he had ever turned his full attention to his work, and it was an uphill battle; but it was also one which at last set him on the way to writing good poetry.

His solitude, although complete in one way, did not represent a total severing of contact from the outside world. In the early part of January, Colin and his younger brother Patrick visited for a couple of days; they sat and talked by the fire, or walked the surrounding moors. There was, too, a post-box only yards from the cottage; Brasch wrote regularly and received post in return. His lengthiest letters were to the two friends whose opinions he most relied on in literary matters: Joy Scovell and Jack Bennett. To them he gave detailed and honest accounts of his progress, both assessing his weaknesses and displaying a growing confidence in his writing ability.

One of his most constant self-criticisms was his lack of concentration: a fault which had been his since his teenage years. 'I was intellectually lazy', he confessed, 'with no impulse to master the disciplines I met. Nobody made me work, so I remained half-educated'.<sup>42</sup> He now acted upon the words which Rodin had impressed upon Rilke - *Il faut toujours travailler*. After a distracting year in London, this period of steady work came as a relief. Near the end of January, he wrote to Scovell:

I have spent enough time here in writing and revising and typing for that to seem a proper occupation; I give the mornings to that, or reading poetry, and write of course whenever the fit comes. It almost seems normal to be writing; one night I actually decided what I must write the next morning, and did so - the result I hope possible; it was, certainly, a subject that had been in my head for a day or two.<sup>43</sup>

Although he was reaping the benefits of a daily routine, he still thought of writing as being reliant on inspiration or mood, which could desert him at any time. Thus his enthusiasm for his Cornish 'retreat' was sincere but expressed cautiously. In an earlier letter to Joy, written three days before the end of the old year, he had mused:

I suppose I must call the cottage, the whole venture, a success: I have begun to write again, am writing more than I could have hoped, have already written more than for months past. Whether it is good I don't know and hardly even dare to stop & consider; I want to go on, preserving the maybe precarious mood while it lasts. For me it is almost dangerously exciting to write so much. I feel now that I might have trusted myself a little more rather earlier - this year had been so chaotic and fragmentary and I don't want to have another like it. It is the keeping in the mood that I find so necessary, and that, in London, the telephone and always preparing for some engagement prevent - I live on my nerves there.<sup>44</sup>

Despite a new-found commitment, he continued to doubt the quality of the poetry he was producing. Scovell later commented: 'His diffidence about his work [...] makes me sad - but he did of course win through to a splendid confidence later'.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, one of his letters urged her (in the manner of Rilke to Kappus) to have more faith in her writing:

You must write whenever you can, believing in yourself however you may doubt at other times, or believing at least that it is necessary to say what is in you and must be said, letting

yourself go and not thinking of consequences. Your poetry will be read - not only by Colin and myself and a few others; it is poetry - I don't trust my own judgement always but on this I do, as much as I can on anything - and poetry doesn't lie hidden for ever. It ought to be not merely a consolation but a just and sober pride that you can write poetry.<sup>46</sup>

While Scovell was struggling to find a publisher, he was slowly revising sufficient pieces to submit a collection of his own. 'I have gone through my past pieces', he wrote to her,

and polished up everything that was at all possible on the notebooks I had with me, so that there is now more than when you saw my copying book. There would be now enough for a book - between 30 & 40 pieces, and I begin to hope, with vanity and probably vainly, of being able to have one.<sup>47</sup>

Although he worked on revisions in the mornings, he usually spent his afternoons walking on the moors, and his evenings reading by the fire. But a New Zealand ode\* begun early in his stay became his primary focus, and it was on this that he pinned his hopes:

One night of showers and gusts, when a few stars showed through flying cloud, I began a New Zealand poem, a kind of ode. This was what I had come for, and all my energy went into it. The poem grew, spreading into several parts; I worked at it all through January. I had written nothing like it before, nothing so ambitious.<sup>48</sup>

Enclosing one section of this ode in a letter to Scovell, he described the difficulties he had had with the former section, which was 'terribly hard to get even right as to sense'.<sup>49</sup> He confessed to spending 'hours altering single words' (a task which became habit). 'I am

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 341-4; see also Chapter One, Section VI, p. 33, and Chapter Four, Section I, p.121.

afraid', he continued, 'much of the time [is] wasted and that it may all be rather commonplace rhetoric in the end'.

The section he sent to Joy was never published, although fragments of other sections made their way into a lengthy poem entitled 'Genesis'.<sup>\*</sup> Lacking the easy expression of his shorter New Zealand poems, this work frequently becomes submerged under the weight of romantic symbolism:

From their first journey they had borne a dream  
Of other journeys, and had drunk  
In their first bath of light the wind's crystal,  
And in the shell of their ear the wind had spoken.<sup>50</sup>

Images of the seed, the birth of light and the land, are equally clichéd. But there are moments of description where the poetry sings from the page, achieving the ease of his best landscape writing. The second section, for example, vividly conjures up the first miraculous sighting of land after a long sea-journey:

Till one dawn in the endless unfolding of days,  
Out of the flights of changing cloud  
One cloud grew, keeping pace,  
Quietly like a seabird settled  
And drifted towards them and was land.

The themes inherent in both the original and published odes became central to the first volume of poetry, published three years later. *The Land and the People* revolves around the necessity to tread the land with 'a light and loving foot', and stresses human insignificance and the supremacy of the elements. Although the large-scale work embarked upon in

---

<sup>\*</sup> Published in *Disputed Ground* (1948).

Cornwall was a laborious and ultimately fruitless task, it marked a 'necessary stage in [a] long tedious painful apprenticeship'.<sup>51</sup>

Drafting in long-hand, Brasch took the time to copy out another, untitled, poem for Scovell. Slighter than the ode, less engrossing to him, it nonetheless achieves a far more natural voice. In *The Land and the People*, where it is close to its original form, it is entitled 'The Iconoclasts'.<sup>52</sup> Alterations are small but effective. In the first and third verse, words are deftly inverted or replaced to intensify meaning. Thus

Rubbing edges, making blunt  
Peak and pyramid and stone

becomes

Effacing feature, rubbing blunt  
The pyramid and the homeless stone.

In 1936, with his mind focused on New Zealand, Brasch took care to emphasize the indigenous setting. The heavens plead to the earth 'not to strain and cry/ With Aorangi and Everest'. In the later manuscript, this is altered to: 'not to strain and cry/ Lawless from the level dust'. But on the whole, few changes have been made to the original handwritten draft. Even in this early work, the absolutes of Brasch's poetic world - sea and rock and sky - are present, and his increasing skill is obvious in the final verse:

Sleep in the dark of the waves, the grey  
Huddling sandscarf, and forget  
Mountain-face and hawk's cry  
Human shape and budding shoot,  
The sun, and its own fiery heart.

The taut quality of this poem foreshadows a more mature poetry, but at the time such writing was still infrequent, flashes of excellence amidst a cloud of loose experimental verse. ‘The Sun from Prison’, for example, written shortly before Brasch departed for Cornwall, is of similar length but inferior quality. Adopting a prisoner’s viewpoint, it never achieves the immediacy of later first-person poems (where Brasch writes from his own experience), nor does it contain the striking natural imagery of his landscape work. In situation and style, it bears a marked resemblance to the work of Tennyson and Shelley:

Prison, my prison taught me; I praised then  
Prayed & wept, clasping the young light  
Alive in memory, & men  
Sharing the dark or precious light were men  
Most dear & nearer than the night.

Brasch was, in fact, reading Tennyson at the time. In a letter to Scovell which lamented the twentieth-century lack of ‘proper and necessary humility’, he described the Victorian poet as ‘slighted’. ‘I could kneel down & worship’, he wrote, ‘the power that wrote parts of In Memoriam’.<sup>53</sup>

His reading during these weeks took in not only the Victorians but also modern poets, including his Oxford contemporaries Auden and MacNeice. Nor was his writing confined to English authors. He was also dipping into Robinson’s *History of Israel*, the stories of Hans Anderson, von Hügel’s letters, the *Chinese Testament*, the *Polynesian Mythology* (which provided inspiration for his own lengthy ode), Pasternak’s poems, and the Old Testament and Numbers, with which he had not been well-acquainted until now (‘it all drips poetry’). In addition to this varied diet, he was consuming the works of Rilke with increasing enthusiasm and facility.

His mastery of German was such that he was now able to read the *Duino Elegies* and *Neue Gedichte* in the original. Being in an unusually disciplined state of mind, he also worked at translations. These he found hard labour, particularly in achieving satisfactory imagery and phrasing:

In the mornings I struggle with some Elegies of Rilke, very difficult, more untranslatable than anything else in poetry I can think of - German means things, or rather has significances, that English hasn't got, doesn't mean (and of course the reverse is true), and Rilke seems to use the language to its limits.<sup>54</sup>

In his next letter to Scovell he again expressed his admiration for the Czech poet, and enclosed a newly-completed translation of one of the shorter poems. Once again, however, he did not feel he had done justice to work which he so profoundly admired:

A Sibyl is a translation of one of Rilke's grand poems - its a rather impromptu rendering & came half into my head & creaks badly here & there - my rimes [sic] are horribly loose but the rime scheme is faithful to his, & the length of the lines, making allowances for a very full stress of black in the 7th line. I could probably improve it slightly if I worked hard at it; it is one of the pieces I knew & loved & was again excited by when I reread it.<sup>55</sup>

Rilke's use of foreign mythologies appealed to him, as did the grave and stately tone of the piece; he still instinctively resisted a personal poetic voice. The opening of his translation bears a striking resemblance to the 'Land and the People' sequence, in its measured cadence: 'Already, before time, men called her old./ But she remained, going the same road daily'.

'I wish you knew German', he wrote to Scovell: 'to be able to read him & Goethe & Heine - a little of those 3 is nearly all my acquaintance with German, but they are supremely

worth while'. He particularly admired their ability to maintain conventional forms while achieving strikingly original images; this was more to his taste than the experimental techniques of the modernists. Despite the fact that he now conceded Eliot's poetry to be of merit, his eight-year allegiance to Rilke - begun in his undergraduate days - remained steadfast. Engaging with the texts on a newly complex level, his enthusiasm grew:

Rilke is a sort of gold mine, like Hopkins in that respect, only perhaps more so, because Rilke's special vision seems, to me anyway, something new, & his subject matter is infinitely suggestive. As a landmark - "gray as a boundary-stone of nameless kingdoms" as one of his most superb sonnets goes - he must be the European figure of our time, with the one possible exception, well down the scale of greatness, of Eliot. The Ukrainian poet we met in Kiev,\* who I think had not heard of Yeats & possibly not of Eliot - certainly he knew little or no English - pricked up his ears when we mentioned Rilke, whom he'd read & plainly thought of as one of the great masters - as I do too.<sup>56</sup>

The Treligga poems reveal Rilke's influence less than Brasch's later, more personal work, which nonetheless still deals with the Rilkean themes of death, love, and loneliness. In the meantime, during the windswept weeks in Cornwall, Brasch more literally followed Rilke's example, seeking out solitude and imposing self-discipline. In this way alone, the two months at Treligga were perhaps the most crucial in his development throughout the 1930s as a poet. He now began to find his place in the world:

Ohne unsern wahren Platz zu kennen  
Handeln wir aus wirklichem Bezug.

Without knowing our true place  
We act in real relationship.<sup>57</sup>

---

\* 'In Kiev we met a Ukrainian poet of about thirty who had taken the picturesque name of Pervomaisky. First-of-May, but was neither picturesque nor otherwise notable in appearance' (*Ind.*, pp. 239-40).

In retrospect, he did not regret that most of what he wrote in Cornwall was never published. 'I was slow to find myself, emotionally and intellectually', he wrote in his memoirs: 'slower still in learning to write'.<sup>58</sup> But, as with the ode, he realized that this writing was not wasted, was a 'necessary stage' in a long apprenticeship. With Rilke as his inspiration, he had finally embarked on the long journey of creative self-discovery.

## V

Despite the importance he attached to the time spent in Cornwall, Brasch was there for less than two months. On the last day of January, he received the unwelcome news that Lesley, staying with Hilda Hallenstein in Gibraltar, was suffering from a mysterious illness and had undergone an operation. And so began several years of precarious health for Lel, and anxiety for Brasch. For the next three years, his movements (including a trip back to New Zealand) were largely based around her needs.

Initially, his concern for her was tempered by his reluctance to disrupt his own plans. Lel's illness, he wrote later, forced him to return to London in the second week of February, 'far earlier than [he] wanted to'.<sup>59</sup> In this instance at least, memory blurred fact for, only two days before, he had written to Scovell that he hoped to be back in town by the fifteenth of February, and would see her the following Monday. His time at Treligga was cut short by a week at the most.

Besides this, he had already confessed to having mixed feelings about a lengthy period of isolation. At first, he had relished the peace and space which Treligga offered him. His

network of friends and relations in London was wide, and he realized that a gregarious exterior came with a price. This became still clearer from a distance, as he wrote to Joy:

I am surprised at my own content - surprised that I am not plagued with the so habitual so often miserable discontents that dog me in London. It is partly that I am writing more; but chiefly because here I don't have before me constantly the sight and thought of other people, my friends & family, working, and others again starving and myself doing - what? ... And added to that is the discontinuity of life in London, unavoidable, but I'm afraid I shall never be able to take it calmly - it just eats my nerves & exhausts me. It is involved in almost any social life at all - almost any seeing people; a dreadful thought. Because I am not really unsociable if I'm at ease & with friends.<sup>60</sup>

The dichotomy of his feelings about ordinary social communion was yet another thing he had in common with Rilke, who had written thirty years earlier:

I so easily get talking and give out everything possible in conversation, so that it is not available for my work. It is a stupid piece of clumsiness that I am so wanting in the gift of sociability, the talent for easy but at the same time recreative conversations, in which one does not exert and expand oneself.<sup>61</sup>

To conserve energy which could be channelled into his work, Brasch had deliberately created his own island of solitude, and had found there a rare equilibrium. His second letter to Scovell reveals a simple happiness born of two days' solid work, and the beauty of the Cornish countryside:

Being happy, apart from your letter coming too, made me want to write to you, because today and yesterday both I have written a little - trifles, but everything comes like a gift for which one

gives thanks. And yesterday was a nearly perfect day - the first for so long, and that seemed like another gift; and today I picked the first snowdrops - they are scarcely more than buds yet, but the old woman next door who owns my cottage said I must pick them, the first; so here they are in a little bottle with very small delicate sweet violets, and in another primroses, red and cream.<sup>62</sup>

But after only a week at Treligga, he was already looking ahead, and making plans for a new life once he returned to 'civilization'. These plans revolved around his writing to a far greater extent than before; he knew he did not want 'always to live in this isolation, but it must be out of London'.<sup>63</sup> Before knowing of Lel's illness, he planned to give up the Primrose Hill flat in June when the lease expired; life without her bustling presence, he thought, would be more conducive to writing. By no means, however, did he wish to continue his hermit-like existence. He would take a cottage 'at some place like East Hendred, within reach of London', he told Scovell,

so that I could see you, & others (you could easily come there at the weekend), and also not cut off from Colin, and from my two N.Z. friends [Bennett and Milner] who will be at Oxford for another year or two.<sup>64</sup>

A few weeks later, with a wry self-awareness, he realized that he was already longing to see Joy and Bennett and 'all my family (from whom I fled!)'. He wrote: 'I shall feel enormously rested when I leave here; and, in my perversity, I shall be burstingly glad when I do leave'. In his perversity, when his departure was hastened by news of Lel, he felt cheated and dismayed.

Although his feelings on leaving Treligga were mixed, he could be in no doubt of the success of his experiment. During the two months he had gained sufficient confidence to continue working at his writing. It was little more than two years later when he left the typescript of his first collection with Denis Glover at the Caxton Press in Christchurch. After

years of imitative writing, he returned to London with a secure sense of purpose, able to define and believe in himself as a poet. His stay in Cornwall had been short but profitable and, even at the time, he recognized its immeasurable importance. 'This was the world', he wrote about the winter of 1935-6: 'these were days in the ocean of time, unrepeatabe'.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ind.*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 161-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind.*, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> *Ind.*, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ind.*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> Rilke, 'Paris, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1903', *Letters to a Young Poet*, transl. Reginald Snell (Edinburgh, 1945), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ind.*, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ind.*, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> *Ind.*, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Ind.*, p. 175.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Land and the People (I)'; 'The Land and the People (II)', *TLP* in *CP*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Roddick, Notes in *CP*, p. 239: 'The epigraph is from Rilke's poem "Ernste Stunde" ("Solemn Hour"), in *Das Buch der Bilder (The Book of Images)*, Book 1, part 2'.

<sup>14</sup> *Ind.*, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> 'Sing to the Deaf', *Home Ground* [hereafter referred to as *HG*] (1974) in *CP*, p. 186.

<sup>16</sup> *Ind.*, p. 391.

<sup>17</sup> *Ind.*, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> RS to SQ, 20 October 1993.

<sup>19</sup> *Ind.*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Rilke to Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss, 25 April 1922; from *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, transl. R. F. C. Hull (London, 1946), p. 364.

<sup>21</sup> *Ind.*, p. 381.

<sup>22</sup> *Ind.*, p. 391.

<sup>23</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 391-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ind.*, p. 342.

<sup>25</sup> Rilke, 'Schloss Duino Bei Nabresina, 28 December 1911', in *Selected Letters*, p. 186.

<sup>26</sup> Cit. *Letters to a Young Poet*, transl. Reginald Snell (London, 1945), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Hass, Introduction to *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and transl. Stephen Mitchell (London, 1987), xxxii.

<sup>28</sup> Rilke to Paula Modersohn-Becker, cit. *Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> Cit. *Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Rilke, Ninth Elegy, in *Selected Poetry*, p. 199.

<sup>31</sup> Brasch, *Present Company* [hereafter referred to as *PC*] (Auckland, 1966), p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> *PC*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ind.*, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup> *Ind.*, p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> *Ind.*, p. 256.

<sup>36</sup> *Ind.*, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> *Ind.*, p. 256.

<sup>38</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.

<sup>39</sup> Rilke to Elizabeth and Karl von der Heydt, 'Capri, Villa Discopoli, 11 December 1906', *Selected Letters*, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> Rilke, *Journal*, 7 April 1900. Cit. Snell's notes to *Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 52.

- <sup>41</sup> Rilke, 'Rome, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1904', *Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 115-6.
- <sup>43</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>44</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>45</sup> JS to SQ, 7 September 1993.
- <sup>46</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>47</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.
- <sup>49</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>50</sup> 'Genesis', *DG* in *CP*, p. 23.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.
- <sup>52</sup> 'The Iconoclasts', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 7.
- <sup>53</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>54</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>55</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>56</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>57</sup> *Cit. PC*, p. 37.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 257-8.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ind.*, p. 258.
- <sup>60</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>61</sup> *Cit. Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 53.
- <sup>62</sup> CB to JS, 29 January 1936.
- <sup>63</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>64</sup> CB to JS, 29 December 1935.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ind.*, p. 257.

## **Chapter Four**

***To Speak in My Own Voice:1936-9***

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TO SPEAK IN MY OWN VOICE: 1936-9

The time in Cornwall appeared more idyllic in retrospect because, for the next three years, Brasch's writing once again took second place to external events. Lesley was diagnosed by a London specialist as having tuberculosis of the bowel: a diagnosis later disputed, as other doctors suspected colitis. Her condition was erratic; she would improve for a time and then deteriorate, with bouts of diarrhoea which weakened her so that Brasch felt he must remain within reach. His movements became 'conditional'<sup>1</sup> on Lesley's and, although he continued to read, write, and visit friends, he felt these years to be a period of 'waiting'. Often, he resented the curtailment of his former freedom. Yet in ways not obvious at the time these circumstances effected a development of his maturity and confidence. The sense of identity tentatively voiced in his Cornwall writings grew stronger throughout these three years, to become a central part of his creative consciousness.

#### I

After hearing the news of Lel's illness, Brasch left for London almost immediately. By the first week of February he was once more installed at St Edmund's Terrace, waiting anxiously for new developments. In fact, his hasty return proved unnecessary. Lesley's operation in

Gibraltar had been unsuccessful, and she was not fit to travel for some weeks. At the end of March, she was brought back to England by ship, accompanied by her mother's sister, Emily. Over the difficult years which followed, this aunt was to prove a stalwart companion, and Brasch grew to know and love her better than before.

Superficially, at least, life at the Primrose Hill flat resumed the same even tenor as that of the previous year. Shortly after Lesley's return, Brasch wrote to Bennett to update him on their news:

Lel arrived back thin but cheerful; she's in a nursing home near; I expect she'll be let out in 10 days or so and then I shall go with her to Churt in Surrey (we hope), a lovely place.<sup>2</sup>

The trip to Churt lived up to expectations. At the end of April, brother and sister joined Enid Cianchi and her children, already holidaying there. Staying in a small inn, they lived quietly. Lesley recuperated in the pale spring sunshine, Charles took long walks through countryside bright with wild-flowers, and friends and relations visited frequently from London. Brasch, too, made the journey between London and Churt reasonably often, and felt relaxed enough about Lesley's condition to spend several days in Oxford.

His intentions were to stay no longer than a fortnight in Churt for, despite his concern for Lel, he had been unable to banish from his mind his plans for a book. The visit to Oxford was largely related to this. Bertram had left in January on a travelling fellowship for Peking and, in his absence, the more sympathetic Bennett had adopted the role of mentor. Before leaving for the country, Brasch had sent Bennett the 'last' of his poems, and asked for advice on ordering the fifty-odd pieces he now had in final-draft form. The new confidence acquired in Cornwall could not overcome a diffidence instilled in him since childhood: 'I should like to

consult you about arrangement', he confided to Jack, 'not of need, really, only my self-distrust'.<sup>3</sup>

The New Zealand ode begun at Treligga continued to cause him difficulties. He still believed it was worth publishing, but it was the stumbling-block in the final preparation of a collection, as he told Bennett:

Here too is the Ode. I don't like the new end specially but doubt whether I can improve on it. Tell me if you think it suitable.... And will the altered parts stand now? Please put any doubts strongly; for I've grown as fogged over these as I was over the old and need your eyes....

As soon as I have arranged the book and am happy in your happiness about the Ode (have you thought of a name for it?) I shall brave a publisher.<sup>4</sup>

He mistrusted not only his own judgement on his poetry, but also his ability to apply himself to it. For this reason, although relying heavily on Bennett for support, he preferred not to travel too often to Oxford. He explained: 'I'm most likely to write when quietly chewing the cud here [in London]; and after my bout of writing earlier I am a bit restless when not doing so'.

Rather surprisingly, he planned to begin the book with a poem written at school entitled 'The Wind'.<sup>\*</sup> Bennett advised against its inclusion, suggesting as an alternative 'The Shape of Darkness',<sup>5</sup> which was shorter than 'The Wind' but was also reminiscent of Brasch's early Romantic style. Although this was eventually replaced by the first of 'The Land and the People' sequence, unlike 'The Wind' it was included in the collection, despite its archaic tone and formality. The weakness of its opening line: 'I embrace thee, darkness', is compensated for by its striking conclusion:

---

<sup>\*</sup> This was the poem which first drew headmaster Frank Milner's attention to Brasch's poetic talent. It appeared in Vol. XIX, No. 1, of *The Waitakian* in May 1924 (p. 235).

Cold in thy quick flint and patient stone  
And this anarchy of thought.

The preoccupation with the endurance of natural elements, and the contrasting transience of human life, is echoed in several other poems in the volume.

The simple restriction of space necessitated the 'weeding' of over half of Brasch's fifty poems. His main concern at this stage was to establish a unifying thread which could be seen to run throughout the volume: something he had discussed with Scovell at length:

We agreed one day that to write single short unrelated poems was unsatisfactory; we wanted to write groups of poems on a single theme, that would express the whole of our experience. Joy's poems of that time and later are indeed closely related, in tone and in outlook; her work is all of a piece. Mine were more various and occasional and seemed to me to have little relation one to another, which I found troubling.<sup>6</sup>

Marshalling his poems into a relevant order was a daunting task. There were a number based on Egyptian themes which formed a natural group, but otherwise, he wrote despairingly to Bennett, there was 'no sort of development and no subject-matter to help in arranging the rest'.<sup>7</sup>

He was hesitant to include his one 'political' poem, 'For the Dead in Spain', which he feared would seem ridiculously 'isolated'. Such poetry was rare for him, both then and later, but the Spanish Civil war was commanding the attention of his Oxford contemporaries and had, to a lesser extent, inspired him:

The dead in Spain, the tortured in Germany,  
The oppressed in India and the lost in England  
Are victims of the one war....<sup>8</sup>

Despite his reservations, he included it. Although it was the only topical poem of the final twenty, and the only one to bear a date ('March 1937'), it was less out of place than he feared. For, ostensibly Audenesque, it did not attempt to champion the left-wing cause, nor did it apportion blame to one side or the other. Instead, it simply presented war as a tragic but inevitable part of human life:

Birth is the one decision, deliverance  
 Into this shadow-crossed arena,  
 Into the opposition of light and light.

It was this theme - the internal war of the instincts, and its manifestations - which became the common 'subject-matter' of his first collection.

Another of his concerns was that the volume was stylistically uneven, and in this his fears were more justified. The incisive voice emerging in his better work was muffled by his early penchant for high-flown Romantic diction, as in 'Simeon's Land':

And fled you, Simeon, from the shepherd's life, the companionable  
 Herding, the summer piping under the olives  
 And winter in warm valleys by the delighted  
 Laughing Orontes, fled where no longer his rarest  
 Measureless outpoured gifts should decoy the allured  
 Sweet-ranging soul from God?<sup>9</sup>

The Romantic-Victorian influence is even more pronounced here because of the subject-matter; Tennyson had written on this topic nearly a hundred years earlier, in his poem 'St Simeon Stylites'.

Despite the tendency towards grandiose language, where the poem is grounded in concrete detail it gains a new clarity. (In much the same way, his New Zealand poems had

benefited from a focus on the visual rather than the abstract.) Early in 1935, Brasch had visited the site of Simeon's column in the north Syrian desert.\* The courage and consistency of the saint had impressed him so greatly that in his poem he set out to extol these qualities. But the great church built around the fallen column, the mountains of silver-grey stone, the bright exotic desert flowers, had also made a powerful impact and these also made their way into his poetry:

And where the mortar has crumbled from cupola and bowed wall  
A pinch of earth nourishes brilliant, soon withered,  
Grape hyacinths night-blue above black,  
The anemone, snow's child and the greying asphodel -  
Splinters of rainbow over rain-grey stone.

Unlike his derivative juvenilia, Brasch's first volume had at its core both a subject and a voice which were to become quintessentially 'Braschian'. Questioning and at times austere, the emergent voice became more assertive in later volumes, the theme of human conflict raised time and again. Therefore, despite the unevenness of style in *The Land and the People*, poems of such diverse locations as Syria, Spain, and England took on a certain unity. But it was the poems about New Zealand, strategically spaced throughout the volume, which dominated this first collection, and bestowed on it a very real coherence.

---

\* For a record of this trip, refer *Ind.*, pp. 222-4.

## II

It had taken some time for Brasch to feel ready to tackle the subject of his home country. By the middle of 1937, only a small portion of the fifty poems intended for publication were on this theme. 'Including the Ode', he lamented to Bennett, 'there are 7 N. Z. pieces, a meagre few; I wish there were more'.<sup>10</sup> He was beginning to realize that these few not only possessed more verity of emotion than the rest of his work but were more technically accomplished.

Despite the embarrassment suffered after blundering into Blackwell's office, while at Oxford he had approached other publishers. He had written to Bertram in May 1930 with a blend of modesty and youthful confidence:

The book is at present in the hands of Cape's; there is no earthly hope from them, so next I intend the Hogarth Press. It was to have been called *The Mountain Journey*, with a pleasant motto - but that sounds too like Sassoon's *The Heart's Journey*, so I have to find another name.<sup>11</sup>

Having no more success with these publishers than Blackwell, he had temporarily shelved his hope of a collection. Having a book published remained the ultimate pinnacle of recognition, a wonderful dream - but one which he had little hope of achieving.

Blackwell's advice to the twenty-one-year-old Brasch had been to get his work known through periodicals. Seven years on, however, with the exception of those in the Oxford journals, none of his poems had been published in England. During the months after his return from Cornwall, he had two short poems accepted by the *London Mercury*. Eight years

earlier, in a letter to Bertram, he had sweepingly dismissed the editors of this journal and their contributors as a precious coterie:

I am becoming a little sceptical about the 'literary'. The London Mercury People - Squire, Robert Graves, Edward Shanks, Harold Munro, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Nichols, Drinkwater and those sort of people, are all very pally, and a good deal related by marriage.... It is all, so it seems, very organised, unofficially. They must have a frightfully bad influence on each other I think. I shouldn't mind knowing some of them, but I think the groups are a good thing to keep out of.<sup>12</sup>

Although professing to scorn such cliques, his ambition to be accepted into their ranks had remained. Now, the *Mercury's* acceptance of his poems confirmed both Bennett's and his own belief in his poetic ability. But his poems were never printed and, at this stage, only publication in England would satisfy him: a stance which, in hindsight, he saw was a mistake.

Back in New Zealand, his poetry had appeared in various publications for some years. The topic he described as being 'chosen' by - the European settlement of the New Zealand landscape - had limited appeal in an international market, particularly at a time when colonial literature was still struggling to make an identity of its own. The work sent home, however, achieved publication with little difficulty. In 1931, two of his poems had been printed in *Open Windows*, a monthly magazine affiliated to the New Zealand Student Christian movement.<sup>13</sup> The acceptance of 'Invocation' and 'Xerxes' was partly due to Milner's influence in the sphere of student publishing; Brasch was a confirmed atheist by this stage, and neither poem was of particular merit. They represented, however, a new and more economic expression not found in the effusive verse three or four years earlier.

Milner was also one of the driving forces behind *The Phoenix*, the Auckland-based periodical which he, Brasch, and Bertram had planned during a holiday at Waianakarua early

in 1932.\* The magazine was short-lived; its fourth and last issue appeared in June 1933. Nonetheless, it was something of a watershed in the history of New Zealand literature, for it launched a generation of writers who, according to Patrick Evans, 'seize[d] control' of the writing of their country for the remainder of the decade.<sup>14</sup> It was in the first issue (edited by Bertram before he departed for Oxford in July 1932) that two of Brasch's poems were published: 'Cold Music' and 'Cape Wanbrow'.<sup>15</sup>

An impersonal voice and a preoccupation with natural forms, both features of the Oxford poems, were once again prominent in 'Cold Music'. Although much of the first issue of *Phoenix* had been written in the few days at Waianakarua, this had been written the previous year. Brasch had sent Bertram a copy of the poem during the winter of 1931, with the suggestion that Bennett consider it for *Open Windows*: 'you can decide between you if it will do'.<sup>16</sup> Instead, they printed it in *Phoenix* in March 1932.

Despite displaying the same affinity with the natural world as 'The Walker by Night' (1929), 'Cold Music' is evidence of three years profitably spent. Brasch had developed a merely descriptive vision into a metaphoric one:

Though I change as the seasons,  
Veil me and unveil  
Treelike, there's no poison  
Of snow or violent storm  
Can destroy from me  
The archetypal form  
Of branch, bud, leaf....

In a continuance of natural imagery, there is implied the existence of a kernel of personal strength - 'the seed of all' - which endures in the face of external flux. And in this way, Brasch reaches beyond the perimeters of the poem: 'Cold Music' becomes the poetic

---

\* The Milners owned a bach at Waianakarua, which was not far from Oamaru (refer Brasch's poem 'Waianakarua', *TLP* in *CP*, pp. 4-5).

expression of an experience he had had in Queenstown, during Easter 1931. Sitting alone in the Park, miserably aware of his unsuitability for a future in the family business, he had gained solace from the age and beauty of the landscape around him:

each [stone], it seemed, an individual that had taken hundreds or thousands of years to reach its special perfection. Those must be my exemplars, if natural objects could be; patient, wholly themselves, enduring.

I went home, and back to work, and felt as if a particle, not of their strength, but of their power to endure, had entered into me.<sup>17</sup>

Years later, in his sixties, he dealt directly with this revelation in a poem entitled, simply, 'Queenstown Park'.<sup>\*</sup> But the recognition of the links between nature and human life had already been articulated, albeit less explicitly, in 'Cold Music'.

The second of his poems to appear in *Phoenix* was also inspired by a specific event. 'Cape Wanbrow', written after an afternoon spent with Milner on the cliff-tops of Waitaki, is the first of many pieces in which Brasch links person and place. In its dedication, too, it typifies a practice which became customary for him. The poem, of ostensibly impersonal content, is prefaced with the personal yet understated tag: 'to I.M.'

Brasch and Milner had never been as close as each was to Bertram (who was, for both, something of a role-model). Milner wrote often to Bertram and, conscious of the particularly close bond between him and Brasch, would refer to 'my Charles' (Charles Spear)<sup>†</sup> and 'your Charles' (Brasch). In 1930, however, when he heard of Brasch's imminent return from England, he expressed a desire to see him again:

---

<sup>\*</sup> Refer *HG* in *CP*, pp. 206-7.

<sup>†</sup> Spear, a contemporary of Milner's at the University of Canterbury, was also a poet.

It would be great if we could stage a reunion with Charles - I'm afraid I'll feel a bit de trop - still never mind that and I would like to see him again very much.<sup>18</sup>

His reservations were partly based on (unfounded) modesty regarding his intellectual abilities. A few months later, in September of that year, he wrote once more of the proposed reunion:

I shall be completely out of my depth you know - I often am with you though I generally manage to keep faintly pursuing. However I shall sit - tight - and list to the gods - that is if Charles 'joins up'.<sup>19</sup>

Despite a mutual admiration for Bertram, Milner and Brasch were noticeably different in temperament. Brasch was by far the more serious of the two, and at this stage he was agonising over his uncertain future. Milner, although extremely keen to follow his friends' example and gain entrance to Oxford (or Cambridge), disguised his ambition with flippant good-humour: 'O but I forgot - I'm a bloody University "gentleman" with pretensions [sic] to a brilliant career as a Rhodes scholar'.<sup>20</sup> In 1934 he was, in fact, successful in winning a Rhodes, enabling him to join Bertram in Oxford.

He treated Brasch's rather prim attitudes with amused tolerance, as on the occasion when Bertram (a fine sportsman) had played a particularly good game of rugby for Auckland University. 'You'll be a bloomin' All Black soon Jimmy', he joked: 'what a disgrace! Imagine what Charles will say!'<sup>21</sup> A letter from Brasch to Bertram two years earlier reveals the source of the quip: then at St John's, Brasch was involved in a search for a spiritual purity which led to the renunciation of red meat, smoking, alcohol, and what he termed 'the physical'. He wrote solemnly:

But let me give you this advice (it had not sounded condescending or superior had I been able to elaborate). Don't waste time over athletics - they are a barren, worthless and mean end.<sup>22</sup>

His attitude towards literature was also different to Milner's, although both loved books and wrote enthusiastically of their current reading. Milner, for example, defended Wordsworth to Bertram with his usual blend of mocking sincerity:

I don't pretend to be a 'Wordsworthian' (in the Arnold sense) but he's written so much glorious stuff that it isn't fair that he should be shelved and labelled 'grandpa'[...] Dammit man. Wordsworth was noble I tell you.<sup>23</sup>

Also writing to Bertram, Brasch described one of *his* favourite Romantics in a vastly different vein:

Shelley is my poetic divinity - I honestly think him England's greatest poet, and the man himself was divine. Paradise Lost which I am halfway through, leaves me cold.... The last stanza of Adonais sets me a-quiver every time I repeat it to myself, which I often do.... I know you worship Shelley too.<sup>24</sup>

Despite their shared education, Brasch and Milner were so unlike as to lose touch once they began university. Their communication after Brasch had left for Oxford was limited to messages through Bertram ('Love to Ian, please')<sup>25</sup> or through the Waitaki Old Boys' network.\* Yet there existed a goodwill between the two which grew into a new camaraderie

---

\* In the late 1920s and early 1930s, several ex-pupils travelled to Oxford, Cambridge, or London to study or work.

during 1931, which Brasch spent back in New Zealand. Bertram was in Auckland at the time, and Brasch stayed some weeks with him and his mother at their house in Hamana Street, in the seaside settlement of Devonport.\* But most of the year was spent at Bankton, his father's tall white house in Dunedin, with occasional nights spent at Manono, a more imposing house but one with a very much more congenial atmosphere.

Milner, too, was in the South Island, living at his parents' house in Oamaru and studying extra-murally. He was caring for his invalid mother, following her nervous breakdown the previous year. (His father was heavily committed as the headmaster of Waitaki Boys'.) Geographically, he and Brasch were within easy reach of each other, and they saw each other several times that year. In March, Brasch passed through Oamaru on his way to Christchurch, and was met by Milner at the station. The reunion was brief, but Milner reported later to James: '[He] was very decent though we couldn't talk much'.<sup>26</sup> In a letter the following month, he wrote that, although he did not know James' Charles as well as his own Charlie Spear, he thought Brasch was 'delightful and a poet'.<sup>27</sup>

Brasch would have been profoundly grateful to hear this judgement, for it was not long after this that he made the difficult decision to leave the family firm and pursue a literary career. At the end of May, unable to bear the tension at home, he escaped to Auckland to stay with the Bertrams. As he travelled north, he was once again met by Milner at Oamaru station: a welcome interlude on a long and wearying journey. Milner was sympathetic to his friend's plight, as his own father (who had strong views on the education of his children) was urging him to study law. After seeing Brasch off, he wrote pragmatically to Bertram:

Of course the break [with the family business] had to come. I only hope writing is a bien. You should be happy together and be good for each other.<sup>28</sup>

---

\* It was during this stay that Brasch first met Jack Bennett, a fellow student of Bertram's at the University of Auckland.

Although such meetings were reassuring for both Brasch and Milner, they were necessarily short - a few hours snatched en route to other places, or the occasional afternoon when Ian, driving his father to Queenstown on business, stopped in Dunedin on the way. In October 1931, they at last had the opportunity to speak more than 'briefly and disjointedly'.<sup>29</sup> Milner later described this day to Bertram with a noticeable absence of flippancy:

We spent one beautifully soft afternoon together sitting on the hill above the 'forest' in Cape Wanbrow - talking over all things under the sun. The sea was perfect - soft blues close in and a deep strong blue away towards the horizon. These are days one doesn't easily forget [...]<sup>30</sup>

He copied for Bertram a 'very lovely' poem which he had just received from Brasch. It was entitled, simply, 'Cape Wanbrow'.

That day in early spring had had a considerable impact on both of them, but their descriptions of it unequivocally reveal their differing characters. Milner's letter to Bertram provides a colourful background to an otherwise opaque poem: the tone of 'Cape Wanbrow' is distant, and distanced. But Brasch's choice to write of a real-life situation - to acknowledge it by title and dedication - represents a real departure from the remote Romantic verse of his Oxford days. As early as 1928, he had voiced an awareness of his preferred subject-matter. 'I unfortunately don't get much inspiration in Oxford', he wrote to Bertram: 'people more often inspire me than places'.<sup>31</sup> Not until now did this become evident in his poetry but, from this point on, personal relationships became a primary poetic source for him. Very often his best landscape writing stems from a connection made between a particular person and place.

Not only did 'Cape Wanbrow' represent a new approach to content but it also displayed a marked development in technique. In a subsequent letter to Bertram, Brasch voiced an awareness of his own growth as a poet:

I bow down with gratitude for all the trouble you've taken over my pieces. Sometime I'll certainly work through them with your letter and pointings. Your general remarks I agree with, especially about consistency of background or subject: System - I know my lack of that. My dissatisfaction with the earlier pieces is chiefly because they rely on a rather vague - and perhaps derivative - mysteriousness, are too thin in both idea and emotion....

Of separate pieces, the one, What questions can we ask you now,\* I had condemned as far too Siegfried Sassoonish; and another you like, Wind breathes ...† I first wrote down I think almost exactly as it is and dismissed as of no interest. I know the rhythm of 'Cape Wanbrow' is about as right as I could get it, but what I'd really like to get right is a piece in broken irregular scansion on a backbone of blank verse; the possibilities there are immense, and I must send you some attempts one day. Perhaps you won't think that is 'me'; but what is 'me' is I fancy changing - unless I'm unnaturally forcing it - from the 'me' of the earlier pieces.<sup>32</sup>

The advance he recognized in subject and technique was mirrored thematically. He now extended his personal awareness of the natural world to incorporate a universal vision. The light, the colour of the sea, and the tawny hills of the South Canterbury landscape had affected him deeply so that, like Milner, he saw that afternoon as one to be remembered with nostalgia, representing more than its few brief hours. This realization becomes the pivot on which 'Cape Wanbrow' successfully swings:

Questionless were those deep hours  
 As the unhurrying noise  
 And movement of the sea and wood,  
 Passing and never past.<sup>33</sup>

---

\* Unidentified.

† 'The Night, Luxor', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 5.

The 'still, transfigured day' not only remains in the individual mind, but becomes part of Yeats's collective 'storehouse'. Thus immortality is bestowed on an otherwise transient existence:

After us they shall fall, through broken years  
As an untouchable casket to the dead,  
Dark, fastened, without key,  
As dark and bright as earth is, and we are.

The final line, with its juxtaposition of opposites, and its linking of man to the earth, epitomizes the style of a much later Brasch. It made an impact on Milner, who quoted it in a letter to Bertram some months later, after the poem had been published in *Phoenix* and Brasch had departed again for England:

I simply can't realize you'll be gone [to England] in a week[....]  
But I remember our last week so vividly and Nelson keeps  
coming back in golden flashes[....] Then it is I am stilled and  
quiet -

'as dark and bright as earth is, and we are' -

Love my Jack [sic] yours Ian.<sup>34</sup>

A year later, another of Brasch's poems, 'Mountain Storm', was printed in *Phoenix*.<sup>35</sup>

This descriptive poem equally clearly indicated the direction in which his writing was developing. With effective use of personification, it emphasizes the super-human power of the elements: the sea looms 'to embrace the sky', and the wind 'staggers, brokenly wailing'. The reciprocal relationship between description of landscape and human observation became frequent in Brasch's poetry, and had its origins in this and other poems of the early 1930s.

Brasch began to use such a parallel with increasing skill, either by personifying natural scenes or by using them metaphorically.

Inspiration from New Zealand landscapes, support and practical advice from his New Zealand friends, publication of his poems by New Zealand periodicals - already, his home country was playing a crucial part in his writing. But in the early 1930s, still intent on establishing a reputation in England, he set little store on his successes in New Zealand. His reasons for returning to London early in 1932 were unequivocal:

I was back in England, as I wished. Why? To be a poet - to write poetry. And I wrote a little always, filling notebooks with short poems and occasional longer ones; but they were slight, nearly all marginal... From time to time I sent a poem or two back to New Zealand to be published; I failed to get a single poem published in England.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps because his role-models were the great masters of the European tradition, perhaps because he was published in New Zealand alongside writers he had known for years, success in Antipodean circles failed to satisfy.

Although not gaining recognition in England, he was becoming known at home as part of an emerging generation.\* While he battled on grimly in London, in his absence Milner continued to champion his writing. By 1933, *Phoenix* was obviously foundering but Milner's enthusiasm for publishing local talent was undiminished. He became involved in several new ventures, including the journal *Oriflamme*, which was banned after one issue for 'scandalous' content, and *Sirocco*, also doomed to only one issue. His brainchild the following year was an anthology of New Zealand poetry, which was to contain 'selected prejudices of the last three or four years - a good deal of unpublished stuff'.<sup>37</sup> For this volume, he applied to *Oxford*

---

\* He and his contemporaries became known as the 'Phoenix' generation.

*Poetry* for permission to reprint Brasch's 'Pyramid'. The application was successful, and three weeks later he wrote to Bertram in Auckland, full of exuberant anticipation about *New Poems*, due to appear from Caxton the following month:

mainly Fairburn Cook Mason Curnow Charles (Pyramid and Mountain Storm). It's a literary squib against the 'Arty NZ' (Art in NZ!) people and also a troop of young emotional neophytes convinced they are all lyric poets!<sup>38</sup>

In this volume, Brasch was published with writers who were already some of New Zealand's best. Although unaware - or careless - of this fact, he too was beginning to establish a name for himself. This growing reputation enabled him to return over a decade later and take command of a far weightier journal than any of those which had gone before.

The thirteen years between the innovative *Phoenix* and the establishment of *Landfall* were years of increasing activity in the field of New Zealand publishing. By far the most substantial new venture of the second half of the 1930s was the fortnightly *Tomorrow*, begun by Christchurch's Kennaway Henderson in 1934. Although it existed primarily as a forum for political and social debate (it soon acquired a reputation for being radically left-wing), it also welcomed literary contributions. For young creative writers, Patrick Evans maintained,

the paper was important less because it was radical and leftist than because it was there, a regular and punctual vehicle which could carry them through the Thirties with their fellow-travellers.<sup>39</sup>

Brasch, severe wherever he perceived a lapse in taste, condemned Henderson's regular cartoons as 'wretchedly ugly' and 'politically ... juvenile'.<sup>40</sup> But he could not fail to notice that almost all New Zealand's talented writers (many of whom had begun publishing in *The*

*Phoenix*) were now contributing to this new journal: D'Arcy Cresswell, Allen Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn, Milner, Bertram (who sent a number of articles from China), and such eminent historians and political commentators as J. C. Beaglehole, Ormond Wilson, and Walter Nash. Despite his reservations, he submitted several poems himself and consequently attracted further attention in New Zealand literary circles.

'End of Day' appeared in *Tomorrow* in July 1936.<sup>41</sup> Its contemplative, melancholic tone ('The calm day waned in mist/ Nights grew out of greyness') echoed that of 'The Walker by Night' and 'Cold Music'. Three years later, in April 1939, Henderson published 'Exile' which displayed a similar elegiac quality, speaking of loss and the passing of time:

Despair was latent in their blood,  
They had known all that the years bring,  
The weakness of accepted good  
The contagion of wrong.<sup>42</sup>

The other three poems of Brasch's to appear in *Tomorrow* similarly typified themes which had preoccupied him since Oxford. 'Chinese Temple Guardian', printed early in 1937, had been inspired by the Burlington House exhibition at the end of 1935. It opens boldly:

Iron like his bolts, insolent as the reared walls  
That he paces, taunting the whirlwind north with impotence,  
Exulting his eyes laugh and lips curl defiance.  
Strength prances in him.<sup>43</sup>

Yet its conclusion lapses into vague reverence, and the image loses its strength:

... his power goes, immune, superb still  
For in his keeping is the compassionate  
All powerful God, creator.

The theme, of art enduring against time, is already familiar.

The final two poems were printed in successive issues in May 1939. A few months in New Zealand in 1938 had satisfied Brasch that *Tomorrow* was an outlet worth pursuing. Once back in England, he submitted 'Of My Generation' and 'A Face',<sup>44</sup> both of which also return to an earlier theme: the impact of an individual life on a vast universal spectrum.\* Although of indifferent quality, they contain lines which foreshadow a more incisive style, as displayed in 'Of My Generation':

Identity is only  
The crossed line  
Of time by space and  
House by house,  
A magnetic pole  
Nothing yet valid.

Later, Brasch did not place these poems among his best work: he considered the New Zealand pieces, written later in 1939, to constitute his first 'real' writing. Others agreed with him, particularly the critic Winston Rhodes (whose 'thoughtful, intelligent and humane' contributions to *Tomorrow* Evans believes to have determined the entire 'critical climate of the paper').<sup>45</sup> Advocating the theory that literature should reflect the contemporary situation, Rhodes condemned both those writing as colonial exiles, and those adopting a plaintive or elegiac tone. The poems for which Brasch was to become best-known were far more to Rhodes's taste: vivid, succinct, and firmly based in reality.

It was in 1939 that Denis Glover printed Brasch's first volume of poetry, which included work of a new and indigenous nature: 'Pipikariti', 'Waianakarua', 'The Iconoclasts', 'Crossing the Straits', and the four parts of the title sequence. Glover, a round-faced robust

---

\* This theme re-emerged much later in Brasch's work, as he moved from an indigenous poetry to a more personal (and cryptic) style. Refer *NFO* (1969) and *HG* (1974).

character with infinite energy and resources, had been a fellow student of Milner's at Canterbury University. A poet himself, he was also interested in printing. He had bought a press, taught himself how to operate it, and founded the Caxton Club which was responsible for publishing *Oriflamme* and *Sirocco*. Despite the demise of these controversial journals, his business survived to become, in 1935, the Caxton Press, and it was this press which published *The Land and the People* four years later.

Evans describes Caxton as having created modern New Zealand literature:

Something of why such a claim can be taken seriously can be seen in John Thomson's list of some of the more important books published in the time before Glover went off to war in 1942: 'several by Allen Curnow, including *Not in Narrow Seas* (1938) and *Island and Time* (1941), Ursula Bethell's *Time and Place* (1936) and *Day and Night* (1939), R. A. K. Mason's *This Dark Will Lighten* (1941), A. R. D. Fairburn's *Dominion* (1938), J. C. Beaglehole's *Words for Music* (1938), Charles Brasch's *The Land and the People* (1939), Frank Sargeson's *A Man and his Wife* (1940), and M. H. Holcroft's essay *The Deepening Stream* (1940), as well as several anthologies and some small books which contained Glover's own poems.' To write of the press as coinciding with a renaissance in New Zealand writing is to put things back to front: it *was* the renaissance; without it these books would almost certainly have never been published anywhere, which is to say that they would never have existed.<sup>46</sup>

His claim is strikingly close to Brasch's personal sentiments. Not only did he feel that his poems did not properly exist until they were in print, he believed this to extend to himself. He took the rejection of his poetry as a personal defeat. 'I am afraid', he had written Bertram much earlier, when he had sent his precious first collection to Cape, 'I am in one of my bad fits - feeling that I have not done and cannot do anything good that will justify my existence'.<sup>47</sup> After his year in New Zealand, forfeiting his writing for business, his attitude had hardened into the belief that, if he were not recognized as a poet, '[he] had no real

existence, and no reason beyond habit for going on living'.<sup>48</sup> Discussions with Scovell confirmed that she felt as he did: 'She seemed to herself to exist only in her poetry, to have no *raison d'être* except to write - which was exactly what I felt of myself'.<sup>49</sup>

Several years later, on his last day in Christchurch in July 1938, he delivered the typescript of his book into Glover's hands. His attitude was very much a 'do or die' one, and seemed to implicate more than the fate of his literary ambitions:

It was late enough, if I was ever going to write well; I was nearly thirty, and nothing yet to show for my life. If the coming war killed me, I might as well never have existed.<sup>50</sup>

In light of both the repeated rejections of his poems in England, and the problems Scovell was having in finding a publisher for her first collection,\* it seems unlikely that his book would have been accepted there. In the summer of 1936, he had made the rounds of publishing houses once again, but with no more success than in 1930. Few at that time were willing to take the risk of accepting the type of quiet, unmodish poetry he was offering. The comparative simplicity of the publishing process with Caxton was startling. Glover's business suggestion was straightforward, and Brasch's reaction mixed:

He proposed printing some of my poems, setting them in Gill's Perpetua, of which he had a font coming; he would print an edition of one hundred copies and give me twenty-five. At this I was amazed and almost overwhelmed, and grateful to Denis, and yet also quite matter-of-fact. 'How easy it is then.'<sup>51</sup>

---

\* *Shadows of Chrysanthemums* was eventually accepted and published by Routledge in 1944; her subsequent volumes were published by Davis, Cresset, and Secker & Warberg. Today, having published most recently with Carcanet, she believes that, had this press existed in Brasch's time, it would undoubtedly have accepted his work. (Interview with JS, 23 June 1993)

A year after he had given the final revisions to *Glover*, the book was printed. It marked a significant stage in the process of becoming an established writer - but one established in New Zealand rather than in Europe. As he sailed from Wellington in 1939, destined for America and then England, he had no sense of leaving his heart behind. Although beginning to write about New Zealand, he remained deeply ambivalent about it.

### III

Although his circle of acquaintances had widened considerably during his time in New Zealand,\* Brasch's closest friends were still abroad. His reason for travelling via America was so to meet up with Milner, who was at Berkeley, and Bertram, who had been in China and was also bound for England. His primary emotion at leaving his family was relief. Lel's health remained precarious, Willi Fels had become sadly frail and less communicative, and the relationship with his father was as uneasy as ever. Only in England had he experienced a happy family life, in the lively household of the Roberts family.

Colin had first taken him home at the end of their second term at Oxford. The Roberts then lived in a large brick house in Highgate, which was always overflowing with friends. Unused to such an environment, Brasch was initially quiet. On this first visit, too, he was in his 'Shelleyan' phase and embarrassedly refused to eat meat: a catering hitch which Colin's mother took in her stride.<sup>52</sup> But Mrs Roberts, both warm and gentle, soon filled the void left

---

\* Ursula Bethell had introduced him to many artists, including Toss Woollaston and Rodney Kennedy, and many writers, including Blanche Baughan.

by Helene's early death.\* Rosemary, the only daughter of the four children, also put him at his ease.†

Colin's father, R. L. Roberts, gained Brasch's trust and respect for different reasons. A master builder with his own firm, he was also active in social work in London. One of his brothers was the literary critic Ellis Roberts‡ and, through this connection, Brasch met the Chestertons and Rose Macaulay. He marvelled at Mr Roberts's versatility and the way that, unlike his own father, he judged people on their talents rather than their social standing. Roberts, moreover, was 'invariably friendly to any of the friends his children brought to the house'.<sup>53</sup> In this, too, Hyam's example presented a stark contrast; Brasch had made every effort to keep his friends and family apart:

My life at Waitaki, the part of it that meant most to me, was entirely hidden from my father. I could not possibly have spoken to him about it. It would have conveyed nothing to him, yet would have shocked him.... I am certain that he had no inkling of the strength of the relationship that bound me to Peter and to Dougal, to Tony, to James, to Winsome. A few years later, when it was clear to James and me that ours was a friendship of the deepest and most lasting kind, he was foolish enough in a moment of heat to speak disparagingly of it as a temporary, ephemeral relationship without reality, which was not to be compared with family relationships and would soon mean nothing to me. That was blindness of a sort I could not forgive; it convinced me that my friendships belonged to a world far from his, and that I must make my life in that world, outside his knowledge and control.<sup>54</sup>

The reaction his father aroused in him, both then and earlier, was a conflicting mixture of defiance and secretive behaviour. Boarding school had allowed a first taste of freedom, but Oxford was the first time he had escaped for any length of time the deadening influence of

---

\* Brasch's mother had died of a haemorrhage during pregnancy, when Charles was four. The account of her death in *Indirections* (pp. 10-11) describes it as ending his 'childhood proper, shortly before [his] fifth birthday'.

† Rosemary later married the poet Hal Summers, who also became a close friend of Brasch's.

‡ One-time editor of the *New Statesman*.

Hyam's disapproval. The atmosphere in the Roberts household could not have proved more of a contrast to silent, oppressive Bankton: two parents, four children, and any number of guests, 'in a rapid exhilarating cross-fire of opinions, arguments, witticisms, banter, laughter'.<sup>55</sup> More astonishing still was the nature of interaction between generations. 'Parents and children were equal in these exchanges', he remembered: 'Mr Roberts laughed with and sometimes at his children, but treated them with respect and never talked down'. The comparison with his own father was never stated but became more implicit with every visit, as his affection for Colin's parents grew.\*

A large part of the Roberts' attraction was their love of the arts. In this aspect, too, Brasch saw his father (and sister) as lacking. Hyam, critical of any occupation which he saw as not 'worthy, healthy, profitable',<sup>56</sup> scorned his son's tentative suggestions of a poetic career. Mr. and Mrs Roberts, on the other hand, encouraged their children not only academically but creatively. Not until much later in life did Brasch realize the extent of his parent's inhibiting attitude:

The effect of my father's mingled criticism and doubt and exhortation had been just the opposite of what he intended: taking away every other conceivable prop to my self-esteem, it had now left me this [poetic talent] alone.... any poem might mean a venture that my entire life hung on, that would either justify me once and for all, or convict me of total irretrievable failure, and shame that I could never expiate....<sup>57</sup>

Ironically, his writing both aroused his father's anger, and enabled him to retain any feeling of worth. Even in middle-age, he felt shaken when confronted by Hyam's (or any other's)

---

\* In the manuscripts of *Indirections*, many seemingly minor incidents involving Hyam are related with considerable bitterness (refer pp. 34; 114; 252). It is clear that Brasch traced the origins of his personal and creative insecurities back to his father's treatment of him as a child; he describes himself as having to '[conform] outwardly in order to maintain [his] inner freedom' (p. 114). Bertram, as editor, has omitted most of this material.

utterly different set of values:

I had to screw myself up every time I went to see him at the club, to face the pain and humiliation (inward if not outward too) which I knew I must expect. What was intolerable about matter-of-fact, so-called normal people was the assumption implicit in their attitude and talk that nothing existed except the matters they talked about every day; that assumption banished all other worlds and blighted every different life. I could not then be myself and live from my true centre.... I had no beliefs that mattered, because none of them imposed standards of conduct. There was nothing to keep me from destruction except a sense of obligation to work at my poems. Only in respect to them did it seem to me that I knew what right and wrong were.<sup>58</sup>

Staying with the Roberts had the opposite effect. Over his time at Oxford and in the years that followed the family broadened his knowledge of the arts and confirmed his tastes. In the summer of 1936, he joined Colin, Brian, and Rosemary, Dora and Leonie Zuntz, and Hal Summers, on an outing to Glyndebourne: his first experience of this great English institution.\* The performance that year was Mozart's *Figaro*, an opera which held for him not only a universal message but (as happened so often with him) a personal one:

The Countess that year was Aulikki Rautawaara, a blond Finn of great beauty ... she sang her *cavatina* in the second act with such tender desolate sadness that my bones wanted to melt with her; she sang for us all, a lament for the beauty and love that our world seemed about to trample out for ever, to trample out perhaps in us. The Glyndebourne gardens on the south slopes of the Downs seemed an embodiment of Mozartian qualities, but anglicized, softened a little as gentleness subdued wit. Glyndebourne was an ideal and a symbol, a more rarefied Salzburg, beautiful and precious, but a little unreal precious, in that Mozart lived in the world and was of the world and his music cannot be felt and understood to the depth in isolation from the world.<sup>59</sup>

---

\* He went several times after this: at least once with Joy Scovell, and with Leonie in 1939 to see *Così Fan Tutte*.

It was partly to protect this England, however 'unreal', that he returned two years later from the comparative safety of New Zealand. He felt indebted for the wealth of culture he had experienced, for the depth of an informal education which he could otherwise have experienced only second-hand. His friends, too, particularly the Zuntzes, had raised his awareness of the precarious situation in England and Europe. The marriage in 1936 of his old Oxford friend Reggie Howlett to an Italian, Leila Cagna, was more than personally significant: 'the lasting stability and happiness of their marriage seemed a symbolic resolution of the tragic divisions of Europe'.<sup>60</sup>

Those relations of his who had been born or had lived in Europe - his Aunts Emily and Kate, Great-Aunt Agnes, the de Beers, and his German grandfather - shared his sense of responsibility and fear. In the years leading up to the war, he found that his awareness of European affairs distanced him from his New Zealand friends, who were geographically isolated and less emotionally involved. Even Bertram and Milner, who by this stage had lived in England for several years, did not identify as closely as he with the tragic divisions: '[they] felt them intellectually, an affront and an outrage, but not in the same way as inward experience'.<sup>61</sup> For himself, the anxiety intensified his feeling of belonging to two countries: 'Without ceasing to be a New Zealander, I had become a European'.

As a new political awareness developed, his reasons to return to England in 1938 became more complex. Yet, in spite of his growing unease, 1936 and 1937 had been golden years, and productive in areas other than poetry. Early in the summer of 1937, inspired by past trips to Glyndebourne, he and the Roberts children staged a production of *Comus* in the garden of the Highgate house.\* Rosemary and Hal had come up with the idea of staging the masque early in April, during their honeymoon in Italy. Once back in England, they swung into action; by the middle of May, plans for the production were well under way. Rosemary was to

---

\* By this stage the Roberts had moved from the house which Brasch had first visited in 1928, but they had remained in the Highgate area.

play the Lady to Hal's Comus.\* Brasch, whom they thought the 'obvious choice' for the part of the Attendant Spirit,<sup>62</sup> had no particular flair for dramatics and was still shy of public performance. Much to their surprise, he accepted his role eagerly.

On a soft summer's evening, with the swallows dipping in the dusk, the seventeenth-century drama was played out for the Roberts parents and a few friends. Although a very amateur production, it remained in Brasch's memory, for it combined the two things he most valued: friendship and poetry. Milton's words affected him deeply:

I think I then knew the whole masque by heart. It was one of the poems we loved best, although we may have brought it too close to de la Mare and Housman; I loved declaiming its eloquently subtle cadences, so lovely they brought tears to my eyes; this was the only kind of acting I aspired to.<sup>63</sup>

The masque gave him inspiration of his own. As plans for the production got underway, he began writing a poem for Rosemary and Hal which bound into one the characters of the pastoral drama and the circumstances of his friends. This he sent to them, accompanied by a letter written in the quaint courtly style of Milton's time:

I have written a poem<sup>†</sup> for you that is half pastiche and half serious, and cannot forbear sending it to you (typed for kindness' sake). Its vices you must please overlook; and its virtues are to be attributed solely to the inspiration of your own.<sup>64</sup>

---

\* In *Indirections*, Brasch states that two of Hal's friends played the Lady's brothers. The parts were, in fact, played by Patrick Roberts and a colleague of his older brother, Brian (PR to SQ, 3 November 1993; RS to SQ, 6 November 1993). In a postscript to a letter to Rosemary and Hal, Brasch mentions the possibility of Leonie playing for them, and Dora (by this time married to Brian) singing, but nothing came of this suggestion.

† See Appendix, pp. 344-6.

In keeping with the celebrated occasion of marriage, Brasch's Comus is successful in winning the Lady. The image of the pagan god, Brasch explained, is that of a 'perfectly innocuous deity, a personification of the natural forces of earth; pleasure loving, but the pleasures were innocent and spontaneous'. He admitted that his god was over-exuberant, but claimed that 'exuberance is beauty'. His Lady stands in contrast to the robust Comus, representing 'reason, intellect, purity of soul'. The union between them is a highly desirable balance of two opposing natures which together form a whole. 'Comus' spells', Brasch wrote, 'are no more than an appeal to the human warmth & generosity which are the hidden fuel giving reason, virtue, and intellect their power'.

The union of his two friends, he believed, was similarly well-starred. He entitled the piece: 'Comus and the Lady: a marriage song for Rosemary and Hal'. After recounting how Milton's 'loth lady' is won by the exuberant Comus, he draws a parallel with real life:

My Comus and my Lady, now  
 A like ending comes for you  
 After long trial. You have proved  
 Separation and the starved  
 Night, the silence. O that I  
 With my wings that fan the day,  
 Your attendant spirit, could  
 About you forever shed  
 The blossomed airs of plenitude  
 And freshness.

Despite the professed element of pastiche, the goodwill in this poem is apparent:

But now  
 For joy at your first victory  
 The graces and the seasons play  
 And the windy music swell  
 Through heaven and the starry dales....

Brasch's treatment of marriage in 'Comus and the Lady', although sincere, is light-hearted. A couple of years later, on the same topic, he wrote another poem which provides a chilling contrast to the earlier work. 'For a Marriage Night' warns of the fragility of human happiness:

Brief, O lovers, be;  
 Even time is brief,  
 Even the sullen day  
 That deathlike drags between your joy  
 Its ghost of life.<sup>65</sup>

The second part contains a cry of anguish too personal for Brasch to have written without real-life basis: 'Night that lays you together/ Has laid me alone'. Although a witness to the union of two halves, he must hear forever 'The bone's unanswered cry'.

No reference, textual or otherwise, discloses the identity of the couple. But the final four lines reveal that the lovers had met through the poet:

And in the night that made me  
 Praise that fatal day  
 When first I brought you to each other  
 Unknowing why.

What is certain from the text alone is that Brasch already had a vision of an inescapable solitude. The 'first victory' of his Comus and the Lady was one which he knew he would never achieve. Writing to Bertram from Sydney in 1930, he had stated in a curiously elderly manner:

As I've made up my mind that - for reasons clear to myself, even to one of my friends whom I discussed it with \* - I probably shant marry, I can be quite selfish, since one's chief other-regarding duty in life is to one's offspring'.<sup>66</sup>

The shattering of his romantic dreams, and possible suspicion of homosexual tendencies, had hastened his decision to remain a bachelor.

The lonely and rather bleak future he foresaw was realized during his months in Dunedin, as he existed on the outskirts of a society which he felt unable to - and had no desire to - join. It was not long before he saw there was only one way open to him. To regain happiness it was necessary for him to return to those friends who had made England home for him.

#### IV

After the urbane and varied culture of Europe, the shortcomings of New Zealand society were naturally magnified in Brasch's eyes. He had returned home in 1931 to a newly uncongenial environment, and was horrified by the narrow complacency he perceived in Dunedin circles. Europe had held a strong attraction for Brasch since his childhood. He had been fascinated by his grandfather's store of treasures: books, paintings, sculptures and curios collected over years of extensive travelling. Although by the age of thirteen he had never been out of the South Island, he had therefore learned an enthusiasm for older cultures which lasted throughout his life.

---

\* Unidentified.

Three years in Oxford, and the consequent opportunities for travel, had merely whetted his appetite. To tear himself away from the rich spread of Europe's possibilities, and return to a colourless life in Dunedin, 'half terrified' him.<sup>67</sup> Preparing for his finals in the summer of 1930, it was not the coming Schools which worried him as much as the prospect of a blank future. The pale spring sunlight, the pink blossom lining the cobbled streets, did nothing to disperse the black cloud of his anxiety. Taking time off from cramming, he wrote to Bertram and poured out his fears:

The exams are in 3 weeks; a bad enough prospect; but I am much more depressed by the thought of leaving Europe - 4½ months ahead. I expect to be in Ak [Auckland] some time in November....<sup>68</sup>

Before he had even reached New Zealand, he had become nostalgic for the Northern Hemisphere and all that it signified. Staying in Sydney with relations, he wrote to Bertram: 'I have already decided that I much prefer the other side of the world, England in particular, and Oxford as the most perfect and lovely place of all'.<sup>69</sup> He dreaded the disappearance of newly-awakened creative impulses: 'It would not surprise me if I soon ceased to write and to want to write verse and prose'. This had preoccupied him for most of the long sea-voyage and, the more his fear grew, the more golden his memories of the past three years became. He painted a glowing picture of Oxbridge life for James:

I daydream about my friends and Oxford continually. You must get home; and Cambridge or Oxford - it is much the same. Through both you learn something otherwise inconceivable, a kind of peace of the spirit, intimately associated it is true with culture and form and an aristocracy of emotions, all three a part of the essence, the best of England; and yet having an equal kinship with the more spiritual ideas of the Greek philosophers ... something best expressed for me by a saying of Socrates in

the Republic that true love consists in loving in a calm and rational manner what is orderly and beautiful; and thirdly, dissociable from both of these and implying a consonance and harmony with nature. All this I find nowhere else but in England, and pre-eminent in Oxford and Cambridge; where too you have endless other joys - 'high comradeship', and the most fascinating people you can meet anywhere. And that is scarcely liveable without.

Although writing vaguely in this letter that he might stay 'for ever' in Dunedin, he had clearly made up his mind before reaching his destination that business life there would be no more than an interlude in his life. The unconscious reference to England as home reflected an attitude prevalent at that stage in colonial New Zealand history. Although he had only lived in England for three years, he had known it since birth. The ideals of high culture which had been such an integral part of his education had been fulfilled for him in one of the traditional seats of learning. Now he could see no way of transporting, let alone continuing, the pursuit of such ideals in a country of philistines.

Even more importantly, he knew that direct contact with European culture provided him with personal inspiration. Thus the loss of this culture threatened his literary dreams. Some months earlier, while still at St John's, he had written pessimistically to Bertram:

I am doubtful about the atmosphere of NZ.... Is it, I wonder, congenial to anything but ballads or the poetry that most new countries produce.<sup>70</sup>

His fears were not allayed. And seven years later, he found the adjustment from English to New Zealand life no less difficult. 'Very quickly', he recalled, 'I was made to feel that it would not be easy to live in New Zealand going one's own way, as in London'.<sup>71</sup> He was experiencing, for the second time, the archetypal colonial dilemma: seeing his home country with eyes accustomed to European horizons. The world had expanded considerably for him

over the past ten years. Now, at twenty-eight, he tried once again to find a way of reconciling his old life with his new - and once again failed. By April 1938, having been back in Dunedin for little more than two months, he had decided to wait out the winter and then return to England.

The days grew shorter, and autumn touched the willows to gold. Having made his decision, Brasch felt restless. In May, he spent a few days with relations in the small North Canterbury township of Amberley;\* but even the wide sweep of the plains and the distant gleam of early snow on the Alps could not distract him from thoughts of an English spring. Despite his affection for his aunt and uncle, and his close friendship with their son Tim, his mind was leaping ahead, and he could barely disguise his impatience. Since he had made the decision to leave New Zealand, his general outlook on life had improved enormously, and his confidence in his writing had returned. Writing to Scovell, he reflected on the toll the past few months in Dunedin had taken on him, personally and creatively:

I got exasperated with going from one place to another here and feeling everywhere, after the first few days of excitement in seeing a different country, the complete fish out of water; somehow I couldn't see myself settling down anywhere, however agreeable in some ways, without anything definite ahead of me. I wrote nothing, read little.<sup>72</sup>

Even as he voiced his dissatisfaction with New Zealand, he revealed a growing love of its landscapes. At the Thompsons', he was surrounded by the vast skies and wide plains of Canterbury. He described for Joy the 'rainy gauze-like look over the smoothed hills', and the silver river-beds, 'pale with light, a kind of muted radiance'. He wrote to her, too, of other

---

\* The Thompsons: his Aunt Kate, the younger sister of Helene and Emily, had married a Dr. T. Thompson of Amberley, with whom she had two children, Eunoe and Tim.

scenes which (to him, brought up in the rugged province of Otago) seemed more typical of New Zealand:

I always think [instead] of the wilder parts, where towering mountains surround one and blue-green rivers swirl in deep gorges, and there are wastes of rock without anything green.

Such descriptions foreshadowed his vivid landscape poems. Yet, although he admitted the hold of this beauty over him, he remained sceptical about the endurance of his emotional ties:

I can like and feel drawn to so many countries of so many kinds that I'm a little suspicious of my own allegiances in this respect. Is N. Z. my country really? sometimes [sic] I think so; but I don't belong in the life lived here.<sup>73</sup>

This was the crux of the matter: he felt there was no place for him in New Zealand society. He had returned against his will for the sake of Lesley's health, to find that friends had drifted away or were leading lives of complacent mediocrity. After seven years, his network had shrunk. His father had sold Bankton and moved into rooms at his club, other relatives and old acquaintances had died or moved away so that Manono was 'no longer, as it had seemed once, the centre of a whole circle of relations and old friends'.<sup>74</sup>

After a happy and sociable life in England, he found his new existence unutterably dreary. He spent most of his time in Dunedin staying with Emily and her daughter Elespie, with whom he had travelled in Europe the previous year. They, at least, were lively and congenial company. But the town appeared ugly to his eyes, its conservative society stifling. After only a month, he had decided to move to Christchurch where, more than anywhere else

in New Zealand, he thought, there was a 'diverse circle of interesting people'.<sup>\*75</sup> The city also offered the *Press*, which he felt was an acceptable paper: on the whole he found the New Zealand media 'most inadequate' for keeping him up to date on European affairs.<sup>76</sup> He wrote to Bennett in mid-March outlining his short-term plans:

Next week I'm going to Christchurch and hope to meet Denis Glover and the Tomorrow people. I sent Tomorrow a poem which they didn't acknowledge; and now I'm trying to write a shortish N. Z. one, semi-prophetic, which you shall see if it comes to anything.<sup>†</sup> But I can't live in Dunedin; and after Easter, when I go to Queenstown en famille for my Grandfather's 80th birthday, I shall move properly to Chch.<sup>77</sup>

Most of the winter prior to sailing was spent there, in a 'gloomy room in a rather decayed house near Latimer Square'.<sup>78</sup> As well as days spent driving or walking with Tim at nearby Amberley, he visited the Pages: Fred (a musician) and Eve (a well-known painter), who lived over the hill in sunny Governor's Bay. Both the Thompsons' and the Pages' homes were near the sea; the deep blue winter skies and choppy waves brought a feeling of freedom which partly compensated for the intellectual and emotional restrictions he chafed against.

His letters from this time reflect a growing awareness of the physical beauty New Zealand had to offer. It seemed all the greater in contrast to its narrow society, and the impermanent feeling of its settlements. In a letter to Bennett shortly after arriving, Brasch outlined his first (and lasting) impressions:

As I expected the worst I am not hurt by the ugliness of the towns, the self-completeness of the people, as most people are when returning for the first time. The country I find more and more beautiful and utterly different from any other; the dense

---

<sup>\*</sup> Many of these he met through the poet Ursula Bethell: they included Leicester Webb, John Schroder, John Summers, Arthur Prior, M. H. Holcroft, Rodney Kennedy, and H. D. Somerset.

<sup>†</sup> Possibly 'Of My Generation', which was published in *Tomorrow* 5 (10 May 1939), p. 443.

bush that fits the hills so closely and that is sombre, wiry, alert, and the hills when one sees them clearly and not just in a blue haze, are primitive and untouched as though man had never trodden or even gazed at them, they belong to another age. We are in this land but we are not of it yet. The towns are froth on the surface; Dunedin and Auckland at least (I have not seen more) don't belong in their settings, though perhaps they may in time. They, like people's lives, everything, are a permanent makeshift, an importation that lingers because no one thinks of the possibility of an alternative.<sup>79</sup>

These were the sentiments at the heart of his first and second collections of poetry. Phrase after phrase voices his impression of a mysterious and untamed land:

They who found and we who find  
 Shore, mountain, dogged bush,  
 What have any of us learned  
 Of the place except its obvious look?<sup>80</sup>

The four-part title sequence of *The Land and the People* developed this theme. As the poet pleads for a necessary patience, the cadence becomes appropriately measured:

... And the newcomer heart,  
 Needing slow-paced generations, the shock  
 Of recognition after long heedlessness,  
 Routine and ripening memory,  
 To make of new air, new earth, part  
 Of its own rhythm and impetus,  
 Moves gauchely still, half alien.  
 Only in the wash of time  
 Identifying, as the sea  
 Isolates, can earth and man  
 Into understanding grow  
 And to a common instinct come.  
 Not the conquest and the taming  
 Can make earth ours, and compel  
 Here our acceptance.<sup>81</sup>

The fourth and final part of the sequence offers hope for the future, conditional on such patience. The Maori legend of the discovery of Aotearoa is referred to - evidence of a newly assured indigenous touch:

Shadowed, by a shadow led  
We, as Maui dropped his line,  
As Kupe steered. And with us go  
Dream of prey and dream of cloud,  
But not to see or divine  
And never here to grasp and now.<sup>82</sup>

Brasch's intended audience was a New Zealand one. He was beginning to realize the value of writing both about, and for, the country of his birth.

His second volume, *Disputed Ground*, predominantly consisted of work written in England, between 1939 and 1945. As a consequence, a large number of poems are on European themes. But the first and third sections revolve around the same theme as *The Land and the People*, with poems of a vividly indigenous quality. 'Forerunners' is one of Brasch's most sophisticated expressions of a native theme; its manuscripts reveal workings more extensive than usual.\*

Written in the troubled months before the war, this poem was 'about New Zealand, now threatened also, with everything and everybody [Brasch] knew'.<sup>83</sup> Initially entitled 'Before us', it was left with Bertram's agent, Henriette Herz, in New York as Brasch returned from Honolulu to England. Herz, however, was unable to place it.

Five years later, in 1944, Brasch sent Crockett a copy of the poem which now bore the more redolent title of 'Forerunners'. The text had also been modified. Significant changes in line divisions created a smoother rhythm, various words had been altered which intensified

---

\* See Appendix, p. 346.

the feeling of unease. ('Branding it [the land] with petulant monuments', for example, had become 'scarring it with restless monuments'.) The changes in the first verse alone showed the distance Brasch had travelled in the five intervening years. The sense and most of the vocabulary of the earlier version remained, but now his writing revealed both a surer and less predictable touch:

Those who were before us named the bays  
 And the mountains, touching with a shade of poignance  
 The places of their lives  
 Where still the currents of living trouble the air. [1939]

Those who were before us gave to bay and mountain  
 Being and human name, and currents of their living  
 Still with a breath of poignance  
 Trouble the air of their chosen places. [1944]<sup>84</sup>

The final 'Forerunners', published in *Disputed Ground* in 1948, revealed further changes. The first stanza was now divided in two, and the additional opening lines contributed to the atmosphere of mystery:

Not by us was the unrecorded stillness  
 Broken, and in their monumental dawn  
 The rocks, the leaves unveiled;  
 Those who were before us trod first the soil

And named the bays and mountains; while round them spread  
 The indefinable currents of the human,  
 That still about their chosen places  
 Trouble the poignant air.<sup>85</sup>

Other changes strengthened the image of Nature withholding her secrets from human eyes. The lakes which, in the first two versions, were 'winding', are now 'guarded'. The 'reckless'

ravines have become 'hooded'; the mountain shadows are betrayed by a stealthy twilight instead of by darkness.

The final verse, however, remained unchanged. With balanced cadences and judiciously-chosen language, it offers a flawless summation of the poem's subject:

Behind our quickness, our shallow occupation of the easier  
Landscape, their unprotesting memory  
Mildly hovers, surrounding us with perspective,  
Offering soil for our rootless behaviour.

Resisting the temptation to tinker with this verse was perhaps the ultimate testimony to Brasch's developing poetic maturity.

Immediately following 'Forerunners' in the collection of 1948 was a poem which he described as his first 'real' work. 'The Islands'\* was also written in 1939 but it, too, needed reworking over a lengthy period of time before 'the clean lines of the idea' emerged.<sup>86</sup> The best-known of all Brasch's poems, it became one of the icons of national literature, particularly the second of its three parts:

Always, in these islands, meeting and parting  
Shake us, making tremulous the salt-rimmed air;  
Divided, many-tongued, the sea is waiting,  
Bird and fish visit us and come no more.  
Remindingly beside the quays the white  
Ships lie smoking; and from their haunted bay  
The godwits vanish towards another summer.  
Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring  
Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;  
And none knows where he will lie down at night.<sup>87</sup>

---

\* See Appendix, p. 347.

Its expression of unease and alienation spoke for a generation acutely aware of their own insecurities as Europeans in an alien land. Yet its relevance endured beyond this generation, the phrase ‘distance looks our way’ telling of every New Zealander’s isolation. Nearly fifty years after its first publication, ‘The Islands’ inspired composer Christopher Blake to write a symphony of the same name.\* Blake describes Brasch as ‘inhabiting a halfway house between being European and New Zealander’, and states that his own generation, ‘trained and steeped in this European tradition’, is no different:

[we spend] the rest of our life back in the home patch unravelling that training, re-describing it, re-creating it, adapting it to express the fact that you’re on the other side of the world.<sup>88</sup>

Blake’s ‘re-describing [...] recreating’ was exactly the way in which Brasch approached his work. The manuscript of ‘The Islands’ sent to Crockett had a longer second section than the final version, so that the sequence consisted of three sonnets. The four lines later omitted speak more of the immediate situation at the time of composition, and less of the islands Brasch was inhabiting in his imagination:

The future and the past stand at our doors,  
 Beggars who for one look of trust will open  
 Worlds that can answer our unknown desires,  
 And enter us like rain and sun to ripen.<sup>89</sup>

At the time of composition, the world was on the threshold of war; Brasch was aware of living in a period of particular historical significance. Yet later, back in Blake’s ‘home patch’,

---

\* *Symphony - The Islands* premiered at the Christchurch Town Hall, 9 May 1996.

he perceived the intrusion this passage made in an otherwise impersonal and timeless poem.

His revision, although less formally structured, is altogether sparer and more elegant.

Throughout the late 1930s, the theme of an untamed land possessed him and became central in his writing. He rarely specified his settings, but they were obviously relevant to the country he had left behind. Another of the manuscript poems left with Henriette in 1938 was entitled 'The Silent Land',\* and this, too, spoke eloquently of the predicament of his generation of New Zealanders. The distant sombre tone which was becoming a characteristic of his writing could find no more apt subject than a land devoid of humanizing legend: 'No hermits have hallowed the caves,/ Nor has the unicorn drunk from the green fountain'. Its nature, as in 'The Islands', is secretive, defensive:

The sea casts up its wreckage, ship or shell,  
Beams of day and darkness guardedly  
Break on the savage forests that from groins  
And armpits of the hills so fiercely look.<sup>90</sup>

Characteristic also was the personification of the landscape. In this poem, the earth is a living entity to be appeased for past violations. At times impartial, this 'silent land' can also be hostile. The metaphors Brasch chooses are harsh ones: the cities 'cry for meaning', and on the nameless plains the 'hot winds bleed'. This is a difficult and desolate place.

Five years after its conception, the poem was included by Curnow in *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*: an anthology which was soon regarded as the first comprehensive collection of truly indigenous verse. In consequence, 'The Silent Land' reached a larger audience than the poems in *Disputed Ground* three years later. Over the war years, in snatched moments of leisure-time, Brasch had made minor alterations to the original version,

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 347-8.

just as he had to 'The Islands'.<sup>91</sup> Phrases were altered and polished, so that the initial wordiness was replaced by clean concise lines. 'A new speech of the heart must be painfully learned' became, more succinctly, 'The unproved heart still seeks a vein of speech'. The power of the earth was emphasized, so that she no longer whispered her message but was predicted to 'tame her tamer'. And, as with 'The Islands', the most haunting verse remained unaltered, suggesting once again Brasch's recognition of his own achievement:

Man must lie with the gaunt hills like a lover,  
Earning their intimacy in the calm sigh  
Of a century of quiet and assiduity  
Discovering what solitude has meant

Before our headlong time broke on these waters....

From this thematic point, the logical progression was towards an exploration of the human need for a resting-point, the possibility of a life in harmony with nature. In an unpublished poem called 'Landfall',\* Brasch wrote of man's 'slow acclimatisation' with his surroundings. The journey in the poem is both physical and metaphoric: it is both the sea-voyage in 'Genesis' and the poet's own search for a place to call home:

For there must be one among the  
Swaying islands that waits for him  
Unknowing, that offers anchorage,  
Hearthstone, altar. Can it be  
Here, or does it lie farther?<sup>92</sup>

---

\* See Appendix, p. 348.

In revised form, this piece was used for the second section of a poem called 'The Voyage', which was published in the Otago University *Review* in 1953.\* Although by this time Brasch was permanently settled in New Zealand, the subject matter had remained valid. The preoccupation of linking person to place became the central premise for his third volume, *The Estate* (1957); in this he identified friends by the landscapes which, with quiet patience, they had made their own.

Brasch's own sense of displacement - caused by his Jewishness, his uncertainty over his sexuality, and his solitary nature - was always acute. But in the years before and during the war, his awareness of this was heightened as he felt himself torn between two countries. New Zealand and its newly-arrived European settlers became a symbol for his displacement. Out of the exploration of this in his writing was born a poetic voice of conviction: a voice which, at last, he could claim as his own.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ind.*, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 April [1936].

<sup>3</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 April [1936].

<sup>4</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 April [1936].

<sup>5</sup> 'The Shape of Darkness', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind.*, p. 343.

<sup>7</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 April [1936].

<sup>8</sup> 'For the Dead in Spain', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> 'Simeon's Land', *TLP* in *CP*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 April [1936].

<sup>11</sup> CB to JB, 15 May [1930].

<sup>12</sup> CB to JB, 26 June [1928].

<sup>13</sup> 'Invocation' and 'Xerxes', *Open Windows*, Vol. V, No. 1 (March 1931), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland, 1990), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> 'Cold Music' and 'Cape Wanbrow', *The Phoenix*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1932), n. pag.

<sup>16</sup> CB to JB, 'Dunedin, Friday' [winter, 1931].

<sup>17</sup> *Ind.*, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> IM to JB [28 July 1930].

<sup>19</sup> IM to JB [22 September 1930].

<sup>20</sup> IM to JB [9 February 1931].

<sup>21</sup> IM to JB, 2 September [1930].

<sup>22</sup> CB to JB, 26 June [1928].

---

\* Refer 'Uncollected and Unpublished Poems' in *CP*, p. 221.

- <sup>23</sup> IM to JB, 'Rolleston House, Chch. Thursday afternoon' [1930].
- <sup>24</sup> CB to JB, 17 May [1928].
- <sup>25</sup> CB to JB, 17 May [1928].
- <sup>26</sup> IM to JB [6 March 1931].
- <sup>27</sup> IM to JB [27 April 1931].
- <sup>28</sup> IM to JB [24 May 1931].
- <sup>29</sup> IM to JB [13 June 1931].
- <sup>30</sup> IM to JB [4 November 1931].
- <sup>31</sup> CB to JB, 24 January [1928].
- <sup>32</sup> CB to JB, n.d. [late 1931].
- <sup>33</sup> 'Cape Wanbrow', *The Phoenix*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1932), n. pag.
- <sup>34</sup> IM to JB, 18 July 1932.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Mountain Storm', *The Phoenix*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 1933), p. 11.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ind.*, p. 190.
- <sup>37</sup> IM to JB, 7 March 1934.
- <sup>38</sup> IM to JB, 26 March 1934.
- <sup>39</sup> Evans, p. 86.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ind.*, p. 313.
- <sup>41</sup> 'End of Day', *Tomorrow 2* (22 July 1936), p. 23.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Exile', *Tomorrow 5* (12 April 1939), p. 376.
- <sup>43</sup> 'Chinese Temple Guardian', *Tomorrow 3* (20 January 1937), p. 188.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Of My Generation', *Tomorrow 5* (10 May 1939), p. 443; 'A Face', *Tomorrow 5* (24 May 1939), p. 476.
- <sup>45</sup> Evans, p. 86.
- <sup>46</sup> Evans, p. 88.
- <sup>47</sup> CB to JB, 15 May [1930].
- <sup>48</sup> *Ind.*, p. 190.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ind.*, p. 246.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 343-4.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 312.
- <sup>52</sup> RS to SQ, 20 October 1993.
- <sup>53</sup> PR to SQ, 23 November 1993.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 89-90.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind.*, p. 153.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ind.*, p. 88.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 252.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 661.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ind.*, p. 250.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ind.*, p. 250.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ind.*, p. 250.
- <sup>62</sup> RS to SQ, 20 October 1993.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ind.*, p. 153.
- <sup>64</sup> CB to Rosemary and Hal Summers, 19 [May (erroneously dated March by CB) 1937].
- <sup>65</sup> 'For a Marriage Night' (undated), Bennett MS Papers 2377, Folder 12.
- <sup>66</sup> CB to JB, 15 November [1930].
- <sup>67</sup> CB to JB, 16 June [1930].
- <sup>68</sup> CB to JB, 15 May [1930].
- <sup>69</sup> CB to JB, 15 November [1930].
- <sup>70</sup> CB to JB, 2 February [1930].
- <sup>71</sup> *Ind.*, p. 294.
- <sup>72</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1938].
- <sup>73</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1938].
- <sup>74</sup> *Ind.*, p. 295.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ind.*, p. 302.
- <sup>76</sup> CB to JAWB, 13 February 1938.
- <sup>77</sup> CB to JAWB, 14 March 1938.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ind.*, p. 312.
- <sup>79</sup> CB to JAWB, 13 February 1938.
- <sup>80</sup> 'The Land and the People II', *TLP in CP*, p. 2.
- <sup>81</sup> 'The Land and the People III', *TLP in CP*, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>82</sup> 'The Land and the People IV', *TLP in CP*, p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> *Ind.*, p. 343.

<sup>84</sup> 1939 version, 'Before us', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12; 1944 version, 'Forerunners', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/14.

<sup>85</sup> 'Forerunners', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>86</sup> *Ind.*, p. 343.

<sup>87</sup> 'The Islands 2', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 16-17. This is Brasch's revised version, first published in Vincent O'Sullivan's *Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* (London, 1970), p. 74.

<sup>88</sup> Cit. William Dart, 'Homepatch Evolution', *New Zealand Listener*, 4 May 1996, p. 39.

<sup>89</sup> Untitled ['The Islands'], Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.

<sup>90</sup> 'The Silent Land', first published in *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, ed. Allen Curnow (Christchurch, 1945), p. 133; 'Uncollected and Unpublished Poems' in *CP*, pp. 217-18.

<sup>91</sup> 'The Silent Land' in manuscript form, Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.

<sup>92</sup> 'Landfall', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/14.

## **Chapter Five**

2

***Public and Personal Speech-Song:1936-8***

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PUBLIC AND PERSONAL SPEECH-SONG: 1936-38

Although beginning to write about New Zealand, Brasch doubted he could make a success of living there. During the winter months of 1938, he felt no more 'at home' than he had in 1931. Then, he had been drafted unwillingly into the family business; now, he was no nearer to finding a niche for himself. As the squally May wind rattled the branches against his window, he wrote gloomily to John Crockett:

I just can't see myself settling down here; perhaps if I were completely sure of myself I might - since I am completely unsure of myself it is impossible. There is nothing here for an odd man to fit into; living is makeshift and has no real relation to the country.<sup>1</sup>

As he partially realized, his uncertainty about himself and the extent of his writing talent was projected onto his home country. Not only was he plagued by self-doubts, but the European/New Zealand division had been brought to a head once more by the trip home. To establish a national identity was reliant on discovering a vocational one, and he saw no opening for himself in the pragmatic societies of Dunedin or Christchurch.

His lack of activity during these months contributed to his feeling of unease. His relations made no attempt this time to force him into business, nor did he seek employment:

I did not look for work, because I was incapable of working, because I did not know what I wanted to do, writing apart, because no one offered me work or suggested what I should do.<sup>2</sup>

He missed his English life all the more because it was there that, for the first time in his life, he had found suitable paid work, teaching at the 'Abbey school' for problem children in Buckinghamshire.

It was this, more than any other factor, which drew him back to England, even while the threat of war was looming large. 'Work meant to me', he realized, 'only what I could do there [at the Abbey]'.<sup>3</sup> His self-esteem was at its lowest ebb before he finally made the decision to return. In Queenstown over Easter for Willi Fels's eightieth birthday, he felt desolate, despite being surrounded by family. A week after the festivities, he sat alone on the vine-covered veranda at Manono, 'stranded, useless and desperate'.<sup>4</sup> Creativity had deserted him and, after weeks of aimless drifting, his confidence in himself and his writing was in tatters. Not until now did he take action, cabling Mrs Lister-Kaye, the head of the school, that afternoon. Four days later he heard the welcome news that there would be a position open for him in September.

The immediate change in his outlook confirmed the importance of the Abbey school to him, although he had worked there for less than a year. 'I am enormously glad', he wrote to Scovell after the confirmation of his post, 'it meant so much to me'.<sup>5</sup> With the recovery of happiness came a renewed desire to write. 'In the time since I've known I am returning to the Abbey', he exulted, 'I've had a proper outburst of writing - nothing like it since the winter I was in Cornwall'.<sup>6</sup> Although taking second place to his writing, his interest in reading also returned. During his stays at Amberley he 'steadily' read the shorter poems of Browning: 'a great poet, really; though he too often lets rude rough vigour sweep away his sensitiveness'.<sup>7</sup>

The sense of lethargy he had had since arriving in New Zealand greatly contrasted with the purposeful life he had led at the Abbey. In this, as in all other aspects, he assessed the situation comparatively:

All this time the Abbey was never far from my mind, and often uppermost in it. I looked at New Zealand, and saw at the same time a green Buckinghamshire valley. Amid talk with my family or with friends I heard the voices of the Abbey children, of Lissie [Mrs Lister-Kaye], John [Crockett], Robert [Roger Cox].\* I was more closely tied to them at present than to anyone else. My family were roots, home, background, starting point, but I was not going to live out my life with them although I wanted to be near them, and if I had any future it must be found by going forward and in some sense leaving them behind.<sup>8</sup>

Still struggling to prove himself in the field of poetry, he had unexpectedly found a new identity for himself:

It was the first paid job I had had: I could call myself a school-teacher. This in itself, in my own eyes, gave me a place in society and allowed me to justify my existence.<sup>9</sup>

His preoccupation with 'naming' or proving himself was characteristic. So, too, was the way in which he first came to be employed at the Abbey - not by any deliberate decision on his part, but simply by a chance meeting which changed his life.

---

\* Throughout *Indirections*, for reasons of confidentiality, Brasch's friend Roger Cox, who spent a good deal of time at the Abbey and became very close to Lissie, is referred to as Robert Maddox.

## I

In the summer of 1936, Lesley's doctor had suggested that, until she was ready to make the long voyage to New Zealand, she should spend a few quiet months in the country. It was taken for granted that Brasch would accompany her and, as usual, he passively acquiesced. 'It was decided', he recalled, 'that I must take a house in the Chilterns'.<sup>10</sup> He had been reluctant to leave Cornwall, but was reasonably happy to make this move, for he knew that London life was not conducive to writing.

Late in the spring, when the vivid green grass of Primrose Hill was strewn with children and kites, he gave a 'house-cooling' party at St Edmund's Terrace. Friends and relations, New Zealanders, English, and German, gathered in the rooftop flat to chat, drink punch, and gaze out over the soft blue haze of London rooftops. Emily was there, keeping a concerned eye on Lel, and other New Zealanders turned up, including James Courage and Fred Page. There was something of an Oxford reunion, as old friends such as Joy Scovell, Reggie Howlett, Rosemary and Hal Summers, and Dora Zuntz met up to exchange their news.

There were significant gaps on the guest list: Colin Roberts, Jack Bennett, Ian Milner, and Leonie Zuntz were unable to come. Bertram was also away, in Peking. Despite these absences, the party was a happy occasion and marked the end of two enjoyable years. As the guests began to leave, there was a sudden thunderstorm, and refreshing rain banished the grey sultry heat which had contributed to Lel's fatigue.

In the last week of July, after a weekend visit to Gloucester with Colin, Brasch left London for the house in the Chilterns which he and Emily had found. A few days later, Lel was brought to join him. Little Abbey Cottage was situated near the village of Great Missenden, in a wide valley of fields and beech-woods. Lesley was too weak to go out, but

she remained stable, and Brasch was happy enough exploring the surrounding countryside. Friends came for day-trips from London, by train or by bus: Joy, Reggie, Elespie, Fred, Colin, Rosemary, Hal. In addition, the area offered some new and interesting acquaintances, for a number of sculptors and writers had formed a kind of colony nearby.\* This was the first time Brasch had encountered a closely-knit community whose main preoccupation was with their art. It was both heartening and beneficial to his own writing. In their company he felt that his poetry was a legitimate occupation, rather than the effeminate hobby his father scorned.

Although telling Scovell that he had 'written almost nothing; partly because of too many disturbances',<sup>11</sup> his mind was focused on poetry. Scovell had given him some of her work for comment and, sitting in the sun outside the cottage on long drowsy afternoons, he made detailed notes for her. While picking up the smallest inconsistencies in grammar, he also kept in mind the unified whole, and was once again struck by the personal vision at the heart of Joy's work. This, he regretfully acknowledged, was not a part of his own poetic abilities:

Anyone could write the kind of thing I write, if in different words; but your kind is single, and so your poems come to me as a discovery, more with a shock of delight than even possibly better poems do.<sup>12</sup>

Although disparaging about his own work, he was in fact waiting for a verdict from Macmillans on his first book. He had also been revising the New Zealand pieces written the previous winter in Cornwall. 'I think', he wrote to Joy with cautious optimism, 'most of the revisions mean improvement'.

Soon, however, he was to be offered the job at the Abbey school which would leave little time for writing. During the summer, he became friendly with Phyllis Chalker (generally

---

\* The group included the composer Edmund Rubbra, relatively unknown at that time.

known simply by her last name), who ran a café in the High Street of Great Missenden.\*

Through her he met many of the artistic crowd, and it was in her house that he first met Mrs Lister-Kaye, early the following year.†

By this time he and Lesley were settled back in London at No. 9 Worsley Road, only a few metres from Hampstead Heath. Emily, who had been a constant support in caring for Lel, had left for New Zealand with her daughter Elespie. A day-nurse had been hired but, as Lel's condition worsened, a companion and nurse called Lilian Brind moved into the house, allowing Brasch to spend short periods out of London. He was feeling increasingly trapped. Although stable, Lesley was emotionally vulnerable, and it was clear that there was little hope for a recovery.

His sense of duty prevented him from unburdening himself to anyone else. Emily's presence and practical help had been enormously reassuring but, after both she and Willi Fels had departed for New Zealand, the responsibility fell on his shoulders alone. He had never found decision-making easy; now, required to organise not only his own life but his sister's, he was racked with anxiety. Lel had placed all her confidence in a Dr McCarron, whose diagnoses and treatment Brasch did not trust. Although remaining adamant about procuring a second opinion, his lack of self-confidence made the ordeal worse:

It was painfully embarrassing for me as a young man without position or status to have to assert myself continually against a much older well-established man whom I could no longer trust. I should not have been able to bring myself to do so had Lel's life not been in question.<sup>13</sup>

---

\* The building which was once Tapping House is now a National Westminster Bank. The view from the rooms where Brasch later stayed is unspoilt, however, with rolling green hills and magnificent beech-woods.

† In 1940, visiting a friend living near Great Missenden, Brasch heard that the Tapping House was 'declining'. Chalker, now Phyllis Brookes, had married the Assistant Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, and they soon moved from the area (CB to JC, Crockett MS Papers 3944, 3).

The situation was still harder because of his difficulty in confiding in anyone. His actions revealed that he was deeply concerned about Lel; one of his pupils, Mary Potter,\* saw him as 'very gentle, kind, generous [...] very involved with his ailing sister'.<sup>14</sup> Yet even after Lel's death, he was unable to speak of it without 'prompting'.<sup>15</sup> And at the time, although surrounded by close friends, he remained characteristically reticent. Towards Lel, he was often short and cool. His journals were the only emotional outlet for his panic, which mounted throughout 1936 and 1937 as the illness worsened. He remained unable to reveal his fear, which he wrote of at last in his memoirs:

I felt so alarmed, so afraid of what I feared and of letting anyone else know it in case even mention of it should make it real or more likely, and so full of doubt about the doctors, that as a precaution I began keeping entries about Lel in my diary in Arabic - my crude pidgin Egyptian Arabic.<sup>16</sup>

As for his poetry, he had neither the time nor the energy to continue: 'inside, I felt like a pot always on the boil; I could not settle to read or write'.<sup>17</sup>

Early in 1937, he decided he needed a few days to clear his head, and physical exercise to relieve his tension. He returned to Missenden, this time to the village itself, to stay with Chalker and do some nearby walks. An uneventful meeting on his first afternoon there proved to be one of the most significant in his life:

while I stood talking to Chalker in her kitchen before going out, a tall upright middle-aged woman and a young man came in for tea.... Chalker introduced us, but I barely caught the names, which meant nothing to me. Later, I learnt they were the principal of the school next to our cottage of the summer before,

---

\* Née Bloomfield; she married the sculptor Donald Potter, one of the Missenden artists Brasch met during the summer of 1939 (refer *Ind.*, p. 269).

and one of her staff. As soon as Chalker had taken up the tea the principal, Mrs Lister-Kaye, said to her, 'Who was that man? Tell him I want him on my staff.'<sup>18</sup>

This 'abrupt challenge' was one which Brasch could not ignore. Lissie not only offered him work but a feasible compromise to the situation with Lel, for he longed to escape but felt that he should remain within easy reach of London.

Although he had been aware of the school - the old 'Abbey' buildings had backed onto the cottage he had stayed in the previous summer - he had known little about it. Lissie and her staff, however, had been interested in their neighbours; they had glimpsed Brasch over the wall several times and 'thought he looked interesting'.<sup>19</sup> Now he talked with Lissie over a pub-meal at the Plough in Speen, and heard what his duties would be. He was not only to provide academic tuition but was to be a support to the pupils: the Abbey was a school for children who were psychologically disturbed or had behavioural problems.

Having tentatively agreed to the proposal, he returned to London. Winter began to give way to spring, and buds appeared on the plane trees. On still blue evenings he escaped the sick-room for walks on the Heath with friends, and went occasionally to the theatre. On the last day in March, Rosemary and Hal were married;<sup>\*</sup> that night, after the wedding, Brasch crossed from Newhaven to Dieppe, bound for Florence. Travelling by train through France, he passed with a rush of recognition into Italy. He had leapt at the invitation to meet Emily and Elespie there; they were taking a final tour of Europe before sailing for New Zealand. Agnes, too, stayed with them at an hotel on the Lungarno, between the Ponte Vecchio and the Ponte Santa Trinità. Brasch's room, 'fittingly', looked onto the Piazza del Limbo.<sup>20</sup> Over the past year and a half, he had felt 'neither bound nor free',<sup>21</sup> these few weeks provided a break from the mundane routine which had become his life.

---

\* They went to live at South Hill Park, only a short walk across the lower Heath from Worsley Road.

Under these circumstances, Florence seemed more beautiful than ever. The sudden release from personal stress made him acutely aware of the advent of spring, which coaxed the white blossom out on the fruit trees and decked the lilacs with sweet purple. Having been away from Italy for some years, he rediscovered his passion for its culture:

I was swept once again into the heady flood of Florence, churches, galleries, palaces, streets and gardens, all of them seeming more vivid because themselves gathered up into the great flood of spring.<sup>22</sup>

All too soon it was over. Leaving the independent Agnes to journey to Rome, and the others to head south, he detoured to Bologna and the towns of the Po valley, eking out his remaining time in Italy before finally journeying to London. He was reluctant to return to Lel and take up the burden of responsibility once more. Never having taught before, he was apprehensive about the prospect of starting at the Abbey in May. Over the past few years, he had discovered in himself an increasing need for solitude, but Lissie had specified that all staff were to live in the school grounds. Apart from at Waitaki and Oxford, he had not lived in any kind of close-knit community, and so this also worried him. Once back in London, although greatly dubious, he confirmed the final arrangements, and made the now-familiar journey to Missenden.

He was to teach the top class, consisting of seven or eight pupils, in a variety of subjects, from the familiar ground of English and history to biology, of which he was self-confessedly ignorant. His other class had only four pupils, one boy and three girls, who were retarded learners and had to be 'occupied rather than taught'.<sup>23</sup> Ostensibly the school provided instruction in the usual subjects and prepared pupils for external examinations, but it was far

from a conventional teaching institution. Lissie believed it was the freest school in England after A. S. Neill's renowned Summerhill School in Suffolk.\*

Staff were free to experiment with methods of tuition, provided they covered the required material. Lessons were for the morning only, and on three afternoons a week there was an hour of communal music; the rest of the time was for recreation. As at Summerhill, where the motto was 'freedom without licence', regulations were few, and there was no form of hierarchy between staff or pupils. Children and adults alike addressed each other by their first names. Even the principal, Mrs Lister-Kaye, had no more authority than any other member of staff - apart from her compelling personality.<sup>24</sup> She was known to all as 'Lissie', for she intensely disliked her real name of Violet and 'kept [it] under wraps'.<sup>25</sup>

In an article on the school for *Tomorrow* in 1938, Brasch stated: 'Prohibitions or rules are of the fewest, and concern little more than meal-times and bedtimes, attendance in class, and going outside the school grounds'.<sup>26</sup> In practice, as at Summerhill, attendance at lessons was voluntary. The rule of remaining within the grounds, however, was one which the students had little difficulty in keeping. Aged between four and eighteen, numbering between twenty and thirty at different times, most stayed at the Abbey of their own free will:

For nearly all of them the Abbey was the home they had never known, a community of trust and love in which for the first time they felt valued in their own right and so felt secure. It was the Abbey, the community, that 'cured' the child.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the children were from wealthy backgrounds; either their parents could not cope with them, or had mistreated them. The fees paid by the families of these pupils helped to

---

\* Bennett notes in his copy of *Indirections* (p. 229) that he, Bertram, and Brasch visited Summerhill in July 1935, travelling by car from Oxford to visit Bertram's close friend and one-time girlfriend Jackie Martin, who was teaching there.

keep the school afloat financially. Most students were from under-privileged circumstances, from which Lissie had 'rescued' them.

Soon, despite his own sheltered upbringing, and his fear of not belonging, Brasch was happier than he had been for a long time. Both Lissie and the children took him entirely at face value: external factors such as social standing were irrelevant in this small, unconventional community. Unburdened by expectations for the first time in his life, he became confident and gregarious.\* In the evenings, although he rarely drank, he would take the boyish Crockett (who was the Art Master) and other members of staff to the pub. They would return to the Abbey shortly after closing-time filling the quiet country night with tuneless but enthusiastic song.<sup>28</sup> Brasch became popular with students, staff, and visitors alike, who saw 'an earnest young man keen on literature',<sup>29</sup> personable, and always interested in the welfare of others.

Although he wrote short poems in the children's autograph books, and came up with dramas for them to act out, he remained reticent about his writing. His favourite pupil, Connie Picton, sent a copy of his article home for her mother to read, adding the postscript: 'Charles doesn't know we have read it - he is too shy, so don't mention it to Lissie or anyone'.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, he was learning to trust others, for which he credited the atmosphere at the Abbey:

Our instinctive reserves, or rather the reserves we had built up in self-defence in a critical or unfriendly world, these fell away.<sup>31</sup>

The discovery that he was good at teaching, that he was respected as a tutor, increased his ability to communicate both with new acquaintances and old friends. For a time, at least, his

---

\* The style in which he recounts his time at the Abbey in *Indirections* is markedly more assertive than elsewhere in his memoirs.

barrier of reserve, built up over long years, was swept away by the extraordinarily liberated attitudes within this community:

Before long, I began to feel that I had learned more about myself and the world in a short time at the Abbey than in the whole of my life hitherto. I was seeing people and the world in a new light, seeing beyond or through the surface of appearances, interpreting people's talk and actions in terms of their unacknowledged, often unconscious or only half-conscious, motives and intentions.... it was as if I had been given an open sesame to expose the hidden springs of life. All at once I wanted to tell my friends that I understood them as never before, that I saw why they acted as they did....<sup>32</sup>

His friends visited often, sometimes for a day, sometimes a few days. Roger Cox, Brasch's friend from the Egyptology Society, came particularly frequently and eventually began living at the Abbey. Leonie visited from Oxford one sunny weekend in July, and Scovell also spent a couple of days there, departing with the impression that Brasch was extremely happy: 'Anything a little unconventional suited him'.<sup>33</sup>

She was surprised at the level of freedom given to the teenage girls, who formed attachments to the mostly male, mostly young, members of staff. Brasch was aware of this and took care to maintain a distance from his pupils, particularly from Sybil (one of the older girls) who did her best to attract him.\* When he returned to New Zealand in 1938, she wrote intensely and frequently to him, which he took with good-humoured tolerance:

Sybil's first ardour of letter writing [he wrote to John] has gone; it is two months, I suppose, since I heard from her, and I hope it means she is much better.<sup>34</sup>

---

\* Brasch remained friendly but detached from her, even when, returning to his sunny white room one day after lunch, he found the half-French sixteen-year-old stretched full-length on his bed.

She was to keep in touch with him long after they both left the Abbey. Married, with a baby, she visited him several times in London during the war.

His attitude to his other, less troublesome, students was a similar mixture of protectiveness and objectivity. In his memoirs he described them as if they were characters in a novel: Mary, with her 'supple grace' and pale face and hair; Hazel, 'open-hearted, kind ... and trustworthy'; Lettsie, 'large, pretty, vivacious', who suffered from depression and later committed suicide; Connie (who arrived at the Abbey at the same time as he did) 'handsome, dark-haired, pink-cheeked', who became his favourite and a friend for life.<sup>35</sup>

But he had problems of his own. Lel's health remained precarious and despite his new-found happiness he continued to feel irritation, guilt, and fear. During his first weeks at the Abbey, he travelled to London almost every afternoon to see her or to make necessary arrangements for her care, returning to Missenden late at night. After these tiring days, the Abbey community was a solace:

It was a wonderful relief from all that pain and anxiety and the fevered pressure of London to get out of the train at Great Missenden and walk through the cool dewy still night home - for the Abbey very soon became my present home.<sup>36</sup>

It was not long before he felt deeply attached to his new world. Unwillingly returning to New Zealand early in 1938, he greatly missed the Abbey, writing to Crockett:

I wandered about aimlessly all through the middle of the day, looking down into the harbour or over the plain, reading the paper in the shade of rocks, trying to read other things too, and undergoing one of my fits of despair and homesickness for the Abbey. It was so bad that I thought of the stupidest things, even of cabling to ask Lissie if she'd have me back.... Sometimes I think of what you are all doing just then, in bed asleep, or sitting

by the fire in Lissie's white room. I get like this especially when the world seems a hell, because of myself or because of all the horror in it.<sup>37</sup>

After only eight months, the large stone house with its lively inhabitants had become 'home', Lissie, Crockett, and Roger Cox three of the closest friends he had. Two of these friendships were to prove a mixed blessing, as he discovered shortly after arriving back in England in the autumn of 1938.

## II

At Summerhill, art was the one class which pupils attended willingly: on these afternoons they ran riot, took off their clothes, and threw powder paint at each other. The Abbey encouraged its students to express themselves in a less radical way. Painting was the emphasized medium, and the artist John Crockett was to help the children by example. At eighteen, straight out of Goldsmith College, Crockett was nine years younger than Brasch, but the two became lifelong friends.

In temperament, they could not have been less alike. Crockett was lively and impulsive, full of a driving energy which found its outlet not only in painting but in acting, dancing, designing, and producing drama. His political beliefs were similar to Brasch's but more extreme. He declared himself a Communist, and drew caricatures of capitalists and soldiers. Brasch, who rarely articulated his vague left-wing principles, steered clear of political poetry, even in the 1930s when it was one of the most prominent styles.

Both had suffered repressive upbringings, but their reactions had significantly differed. Crockett's father, an officer in the army, wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Rather than passively submit to these plans (as Brasch had with Hyam's), Crockett's reaction had been one of 'violent revolt'.<sup>38</sup> He had left home, started at Goldsmith's in 1936, and from then on had decided that his life would revolve around art.

Tall, with dark curly hair and a boyish face, he looked as youthful as one of his own pupils. They adored him and, as Lissie emphasized creative rather than didactic methods, they watched him paint and copied his example. In his article on the Abbey, Brasch wrote of Crockett's gift for inspiring his students:

One of the staff has always been a painter, and seeing him at work [the children] wish to paint, too; once they start, his judicious encouragement is enough to spur them on, but there is no art teaching of any kind. He never criticises unless questioned directly; but the children often ask him to suggest subjects, and their imaginations generally work best on mythological or biblical ones which it is unlikely they have seen represented. Much of their work is amazingly vivid and beautiful, as children's work can be when they are not spoiled by a deadening routine of conventional life and figure drawing.<sup>39</sup>

Before coming to Little Missenden, Crockett had lived with a community of Anglican priests (after his marriage to Anne Stern in 1940, he formed his own 'Community' in Cornwall). By nature and inclination, he was far better suited to the communal Abbey life than Brasch. Forging relationships came easily to him, and he soon overcame Brasch's diffidence to become a close friend.

The relationship had the potential to be one of pupil and mentor: Crockett was excitable and at times foolhardy, Brasch steady and dependable. But Brasch had far too much respect for Crockett - both personal and artistic - for this imbalance to occur. He in no way attempted

to curb his friend's impetuous nature, only fearing for his 'ability to live - to ride out the dangerous demanding world'. In appropriately dramatic imagery, he described Crockett as

being so possessed by waves of inarticulate rage against the world in general and especially his own upbringing that he seemed like those figures in the Gospels who fall to the ground incapable, foaming at the mouth, before Jesus drives the devil out of them.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the 'rage', however, beyond the effervescence, there was another side to Crockett:

[He] was at heart a gentle and tender creature with a marked Franciscan strain of love for all creation, when he could allow this to express itself.<sup>41</sup>

A mutual dedication to art strengthened the friendship between Brasch and Crockett, as did their respect for each other's creative talent. Like Scovell, Crockett was certain that Brasch would be a successful poet, and his support and practical advice (for he became the recipient of many manuscript poems) was immensely encouraging. At the time of their meeting in 1937, Crockett too was unknown, although he had a greater self-confidence than Brasch. His merit as a painter was recognized by his teachers at Goldsmith's but, at such a young age, his future was uncertain, and to support himself as an artist impossible. Brasch showed a reciprocal faith in his talent, and began to buy works which appealed to him, adding them to a growing collection of paintings which he shipped back to New Zealand after the war.\*

---

\* The majority of these paintings are now housed in the Hocken Library in Dunedin.

His first purchase was as early as 1937, after only a few months' acquaintance with John. Roger Cox, his Egyptologist friend, had offered to buy a large painting of Crockett's, only to back out of it when Douglas Glass (another New Zealander, and a painter himself) had decried it. Brasch, with some diffidence, stepped into the fray, buying the picture himself and donating it to the Abbey. A few days before leaving for New Zealand, he wrote to Crockett and, with anxious tact, explained the situation which was made more awkward by Roger's state of mental health:

I think Lissie was really excited about the picture; she feels, as I do, that it is so perfectly right in its place above the mantelpiece. Lissie thought we should not tell Roger only because I am going away and he might take it badly; if I were staying on it would not matter. But I think that after a few months you may be able to tell him, if he is still curious - perhaps also if his treatment goes on and he is more balanced. Then he may understand; besides, at the Abbey he can always see it, and in a better position than any he could have found for it.

I'm awfully sorry about your row....<sup>\*42</sup>

When asked for his critical opinion, he gave advice to Crockett in the same detail as he did to Scovell. This was almost always concerning artwork but, in 1941, Crockett sent him some poetry. In literary matters (as hopeful contributors to *Landfall* were to discover) Brasch never allowed friendship to take precedence over critical judgement. His reply to Crockett's letter was encouraging but candid:

As for the writings, I don't feel they are suitable for publication; because while they are obviously valuable to you - and it is that, after all, which matters most - they don't seem to me to be objectified, they're only half-born, as it were, they remain partly in you still and one sees you where one should be seeing the object itself.... Is your intention in these pieces clear to yourself?

---

\* Further bad feeling between the two occurred a couple of years later, when Crockett began a double portrait of Brasch and Cox. Already cold towards Crockett for various reasons, Cox refused to go through with the final sitting (refer *Ind.*, p. 352 and Plate 46; the portrait is reproduced in *Islands* 5 (Spring, 1973)).

If so it doesn't come across yet, and there's no single level, no consistent tone in them, as if they sprang from different levels of consciousness - or unconsciousness.<sup>43</sup>

When criticising art, he was naturally less sure of himself, and at times he revealed an unswerving loyalty owing more to friendship than discrimination. Writing from New Zealand in 1938, he made much of his ignorance in the area of painting, presumably to explain away negative reactions to some of Crockett's work. 'I shall be delighted to see your big picture, particularly as I liked the design so much', he enthused,

but I doubt whether I've progressed much in understanding, so you must bear with me when I'm plain stupid, or cold, and know that I do believe in you even if the picture is beyond me. It was to my own surprise that I came to like so much Lissie's abstract; so perhaps there's a little hope for me.<sup>44</sup>

Although his first purchase of Crockett's work had been to divert ill-feeling, his motives for buying his friend's paintings were not purely philanthropical. After this, he bought only those works that he liked and, as his confidence increased and his intimacy with Crockett grew, he became less afraid of giving constructive criticism. In 1941, contemplating buying a small picture of St Paul, he suggested an alteration:

I was rejoiced to get the photo of St Paul, and even though it is not a good photo the picture excites me in a strange way I can't define, just as it did when I first saw it, and more perhaps than any other of yours. So I am very grateful for the photo. I must add, tho', that the angel's beard still disturbs me; it looks rather like a smear, not definitely enough a beard.... Weren't you going to make it curl, like his hair?<sup>\*45</sup>

---

\* He eventually bought the picture for the sum of £3 or £4.

When he thought Crockett's work excellent, he was unstinting with his praise and expansive about the effect it had on him. Shortly after purchasing the picture of St Paul, he bought a small gouache portraying three helmeted soldiers, which he considered some of the best art to emerge from the wasteland of war. In August 1941, he wrote to Crockett of his impatience to have 'the soldiers' returned from Robertson's, who were framing the two pictures:

I didn't want to part with the soldiers at all, but wanted to keep them here and see them every day, as I did for a week after bringing them back. They held me completely; nothing else seemed as strong and compelling.... Oh yes, John, I think you have created something very fine in that picture; it is as though it had burst out of you after a long period of intense concentrated feeling and thought. To me it is the most moving - the most humanly moving - of the war. And I am grateful for it.<sup>46</sup>

He gained not only pleasure from Crockett's work but also inspiration. Witnessing the process of painting appealed to him on two counts: aesthetic and personal; knowing the artist gave an added perspective. Among the manuscript poems he sent to John, after they had left the Abbey, were pieces based on his friend's paintings.\*

After the Abbey school collapsed due to financial difficulties, both Brasch and Crockett remained in touch with Lissie. In 1939, they stayed at her house in Hampshire for some months to give her emotional and financial support. Despite a fraught atmosphere,<sup>†</sup> both attempted to pursue their artistic careers. When Crockett gave up his twelve-hour days working as a cowman on the neighbouring farm, he began work on a large portrait of a woman's uplifted face. Brasch was finding it almost impossible to write, not having 'enough

---

\* The technique of basing a poem on a painting was one with which he was newly experimenting. Thirty years later, he wrote 'Huinga September', based on Toss Woollaston's work, and 'Six Water-colours' on Doris Lusk's (both in *Home Ground*, (1974)).

† Refer Chapter VI, Section II, pp. 227-32.

continuous uninterrupted time',<sup>47</sup> and disturbed by Lissie's increasing hostility towards them. But he maintained a clear image of Crockett's painting in his head and, over a year later, he sent his friend a hand-written copy of a recently composed poem based on the picture.\*

Unusually for him, he had not laboured over alterations before allowing John to see it; he now trusted Crockett enough to read it in this early stage. But his deprecatory comments in an accompanying letter indicated that he was not yet satisfied:

I have something to send you, too - a poem about the painting that I call Head and lifted hands: the one that Lissie thought was of her. I only wrote it last week, so that I may find it needs altering when I get to know it better, but I send it to you now as an offering, whether worthless or not; you'd better say what you think of it.<sup>48</sup>

Crockett approved, and the poem appeared seven years later in Brasch's second collection, *Disputed Ground*. The working title had been discarded in favour of 'Grieving Head'; its subtitle, 'A painting by John Crockett', acknowledged the personal debt. Disparities between the first manuscript, a typescript sent to Crockett some months later, and the published version of 1948 were slight. The original structure was kept, and only single words or phrases were altered. 'A moon's dead light' had become 'a moon's dead refulgence', for example. 'Eyes that the sun has nurtured' was more vividly expressed as 'Eyes from the sun first lighted'.

It remained a dense poem, neither as accessible nor compelling as Brasch's landscape poems. Each of its three verses consists of lengthy, formally expressed sentences and the tone is sombre:

---

\* See Appendix, p. 349.

... O you,  
 Amazed and grieving head and horror-idle hands,  
 You, only arbiter of time and territories,  
 You it is who ordain the ages, the man-destroying  
 Desert; for all the sands can never staunch your tears,  
 Nor all the mortal years of silence still your voice.<sup>49</sup>

When Brasch started this poem, the war had just begun, and there seemed no imminent end to the darkness. Consequently, the original manuscript paints an even more foreboding picture than the final version. Crockett's figure is not merely a witness to but has the power to order 'the fatality of ages'. The life behind the fearful eyes 'from one heart-beat to the next is stricken/ With horror that impels more urgently the heart'.<sup>50</sup>

Despite a wordy surface, certain phrases achieve an appropriately pictorial quality. The poem's opening is particularly arresting:

Cold is the sunflower face now, and the hands aware of desolation  
 Lift with amazed parting of finger; cold that face  
 With a moon's dead refulgence, and wide in unendurable  
 Apprehension are the eyes....

Where human features and natural ones are linked, Crockett's vision is successfully reproduced in words:

Eyes from the sun first lighted, wind-instructed hands  
 And wandering-ivy fingers, let not dismay deceive you.  
 Death only by your looking lives, and by your feeling  
 Touch is dead, is still; you feel the rocks, the mounded  
 Breasts of sand....

Time and again Brasch draws on the physical world for his imagery, creating the impression of a primal link between the central figure and the forces of Nature. This 'wind-spirit' is both possessed by and controls the breezes; it has the power to shake the rains from the 'impotent' clouds.

Crockett's painting was not the only one of his talents to provide Brasch with inspiration: 'He was capable in many ways, as actor, dancer, choreographer, designer, producer'.<sup>51</sup> When plays and dances were put on at the Abbey for visitors (a frequent occurrence), Crockett was always actively involved.\* As well as these amateur projects, he was part of a semi-professional dance troupe in London and, after leaving the Abbey, he formed two travelling theatre companies (for which he persuaded Brasch to write scripts)<sup>†</sup>. Two poems, 'The actor' and 'The dancer', stand as testimony to Brasch's admiration for Crockett's varied talents. Neither poem was published, but both are evidence of Brasch's growing conviction that all forms of art work to the same end: 'above all [they are] communicators'.<sup>‡52</sup>

Around the time of starting at the Abbey, he had begun to take an increased interest in dance. He had been immensely impressed by the London performance of the Russian ballet, and once again connected this art with the natural world. The 'beauty and vigour of the dancers', he thought, brought the ballet alive in the same way that the seasons transformed the familiar woods around Hampstead Heath.<sup>53</sup> With Bertram and Bennett, he had frequently visited Covent Garden to see the company of Monte Carlo. 'In the summer of '35', Bennett recalled, 'we went night after night, queuing for tickets'.<sup>54</sup>

It was in the mid-1930s, too, that Brasch first saw Indian dancing, which quickly became a passion. After seeing a company at the Savoy with Joy, he then saw Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and 'all the Indian dancing [he] could hear of'.<sup>55</sup> The appeal of this dance was quite different from that of stylised ballet; he saw it to be an integral part of an everyday existence,

---

\* Brasch himself wrote a short play for the children to perform.

† Refer Chapter VIII.

‡ The culmination of this belief is found in Brasch's essay *Present Company* (1966).

and to express the 'life of the fields and the seasons'. In words close to those he had used after seeing an exhibition of Chinese art a year earlier, he stated: 'No other form of art I knew exercised a more powerful spell'.

He learnt more about dance after meeting Crockett, whom he and Bertram accompanied to a performance by a troupe of Javanese dancers. Through Crockett's dance-drama group in London,<sup>\*</sup> he saw the production process first-hand. Watching his friend dance, he was struck by the indivisible links between artistic and natural forms. 'The dancer: for John Crockett' was the result of his new knowledge.

The poem was written during the summer of 1939, which he spent staying in a cottage on the Berkshire downs. For Crockett's troupe he sketched the draft of a ballet;<sup>†</sup> for Crockett, he worked considerably harder and came up with the manuscript of 'The dancer'.<sup>‡</sup> This he sent diffidently to Crockett: 'The dancer is for you, suggested by you; I don't think it is much good, but you might as well see it'.<sup>56</sup> In it, he expresses a reverence for an art form whose elemental strength is close to nature's. Like the figure in 'Grieving Head', the dancer is both owned by and part of the natural world: 'A power not his possesses him'. The human body is an agent for the expression of these forces, which brings life to its empty form:

Suddenly into the loose and drooping limbs  
Leaps an invisible torrent of wind,  
Whirls them, and is still to listen, climbs  
The ringing sky, then crouches to the ground.<sup>57</sup>

Arms are 'freed by the sun', hands are connected with the air: 'Wings in the fluttering hands pass overhead'. Dance, Brasch implies, is a more instinctive art form than any other, and

---

<sup>\*</sup> Formed by a woman called Margaret Barr, whom he helped with various business and personal contacts when she emigrated to New Zealand several years later.

<sup>†</sup> This came to nothing, as the style did not appeal to Barr.

<sup>‡</sup> See Appendix, p. 350.

more easily enables escape from a 'hesitant half-existing world'. With a body charged by motion, the dancer enters a superior sphere, and comes to know Rilke's 'real relationship'.

Now, for the first time, Brasch's writing began to show the influence of Eliot. Since Oxford, his initial negativity had been gradually replaced by a grudging respect both for Eliot's system of thought and his manner of expression. The implied foundation of 'The dancer' is similar to the concept of the universal dance. Stillness is achieved through motion, and individuality through the renouncing of identity. Brasch's dancer is 'balance and is flux'; he is 'released like daybreak out of gathered night'.\*

The ability to embody opposites is a theme also focused on in 'The actor', the second poem for Crockett.† Man is once more portrayed as an empty form, given shape and identity only by his chosen art:

These vast heroic figures that you wear  
Like masks, and fill with breath, make you seem small;  
But do they not really serve you, let you share  
The life in which you've no task to perform.  
No true identity, no boundary wall,  
An energy without a proper form?<sup>58</sup>

There is an increased emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the relationship between human form and external powers. The 'nightly selves' the actor plays are brought to life by him: they flame into being and die 'like magnesium flares'. But he is, too, a slave to his art. Expressing multiple identities places him in some kind of bondage:

... they consume your life; you give your power  
Wholly to them, and all that's left of you  
Is but a shadow, moving from flower to flower  
Bee-like, to fertilize them and renew.

---

\* This theme is expressed more fully in *Present Company*, where Brasch refutes Pater's claim that music is the purest of all art forms, and states that dance is the 'life-rhythm' to which all other arts move (p. 30).

† See Appendix, p. 350.

The poem ends by returning to the question of these multiple identities:

But do they not really serve you, let you share  
 The life in which you've no task to perform,  
 No true identity, no boundary wall,  
 An energy without a proper form?

In these lines Brasch's own voice is clearly heard, for the quest for a stable sense of self was a growing preoccupation with him. Seeing his identity as 'unfixed' and 'fluctuating',<sup>59</sup> he began to realize the fundamental paradox of writing about it. By addressing it in his poetry, he was discovering it by creating 'small islands of meaning'. An entire section of *Not Far Off* (1969) is devoted to this theme, with poems such as 'Man Missing', 'Ergo Sum', 'At Pistol Point', and 'Bonnet and Plume'. 'The actor', composed thirty years earlier, represents his first attempt at solving this complex problem.

Elements in the later works are strongly reminiscent of the two poems written for Crockett in the 1930s. The multiple selves of 'The actor' become in 'Ergo Sum' (more succinctly), 'a self and its leaf-selves'.<sup>60</sup> Nature, central in 'The dancer', remains the principal source of imagery, the changeable face of the elements providing a metaphor for the human condition. In 'Ergo Sum' the image of a tree, used earlier to represent the dancer's arms, is again central in symbolising the self:

Pretences, discontents -  
 Leaves of my raging tree....

Who am I to command  
 A self and its leaf-selves  
 Living dispersed through all  
 With the salt grains of the sea?  
 I follow, obeying a word

That leads in whirling dance  
Through the cloud of days  
And the cries of living and dead  
To the last leaf-burning.

The cry for release is far more anguished than in 'The dancer' and 'The actor'. Both earlier poems, however, foreshadow the message of 'Ergo Sum': that a surrender of the self remains the only way to salvation. Thus the actor gains life by imitating the lives of others, the dancer by springing from shape to shape; and, twenty years on, the poet who created both figures is saved by the very forces which threaten to destroy him:

It is you keep me warm  
In the chill fever of  
Mood-modes I must try on,  
Daily, hourly practising.

The self becomes stronger by being 'scattered/ In many'. Even doubt, by its very continuity, is self-confirming.

Crockett - artistic, impulsive, changeable - embodied an attitude to life which Brasch had rarely encountered before: a conscious choice to achieve security through insecurity. His friendship validated Brasch's earlier decision to turn his back on business, and comforted him as he faced a less stable career. It was unsurprising that such a friendship provided him with not only support but also inspiration for his writing.

## III

In May 1938, Brasch received an alarming cable which had been forwarded from Dunedin to Christchurch. It was from Crockett: the Abbey (which from the start had been managed inefficiently and uneconomically) was threatened with court action from a creditor. His response to the request was immediate. He sent Lissie £100 - the full sum owed - and spent a 'racked' weekend, hoping that his gift would arrive in time to save the school.

Long after the event, Crockett explained his action by stating that Brasch was the 'only person we knew who could and would provide financial assistance'.<sup>61</sup> Far from being affronted, Brasch regarded his handout as little more than a gesture to people who had given him less tangible but equally vital support. 'I wrote to [Lissie] that I could lend her some more money if she could accept it', he confided to John: 'thank God I can do at least that'.<sup>62</sup>

The following year he had occasion to offer Crockett himself financial help. The restless young artist had left the Abbey and was in what he described as an 'economic crisis',<sup>63</sup> his mother refusing to keep him at home because she disapproved of his pacifist stance. In Honolulu at the time, Brasch had just made the difficult decision to return to wartime England rather than travel on with his father to the relative safety of New Zealand. He was unsettled and afraid, and about to leave for New York, but he had time to worry about Crockett's plight. He wrote offering encouragement and advice: 'if, later, the human in [your mother] reasserts itself, you must be prepared to forgive'.<sup>64</sup> He also offered assistance of a more practical kind:

You are to use this cheque without scruple: I can't get the money out of England, so it is useless to me until I come back.

And if you want more, will you tell me? You know how it would hurt me if I think you're starving; and I shall have between £60 and £70 in the bank now, after paying a few bills.

Three weeks later, lingering in New York, he had heard nothing from John. He wrote again expressing hope that the cheque had reached England safely and, unsure of how bad the situation was, exclaimed: 'I hope to God you've had money for food'.<sup>65</sup> Having secure finances, he was always ready to share them with friends who gave him what he considered to be a far more precious gift.

Yet he longed to acknowledge his debt to Crockett creatively as well as pragmatically, and for this reason alone was tempted to stay in New York. Henriette Herz, his literary agent friend, not only provided practical advice, but she offered to help him find work if staying in America. He had no such professional help in England and he feared that returning there - particularly if he was engaged in war-work or drafted into the army - would mean he had no time or energy for writing.

Although the past few months had been a blur of hotel rooms and ship's cabins, ports and railway stations, the desire to write and write well remained undiminished. The focus of his writing was to be, yet again, a work dedicated to Crockett. Leaving England, he had taken with him one of John's drawings (for which he insisted on paying). 'It is very satisfactory', he wrote the day before he sailed for America, 'to have something of yours with me'.<sup>66</sup> He was afraid, he said, that 'The dancer' would not give equal pleasure: 'maybe one day I'll write you something worthier'. His job at the Abbey, although hugely rewarding, had taken up so much of his time that he had had little opportunity for writing. Over the next few unsettled months, however, the work he had 'pent up' over the past year and a half was able to emerge.<sup>67</sup>

En route to Hawaii in July, he spent two humid weeks in New York, staying at Allerton House (the small hotel where he and Bertram had stayed the previous year).<sup>\*</sup> Wanting to escape the heat and the crowds, he headed north to the village of Woodstock, deep in the Catskill Mountains. Here, in a small inn, he spent five quiet days trying to learn how to write again. After spending his first morning struggling with something that was 'hopeless', he took refuge in his usual way: by pouring out his despair in a letter to Crockett.<sup>68</sup> Four days later, however, back in the cauldron of New York, he felt he had achieved something. 'It has shown me', he wrote happily to John, 'that I can go on writing, that there's something which will come out, given the chance'.<sup>69</sup>

Waiting for him in New York, a letter from Crockett (a rare enough occurrence) added to his mood of optimism. After spending the evening wandering through the emptying streets, thinking of all he had left behind in England, he returned to his small plain hotel room and began a reply. His letter grew over several days as he digested, and responded to, John's comments. Most were encouraging, for Crockett was a firm believer in his friend's literary skills. Unusually for him, he advised patience; the more patient Brasch answered: 'Yes, you are right: I am just beginning'.<sup>70</sup> It was difficult to remain philosophical, when a collection of his poems had just been rejected by Faber's, and his thirtieth birthday - which he saw as a watershed - was fast approaching. But Crockett's words heartened him, and he replied:

It is shameful only to be beginning at my age - I shall be thirty in less than a week, the best part of life wasted and nothing to show for it. Yet it doesn't seem to matter; I want to make the most of it now, and it is now that counts.

---

<sup>\*</sup> In a letter to Mrs Bertram, he jokingly described Allerton House as 'a most respectable but quite pleasant hotel' (25 August [1938]).

Two days later, he was again in need of emotional support. Allerton House was only a few blocks away from Henriette's apartment and, the day before he was due to leave for Hawaii, he was invited there for lunch. Sitting in her shady garden-courtyard, sipping on cool drinks, they began to talk not only of Brasch's potential as a poet but also of his personal future. As often happened with Henriette, the discussion became alarmingly frank:

She asked me if I was content to write poetry. She did not think one could be quite honest in poetry ... because it is too easy to evade, to escape into beautiful phrases; but prose is merciless, there one must have material, facts, and must be honest about them.

[She] then asked, did I want a job, because one becomes rooted in life only, or best, through a job. However, she thought marriage would solve all my problems - with which my father would have agreed....<sup>71</sup>

He liked Henriette too much, and valued her literary opinion too highly, to take offence. But her advice on his writing and his future, conflicting with his own vacillating feelings, meant that he left in a daze. 'It shook me up so much', he wrote to Crockett that evening,

that when I went to the Metropolitan to look at Italian pictures I felt exhausted, and couldn't look properly; and the only thing to do seemed to come back and write it all to you.<sup>72</sup>

The lunch had begun with talk of James Bertram, who had returned to China earlier in the year. Henriette was Bertram's literary agent, and it was through him that she and Brasch had first met, in the summer of 1938. Despite her directness, Brasch now found her easier to confide in than Bertram, who had become increasingly unsympathetic over his indirect approach to a career. The difference in their attitudes had already been made clear several

years earlier. At the end of 1935, as Bertram was leaving for China and Brasch for Cornwall, there was a feeling of unease between them. 'I felt it keenly', Brasch recalled,

when we said goodbye a week before Christmas at Piccadilly Circus, after lunching together, and in a rather matter-of-fact tone, with a half wry expression, he hoped that my 'literary plans' would go well; while I wanted to take him in my arms and exchange a word of blessing, and could not.<sup>73</sup>

By 1939, the disparity in their temperaments had become even more apparent:

[James] and I seemed to be living on remotely different planets, and his, though he does not know it (I told myself), was somehow hostile to mine. I found it hard to talk to him, feeling that there was nothing to say, that I was utterly desolate.... James had always to be in the thick of events; he was a personification of action. And that was not completely real to me, yet I had to admit to myself that he might represent a reality from which I wanted to escape.<sup>74</sup>

Compounding the problem was the fact that Bertram had reservations about Brasch's first book. Brasch attempted to make light of this in a letter to James's mother but his joking tone could not conceal the sting:

Jim, by the way, doesn't think my poems make a satisfactory book - in which I daresay he's quite right; so perhaps you will think the same. Therefore don't be afraid to be critical!<sup>75</sup>

Others noticed the widening gulf in experience and ambitions: Rosemary and Hal saw Bertram to be generally supportive of Brasch but not '*sympatica*' [sic] with him.<sup>76</sup> From being soulmates, he and Bertram had become friends with a shared past.

As his old school-friend failed him, struggling to find his poetic voice, he turned increasingly frequently to Crockett for support. 'You are the only person with whom I can talk over these things', he wrote in 1939, on board ship between Hawaii and San Francisco:

even Joy, though she would understand, sees them differently, because I think her problems are solved within, silently, and she does not have our outward more tangible struggle. She is a purer artist because all her problems fuse and are of one kind, whereas I am distracted by a multitude of differing ones.<sup>77</sup>

During his time at Oxford, his primary correspondent had been Bertram; now, trying to come to a decision about his future, he poured out his thoughts to the more sympathetic Crockett.

The trip to Hawaii had been arranged to please his father, who took it for granted that his son would return to New Zealand with him. Brasch's feelings about this plan, which he expressed to Crockett rather than Hyam, were mixed:

It might be more honest of me to go on to N. Z. simply because I am afraid of it and likely, maybe, though I don't know how, to lose myself there. England is easy, because there I am relatively adjusted, in a world I know. N. Z., though also my world, is an unknown one.<sup>78</sup>

The friendship with Crockett that had grown up over the past year had made leaving more difficult. 'As I missed the Abbey last year I shall miss you this time', he wrote from his London hotel room, regarding his packed trunk with his usual pre-travel nerves: 'it was what England meant to me then, and you will be now'.<sup>79</sup>

Part of the intensity of this new friendship lay in a need to be needed. Both Colin and Joy were self-sufficient. Colin, a true scholar, was absorbed in his Egyptology, and Joy, although sharing the same preoccupation with poetry as Brasch, was always self-contained. Crockett

was more volatile, his future less secure, his nature more confiding. Leaving England on the last day of a hot blue June, Brasch was anxious that, by fulfilling his duty to his father, he was betraying his friend. 'Does it seem desertion to you?' he asked.<sup>80</sup> Once in the bustle of New York, he was still unsure whether to return to New Zealand, and still worrying (unnecessarily, for John was far more independent than he was) about Crockett's reaction to his supposed defection. 'You might well think me an utter swine for staying away so long', he wrote dismally.<sup>81</sup>

Over the next fortnight, he added instalments to this already lengthy letter. He made no attempt to hide the supreme importance of the relationship to him which, he asserted, overrode all other considerations:

There's this one thing to be said: if you want me to come back, want it because I could be of use, will you write at once and tell me, and then I won't go to N. Z. There's no one else, at present, I would say this to - it is not as if you would be cutting out anyone else ... so do feel quite free to say if you want me.<sup>82</sup>

His concern was genuine, but there was, too, an element of desperation: he had no idea what to do regarding his future, and a direct request for help would have solved this problem. He had the insight to realize this and, on re-reading his letter, regretted it as arrogance on his part: 'as though I thought myself indispensable', he wrote ruefully. But even while apologizing for his gaffe, he reiterated the offer: 'I like to feel of use to somebody: to you; and ... if I can do anything I will'.

His anxiety (ostensibly, at least) was because Crockett had declared himself a conscientious objector, and the consequences of this action were still unknown. The news that Crockett had fallen in love with the actress Anne Stern slightly eased his feelings of responsibility:

it will be good to feel that you will be less alone. It makes me humble and thankful when you say you trust me - and very undeserving; and I do wish for you some realer [sic] and closer support.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the intensity of his feelings towards Crockett, he was not possessive over him.

From now until his eventual return to England, he continued to write frequently, his feelings a peculiar blend of protectiveness and admiration. The latter he expressed as openly as the former:

I always admire you for following in your own way, so faithfully and so patiently, what you conceive to be right. Now, when I want courage, I think of you; because tho' you have far more to build on than I (because you are more wholly an artist, with clearer conceptions and, in regard to your art, purer motives) the conditions have been made more discouraging and much harder for you than for me - unless indeed there is greater temptation for me in ease than for you in hardship. I think of you and am ashamed of my weakness, and I love you for your single-mindedness and your devotion.<sup>84</sup>

His letters went some way in expressing how he felt, but he still believed poetry to be the ultimate tribute:

I would like to write something good as an offering to you, as the only way to express all you've been to me this year - and most of my happiness and consolation has been from you; but, alas, it is not very likely to happen.<sup>85</sup>

In spite of his pessimism, throughout July he managed to write snatches of poetry. These steadied him, by both renewing his sense of purpose and providing a connection with Crockett. This new writing would, he hoped, become part of his tribute to their friendship.

The night before leaving New York, trying to dispel his gloom at the thought of moving on once more, he wrote again to Crockett. 'Tomorrow night I start west,' he lamented: 'it feels like taking leave of you and of England again'.<sup>86</sup> The months ahead were once again shrouded in uncertainty. He could not see his way back to England, nor could he tell if he would be able to sustain the tentative beginnings of a new poetry.

#### IV

Most of the poetry he was working on during the peaceful few days at Woodstock was not new. It had always been his goal to write a set of theme-related pieces, and he already had a number of suitable poems which he began to revise. Leaving New York broke his concentration and, arriving in Hawaii at the beginning of August, he was apprehensive that he would have neither the time nor the privacy to write, as his father was due to arrive the following day. Shortly before disembarking, he voiced these fears in a letter to John:

in Honolulu the days and evenings will not be my own - a hardship I am trying to prepare myself to endure, and must, since it is only for my father I've come.<sup>87</sup>

It was not as bad as he had feared. After a rather fraught fortnight together, his father decided to attend a health clinic in Minnesota and Brasch, defying Hyam's wishes, remained in Hawaii. At first he felt inhibited: their talk of New Zealand had unsettled him, and it was still expected that he would return there once Hyam rejoined him in September. He moved

from the grand Halekulani, situated on the golden beach of Waikiki and surrounded by elaborate tropical gardens, to a smaller and less expensive hotel. Here, he sat and wrote to Jack Bennett who, with his wife Edith, had been spending several months in Auckland. 'I am hoping to be able to write again now that I'm alone here', he admitted:

I'm still crammed with thoughts waiting to be crystallized into sonnets for the sequence (or variations on a theme) of which you saw some in Oxford. But for the moment I'm arrested - inhibited; and it is like having a form of acute indigestion. I'm afraid of the same thing happening in N. Z.<sup>88</sup>

By this time, he had seen his book, *The Land and the People*, which Hyam had brought with him. Pleased and excited, he had exclaimed over the Caxton's workmanlike but attractive printing. After one conversation, Hyam had not mentioned it again: poetry, to him, remained a worthless and unmanly pastime. Brasch's pleasure in his achievement was diminished and, by the time he came to write to Bennett, his only reference to it was the deprecatory: 'I wonder what you think, maturely, of my wretched poems'. To Crockett, however, he allowed himself a small gloat and, regaining his confidence away from the scornful eye of his father, he began to write once more.

Despite having the long balmy days and warm nights to himself, however, he still felt edgy and could only concentrate for short stretches. He confided in John:

I've been writing again since my father left; it is not the best environment, with the bronze people passing on the beach nearby, and the sound of waves on a hot afternoon, but to be able to go on is very heartening. So I cannot complain; though what I want most is to go on with the sonnets, to make a substance of the still shadowy sequence, and I fear this won't prove the time or the place for it.<sup>89</sup>

But the distractions of sea and sun proved to be only peripheral. Although he felt insufficiently focused to tackle any large-scale work (and the sonnet sequence continued to preoccupy him), during the few weeks in Hawaii he came up with several shortish poems which he copied out in his small neat hand and sent to John.

Just as his life had suffered a number of disruptions, so too did his writing now depart from its lengthy, formal style to a new simplicity. As if imitating the sonnet sequence, the shorter poems had regular stanzas, conventional rhyme schemes, and song-like rhythms. (In fact, one of the four he sent to Crockett was called 'Song'.)\* Thematically as well as stylistically, they represented a change for Brasch. Less metaphorical, less foreboding, blunter and more stoical, they advocate insouciance rather than care. 'Song', in particular, adopts a carefree stance. Although the listener is indefinably threatened, the speaker remains assured of their eventual happiness:

Danger rises round you  
And nothing I can do  
Will keep you safe and sound,  
I am as weak as you.  
But even while I fear,  
O, irresponsibly  
This heart that's yours, my dear,  
Grows joyful with the sea.<sup>90</sup>

Jotted down on note-paper from the luxurious Halekulani, the poem is followed with a scribbled note to Crockett: '[this is] a trifle. It was written for you and hope you wont mind!' Certainly, the position taken by both this poem and those accompanying it was closer to Crockett's than his own. Nonetheless, it was a new approach with which he persevered.

---

\* See Appendix, p. 351.

Strength, he suggests, lies in unquestioning resignation, and this is the 'great theme' of his second poem:

Nothing waits for man,  
 Nothing asks his aid,  
 To another plan  
 Than his the world was made.<sup>91</sup>

The third and the fourth poems were untitled.\* In one of these, speaking for all poets, he disclaims responsibility, both personal and creative:

The beggar must take what comes,  
 The poet too; he cannot choose his themes  
 Or decide what he will be,  
 But must do what he is given to do  
 Thankfully.<sup>92</sup>

This five-verse poem advises the reader to 'cast away like a rag/ Responsibility', and concludes with the assertion that 'the happy are the bold'. Although not specifically dedicated to Crockett, it takes for its centre his insouciance. A tribute is paid to those who pursue their dreams regardless of fear:

They who answer  
 Like an impulsive child  
 Every wind's word,  
 Swift to follow the frenzied dancer  
 Or the watching bird.

As in 'The dancer', human ambition and nature's force are linked. Only by relinquishing one's considered self to instinctive action, Brasch implies, can one reach truth.

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 351-2.

The most notable feature of the Hawaiian poems is their almost desperate tone: so strongly do they assert the abnegation of personal responsibility, that they fail to convince. Brasch himself remained unconvinced. Caught in a web of guilt and indecision, suspended geographically between England and New Zealand, he did not know whether to retrace his steps or go on. In the meantime, he sat alone in a hotel room, miserably aware that time was running out, writing poems which failed to make him feel any better.

Very few of the poems he wrote during his months in America were published. In hindsight, they did no more than skim the surface of a world darkened by war, and were invalidated by later events and feelings. But one piece from those strange, isolated weeks in Hawaii endured: a poem called 'Great Sea'. Years later, Brasch considered this the only work to have arisen from a Rilkean 'centre':

On the Kona coast the nights were clouded, starless, oppressive; when they were partly clear, we saw meteors falling silently. I felt myself numb and leaden and without hope, and because of that my father and I had almost nothing to say to each other, trivialities apart. Only the unquiet sea was alive, I thought. It seemed to speak what we could not speak, and I was able to catch a few lines of verse that rose in me as if out of the sea itself, like a difficult prayer addressed to the sea. Of all I wrote and tried to write at that time these were the only words that seemed to keep any meaning.<sup>93</sup>

The poem expressed what he felt rather than what he thought he ought to feel. Unlike its companion pieces, it had all the hallmarks of the emerging style which would become typical of him. Grounded in a specific time and location ('August 1939', 'Kona Coast, Hawaii'), it also held truths beyond these particulars. And its tone was distant but underlaid with a note of personal anguish.

In *Disputed Ground* (1948), 'Great Sea' is placed first in a section of non-New Zealand poems. Chronologically, its position is logical: written on the eve of war, it leads into a body

of poems relating to later specific locations or events. In the sentiments it conveys, too, it is a fitting start to a section which deals with the darkness of war. Resonant with both fear and hope, it is a supplication to the powers of Nature to absolve man's divisiveness:

Speak for us, great sea.

Speak in the night, compelling  
 The frozen heart to hear,  
 The memoried to forget,  
 Speak, until your voice  
 Possess the night, and bless  
 The separate and the fearful;  
 Under folded darkness  
 All the lost unite....<sup>94</sup>

This writing does not set out to 'create' a poetic stance, nor does it express the fleeting moods of optimism or despair Brasch experienced during these few months. It has at its centre the calm of earlier poems such as 'The Islands' or 'The Land and the People'. The poet looks beyond the transient present to an enduring world, symbolized by the great sea 'from whom we rose,/ In whom our power lives on'.

On the first day of September Poland was invaded, and two days later Chamberlain declared war on Germany. Brasch, alone in Hawaii waiting for Hyam, grew increasingly anxious, both about world affairs and his own future. Due to sail to New Zealand on 18 September, he now felt that it was his duty to return to England: 'I had enjoyed and loved the best of [it], I must not now refuse the worst'.<sup>95</sup> On this pretext he cancelled his berth, in spite of his father's anger and sadness: 'when we said goodbye again we were hardly able to trust our voices to speak, he in grief and I in pity'.<sup>96</sup>

There were, of course, other factors contributing to his decision. His closest friends were in England, besides which his feelings towards his home country had vacillated wildly during his time in Hawaii. Hyam's talk had made him long to see his relations, his book had made

him think that there was a culture of sorts waiting for him. But, for a long time, he had feared that New Zealand's inferior intellectual climate would destroy his creativity. He continued to waver. 'We return in a few days to Honolulu', he wrote to Scovell from the shady balcony of the Kona Inn, on the island of Kailua:

From there I may go on to New Zealand with my father - though after reading this afternoon a copy of *Art in N.Z.* (the only magazine devoted solely to art and literature) I am filled with horror at the thought of being in a philistine and soul-destroying country, where people cannot write English, nor think, nor paint. But I may go for a few months, to see friends, and to settle again somewhere and write, which I want to do as soon as I can. I feel now I am really beginning, and to be so interrupted is very irksome.<sup>97</sup>

Having decided to return to England, he had to wait several days to get a boat from Honolulu to the mainland. In the meantime - somewhat ironically - his writing began to suffer. His imminent departure, and the increasingly alarming reports on European affairs, made concentration on his poetry impossible. 'My writing has almost halted for the moment', he wrote worriedly to Crockett the day before he left for Los Angeles: 'there is so much to digest, and from day to day events are so shattering'.<sup>98</sup> He clung to the thought of his sonnet sequence as if to a life-buoy:

if the sonnet sequence ever gets completed, and after that ever gets printed, I would like to dedicate it to you. May I? You've been a spirit at my side so often when I was writing....

For some weeks, he remained unable to work. He sailed from Hawaii to Los Angeles, with a day in San Francisco. Although outwardly committed to England, he feared

conscription, and consequently looked for any excuse to postpone his return. After six days of ship-life, with little to distract him from his circling thoughts, he felt strangely fragmented:

I begin to feel as though I were diffused throughout the world, having no solid nucleus or continuing identity any longer. Perhaps writing a poem or two would gather me together again; but at the moment it is as though there were scarcely enough I to write one. It is vaguely unsettling, although it takes away all sense of responsibility....<sup>99</sup>

From Los Angeles he wound his way onwards, spending a weekend in Huntington, and then taking the train through New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas, to Chicago. He did not reach New York until the autumn. The crisp October days were a contrast to the sultry heat of his last visit, and reminded him how long he had been away from England. Guilt gripped him once more. On the boat, the usual feeling of unreality had suspended his fear; he had deliberately fostered a kind of 'protective skin' which prevented him from picturing the end of his journey. 'I'm numb and cannot feel', he had written to Crockett: 'sometimes [I] scarcely know myself'.<sup>100</sup>

Back on dry land, with people who knew him, he felt the familiar jaws of expectation closing around him. He had received several letters from Crockett (then in Suffolk after the disbanding of his Kentish Town dance group), which made him long to see his English friends. But at what cost? His father had been horrified that he was not offering to serve immediately; his fear of army-life was acute. He toyed with the idea of remaining in New York, where the optimistic Henriette made him feel better able to cope, yet the feeling of being a deserter persisted. His reaction was a typical one, as he admitted bitterly to Crockett:

I have days of torment about what I ought to do and what I can do; and I decide nothing; wait for time to settle it all. It is weak, yes; I think I'm like water and take the line of least resistance.<sup>101</sup>

To survive, he forced himself to believe that passivity itself was action. He was 'lost in the tracklessness of life', without job or family to determine his course for him, and could only wait:

The wasted years reproached me - but I could not raise regret. Everyone had some capability, some purpose or the pretence of one, or was tied down by some necessity. But I ran on no rails and was therefore unprotected, unguided. Simply I waited for the word - if this was not deceiving myself, for I knew I had never asked myself Rilke's question: Must you write? And there was nothing - could be nothing - for me to do except wait so; complete opportunism, utterly self-regarding.<sup>102</sup>

The Hawaiian poems had voiced his sense of unreal isolation; others, which he now gave to Henriette, spoke starkly of a return to reality. With a new clarity he recognized that, whether in England or New Zealand, he was trapped by the moral duties of the human race. The fear of making a wrong decision was crippling him, and his poems were a direct expression of the paradoxical confinement of supposed freedom:

Every choice is wrong because the need  
To choose is wrong. Alternatives confront  
Us as the epitome of our punishment....

We choose, and we are wrong; but must still hold  
Fast to our choice, for there is no escape.<sup>\*103</sup>

---

\* See Appendix, p. 352.

Other poems emphasized his loneliness: both specific, as he knew few people in New York, and general, as he belonged nowhere with conviction. England was not his by birth, New Zealand was alien to his nature; and the poem 'His kind'<sup>\*</sup> laments this fate:

Each must seek his kind,  
 But whose kind am I?  
 Tell me, eaves-dropping wind,  
 Tell me, schoolmaster sky,  
 Say where I belong....<sup>104</sup>

He was now writing of his own attitude rather than Crockett's. In 'His kind', he *is* the narrator, who has no vocation other than the self-appointed - and thus invalid - role of poet:

... through me all desires

Pass and are gone again,  
 No great master hires me  
 For pay, like other men;  
 I am fobbed off with song.

His sense of isolation during the first months of war, when all around him were engaged in purposeful action, sharpened his awareness of his Jewishness. In the past, this had been largely academic: now he identified emotionally with the loneliness of belonging everywhere and nowhere. He wrote of this predicament in 'The chosen people':<sup>†</sup>

They belong to none,  
 But separate as the sun  
 Know that every land  
 Is theirs on which they stand.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>\*</sup> See Appendix, p. 353.

<sup>†</sup> See Appendix, p. 354.

In a way, loneliness was a spur to his writing. Hovering in New York, hoping his dilemma would resolve, he spent a 'hermit'-like week seeing no one but reworking more than a dozen recent pieces. Despite his general anxiety, he began to have renewed confidence in his work. He sent typescripts to Crockett,\* stating: 'several if not all of them deserve [reworking] - or I think so now'.<sup>106</sup>

These poems were as much a response to the escalating war as the Hawaiian ones had been. But both responses were essentially indirect, were the result of Brasch intellectualizing his fear and uncertainty. Despite their strongly autobiographical grounding, they were shadowy poems which spoke in abstracts instead of specifics. They became irrelevant, redundant, and remained unpublished.

It was the sonnet sequence - shelved month after month, and progressing inch by grudging inch - that best expressed and encompassed Brasch's vision of the war. The sequence was not, after all, dedicated to Crockett, for it came to be not so much a celebration of friendship as a record of the horrors of war. Simply called 'Nineteen Thirty-nine',<sup>107</sup> it had a sombre tone of reality not present in the first raw drafts from the months in America.

The six sonnets selected for the final printing were a workable vehicle for shaping and cohering the narrated atrocities. Each speaks the same message in a different way, paints a common theme with different materials. Most importantly, each takes for its base concrete detail rather than abstraction. It is from this that their success derives.

The first three are the most strikingly visual, drawing on the natural world for metaphors. 'The City', which begins the sequence, does not refer directly to the war but quietly points to its cause: the flaws in human nature. After years of city-living, it tells, man has turned his back on water and light and, subsequently, on his fellow men. Fear and suspicion are rife in this grey world, and war is the inevitable result:

---

\* Several of his previous letters had not been forwarded by John's mother, who was still not speaking to her son over his pacifist stance, so he now wrote via Anne's family home in Enfield.

For we have shut ourselves off from the larger world  
 And grown hearts narrow like alleys; we are afraid  
 Of quiet, emptiness, the far away.

No one knows what his neighbour is called  
 But fears him; defences go up; weapons are made  
 To keep the unknown constantly at bay.

In this sonnet, Brasch reduces the war to an individual level: that of traffic, fruit-sellers, and hedge sparrows. Only then does he widen his perspective, emphasizing the universal nature of each individual plight. His second poem, too, uses visual imagery to personalise the amorphous face of war. The horrifying ease of extinguishing human lives is portrayed in one simple phrase: 'the lights go out/ In Europe'. Natural metaphors convey the swift escalation of the war more memorably than any abstract interpretation:

Above your head intolerable death  
 Unfolds blank wings; on the forbidden tree  
 Ripens the fruit despair.

The evil born from man's pride is described as the 'rising dark': his fall as '[being] sucked down into the swamps of doubt'.

Sonnet 3, the most accomplished of the six, offers a hope of salvation in images which are close to Eliot's vision in 'Burnt Norton'. The advantages of a related series of poems becomes clear, as the sombre worlds of the first two give way to one of clear air and white light (described in the manuscript version as a 'forgotten hollow where you can lift your face').<sup>\*108</sup> There is a noticeable shift in emphasis between manuscript and published versions. Brasch's view of the world has darkened, so that redemption is still more difficult and

---

\* See Appendix, p. 354.

painful. Once a refuge is reached, man does not 'lift' his head but bows it. His journey through the 'pitiless mountains', rather than reassuring him that he belongs, almost destroys him.

The basic premises of the sonnet, however, remain. The landscape metaphors lend immediacy and colour to its philosophies, so that it is one of the more accessible of Brasch's war poems:

Far on the mountains of pain there may yet be a place  
For breath, where the insensate wind is still,  
A hollow of stones where you can bow your face  
And relax the quivering distended will.

Although the subject of the sequence is not New Zealand, there emerges in it a similar theme to the earlier native poems, so that, unlike most of his work written in America, it seems a natural part of Brasch's growing corpus. The final sestet of Sonnet 3, for example, presents Nature as both an opposing and a protective force. The glare of the light in the mountains is 'deathly', and the escape from the war-ravaged lowlands is a struggle almost to the death. But, as in 'The Land and the People', the often hostile natural world offers redemption by recognizing, and thereby preserving, man's identity:

... But you go on, and bear  
The frail life farther yet, blindly and slow,  
Into the pitiless mountains and the glare  
Of deathly light, ceasing to know or care  
If you are still man; but the frozen rocks know,  
And the white wind massing against you as you go.

The sonnet entitled 'The Desert Fathers' presents a similar picture of withdrawal in pursuit of truth. The opening is striking in its contemporary relevance, yet retains the sense of timelessness and legend:

Despairing of a world of violence, they  
 Could find a refuge still uncovered  
 By Power, where time had long since passed away  
 And they were poor and quiet as the dead.

Europe is referred to as a stronghold of man's follies, which is nonetheless influenced by the 'desert fathers' who have retreated from such evil. Again the images are those of nature, allowing interpretations beyond the specific. This quiet race raises 'flowers of charity/ And trust that had withered from the green of earth'.

The next poem (which is untitled) is, by contrast, less visual and allegorical, and more didactic. In fact, it reads like a summary of the two themes of choice and isolation with which Brasch was preoccupied while in Hawaii. Beginning 'Always defending, always justifying',\* it speaks more directly than any of its companion pieces of the poet's current predicament:

Always defending, always justifying,  
 We lose the power to receive and give  
 Among the creatures in their living and dying,  
 Estranged from earth, uncertain how to live.

Fast in the prison of our apprehension,  
 Shut against the wind of time like stone  
 And dreaming only of safety and prevention,  
 We become increasingly alone.

---

\* See Appendix, p. 355.

The enduring relevance of this sonnet is due to the fact that its touchstones are also things which endure: rock, wind, water. 'World is without', it entreats; but man looks ever inwards, clinging to the past and becoming paralysed with fear:

And all the rivers towards tomorrow run  
And leave us, on time's shore self-cast-away,  
Shadow by shadow wasting in the sun.

Once again the poem advocates the throwing away of an irrelevant yesterday, and an unresisting submission to fate. But now this submission is considered to be not blind but a deliberate move towards hope. The suggestion that we have a choice whether or not to remain in this arid landscape represents an important departure from an earlier passivity.

As Brasch moved from the unreal paradise of Hawaii to the gritty realism of wartime New York, he regained with a rush a sense of moral responsibility. An unpublished sonnet, obviously intended for inclusion in the sequence, displays this new awareness, beginning: 'Our acts are known and numbered like the waves'.\* As the waves determine the nature of the sea, it warns, so do man's actions - however trivial - affect the human race:

Private lives cannot be insulated  
From a public world; we are responsible  
With every motion of our heart and will  
For the kind of life that is now being created.<sup>109</sup>

This was a stance that Brasch rarely adopted: that of a didactic poet, using his position to urge duty to others. Unlike Milner, who had responded so strongly to the left-wing poetry of Auden and Spender, he had never seen poetry and politics as inseparable. His attempts to

---

\* See Appendix, p. 355.

yoke them together in this sonnet result in a repetitive, clumsy expression of his theme. But the determination to tackle topical issues was the unavoidable movement of a pendulum swinging away from his earlier escapism. Between these two extremes lay the middle ground eventually reached by the published sonnet sequence, which is poetry of a contemporary and a lasting relevance.

The sonnet Brasch chose to end the sequence reflects as clearly as any other the external events in his life. It marks the end of the indecisive months before he committed himself to England for the duration of the war. Writing in New York, racked with guilt over his own ineffectualness, he reflected on the current situation and looked back to the beginning of the nightmare. He chose for his subject the invasion of Poland, and its aftermath. The original typescript sent to Crockett was untitled, and referred only obliquely to the plight of the country as 'one nation's fall'.<sup>\*</sup> The published version narrowed the focus, taking the name 'Poland, October'.

The unequivocal title allowed for a greater freedom within the text itself. Originally, Brasch had described the actualities of the Polish situation: the 'wounds to be nursed, a winter coat,/ Bread'. With understanding of the subject guaranteed by the new title, he was able to venture away from specifics. His reworked second stanza is applicable to all victims of warfare:

All that was and was known now only seems,  
All seeming changes and all change appals,  
As they live out the intolerable dreams  
That usurp nature to itself grown false.

---

<sup>\*</sup> See Appendix, p. 356.

The opening of the sonnet remained largely unchanged, and carried the same message as Sonnet 3: that, in spite of seemingly intolerable pain, life continues ('Even for the defeated life goes on'). The sombre tone of the entire sequence is sustained by the final sestet, which states: 'Only to suffer are they still free'. There is both despair and objectivity present in the conclusion, that 'They are history'.

V

The sonnets were only some of Brasch's work which reflected an unprecedented preoccupation with topical events. In the second section of *Disputed Ground* appear poems with titles such as 'Wartime Snow, London' and 'Soldier in Reverie',<sup>110</sup> while unpublished manuscripts are called 'London, April 1939' and 'War generations'.<sup>111</sup> Like 'Nineteen Thirty-nine', these poems attempt to humanize the face of war, while drawing broad universal conclusions. All too often, however, Brasch lapses into vague abstractions which fail to convey either a political reality or an historical perspective. At times he adopts the grandiose style of ten years earlier, as in 'Wartime Snow, London' which opens: 'O whiteness out of gloom!' and concludes:

By very candour you  
 Accuse: O pierce and wound,  
 That, shamed, we may no longer  
 Betray what we most crave;  
 Wash with your innocence  
 Our dulled, accustomed sight,  
 And upon memory stamp  
 Your white exemplar of  
 Earth's paradisal day.

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 356-7.

In this way, declamatory language blurs his vision instead of illuminating it. Even in these poems, however, the use of visual imagery achieves a degree of success. The snow transforms London, bringing beauty to a scene where war has 'written large/ Across the torn world's face'. In 'London, April 1939', the rivers 'choke' with despair; the central figure in 'Soldier in Reverie' would 'plant his devotion' in a unified world.

In his new focus on contemporary social themes, for a time Brasch believed that he was closer to discovering the elusive 'voice' that he sought. He wrote to Crockett from New York:

I have no vision as [Joy Scovell] has; I do not see things in a quite personal fresh way; I admit to being a complete opportunist in that I take whatever comes. But still I am now trying to be honest, and feel at present that I have a subject, even though I've not reached the heart of it yet.<sup>112</sup>

For some months, he persevered with this subject. But nine years later, when *Disputed Ground* was published, his war-poems were juxtaposed with other very different ones whose voice was far more natural; and his mind returned to his talk with Henriette in July 1939. She had said something which had puzzled him: words to the effect that, if he continued to write poetry, he might eventually express what he felt to be the 'essence of things ... but that it would be too personal, not universal'.<sup>113</sup> At the time, he had not got 'clear what she meant'. Now, with the war behind him and a life in New Zealand ahead, Henriette's meaning was clarified. His poetry had indeed become more personal, and in this development it had gained a sincerity which his more 'universal' writing lacked.

His reasons for leaving New York and returning to wartime London were similarly cloudy. Adopting a sense of duty towards England provided him with a watertight excuse for his actions, but it was, as many of his friends saw, curious reasoning. Despite his professed

sense of obligation to his adopted country, and his Jewish origins, he had no intention of joining up, and hoped to avoid war work altogether.<sup>114</sup> In fact, his return was due as much to personal reasons as to duty. He knew his surroundings, felt sure of them, and was thus defined by them. He could feel solid, real, *himself*, in England.

On arriving back in London on a Saturday afternoon in early November, the crippling indecision of the past few months already seemed like a dream. This outcome, it now seemed, had been inevitable. His mood was sober, and as grey as the sky over Waterloo Station; for the boarded-up windows and sandbags of London forced him to realize that war had indeed begun. But, arriving at the de Beers' elegant cream house in Sussex Place, he turned to look over Regents' Park. As the autumn sun suddenly glinted over the golden trees, his heart lightened, and he felt sure that the decision he had made was the right one. The de Beers' welcome heartened him further and, after a good night's sleep, he wrote to Crockett to announce his safe arrival. 'What I am to do I've no idea yet', he confessed:

so far, I am only glad to be back, and while you and Lissie and a few other people are in England, where else should I be?<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> CB to JC, 31 May [1938].

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.*, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind.*, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> *Ind.*, p. 320.

<sup>5</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1938].

<sup>6</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1938].

<sup>7</sup> CB to JS, 19 May [1938].

<sup>8</sup> *Ind.*, p. 318.

<sup>9</sup> *Ind.*, p. 275.

<sup>10</sup> *Ind.*, p. 259.

<sup>11</sup> CB to JS, 'Little Abbey Cottage, Gt. Missenden, Thursday' [early summer, 1936].

<sup>12</sup> CB to JS, 'Little Abbey Cottage, Gt. Missenden, Thursday' [early summer, 1936].

<sup>13</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 427.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Potter to SQ, 18 November 1993.

<sup>15</sup> *Ind.*, p. 336.

- <sup>16</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 387.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 413.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ind.*, p. 271.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Anne Crockett, 30 June 1993.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ind.*, p. 274.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ind.*, p. 271.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ind.*, p. 274.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ind.*, p. 283.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ind.*, p. 276.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Goodwin to SQ, 16 June 1994.
- <sup>26</sup> 'An English Pioneer School', *Tomorrow* 4 (31 August 1938), pp. 692-3.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ind.*, p. 276.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Anne Crockett, 30 June 1993.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Goodwin to SQ, 25 May 1994.
- <sup>30</sup> Letter written by Connie Picton, 'Little Abbey, Sunday' [late 1937]; in the possession of Reg Weston.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ind.*, p. 284.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ind.*, p. 285.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Joy Scovell, 23 June 1993.
- <sup>34</sup> CB to JC, 31 May [1938].
- <sup>35</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 281-2.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ind.*, p. 278.
- <sup>37</sup> CB to JC, 26 March [1938].
- <sup>38</sup> *Ind.*, p. 286.
- <sup>39</sup> 'An English Pioneer School', p. 693.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 286-7.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ind.*, p. 287.
- <sup>42</sup> CB to JC, 27 December [1937].
- <sup>43</sup> CB to JC, 2 April [1941].
- <sup>44</sup> CB to JC, 31 May [1938].
- <sup>45</sup> CB to JC, 2 April [1941].
- <sup>46</sup> CB to JC, 24 August [1941].
- <sup>47</sup> CB to JAWB, 29 December [1939].
- <sup>48</sup> CB to JC, 4 February [1940].
- <sup>49</sup> 'Grieving Head', *DG* in *CP*, p. 27.
- <sup>50</sup> 'For the grieving head: a painting by John Crockett', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 287.
- <sup>52</sup> *PC*, p. 32.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ind.*, p. 272.
- <sup>54</sup> Bennett's marginal annotations in his copy of *Indirections*, p. 229.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind.*, p. 272.
- <sup>56</sup> CB to JC, 17 May [1939].
- <sup>57</sup> 'The dancer', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>58</sup> 'The actor', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ind.*, p. 368.
- <sup>60</sup> 'Ergo Sum', *NFO* in *CP*, pp. 136-7.
- <sup>61</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/2.
- <sup>62</sup> CB to JC, 31 May [1938].
- <sup>63</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/3.
- <sup>64</sup> CB to JC, 19 September [1939].
- <sup>65</sup> CB to JC, 14 October [1939].
- <sup>66</sup> CB to JB, 29 June 1939.
- <sup>67</sup> CB to JC, 10 July [1939].
- <sup>68</sup> CB to JC, 17 July [1939].
- <sup>69</sup> CB to JC, 21 July [1939].
- <sup>70</sup> CB to JC, 21 July [1939].
- <sup>71</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 347-8.
- <sup>72</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].
- <sup>73</sup> *Ind.*, p. 256.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ind. MSS*, pp. 456-7.
- <sup>75</sup> CB to Mrs Bertram, 25 August [1938].

- <sup>76</sup> RS to SQ, 6 June 1993.
- <sup>77</sup> CB to JC, 26 September [1939].
- <sup>78</sup> CB to JC, 10 July [1939].
- <sup>79</sup> CB to JC, 29 June 1939.
- <sup>80</sup> CB to JC, 29 June 1939.
- <sup>81</sup> CB to JC, 10 July [1939].
- <sup>82</sup> CB to JC, 10 July [1939].
- <sup>83</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1939].
- <sup>84</sup> CB to JC, 3 July [1939].
- <sup>85</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1939].
- <sup>86</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].
- <sup>87</sup> CB to JC, 31 July [1939].
- <sup>88</sup> CB to JAWB, 19 August [1939].
- <sup>89</sup> CB to JC, 22 August [1939].
- <sup>90</sup> 'Song', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/14.
- <sup>91</sup> 'The great theme', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/14.
- <sup>92</sup> Untitled, 'The beggar must take what comes', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/14.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ind.*, p. 347.
- <sup>94</sup> 'Great Sea', *DG* in *CP*, p. 26.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ind.*, p. 346.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ind.*, p. 346.
- <sup>97</sup> CB to JS, 9 August [1939].
- <sup>98</sup> CB to JC, 19 September [1939].
- <sup>99</sup> CB to JC, 26 September [1939].
- <sup>100</sup> CB to JC, 26 September [1939].
- <sup>101</sup> CB to JC, 14 October [1939].
- <sup>102</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 485.
- <sup>103</sup> Untitled, 'Every choice is wrong', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.
- <sup>104</sup> 'His kind', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.
- <sup>105</sup> 'The chosen people', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.
- <sup>106</sup> CB to JC, 14 October [1939].
- <sup>107</sup> 'Nineteen Thirty-nine', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 29-32.
- <sup>108</sup> MS of sonnet to become No. 3 in 'Nineteen Thirty-nine', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.
- <sup>109</sup> Untitled, 'Our acts are known and numbered as the waves', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>110</sup> 'Wartime Snow, London', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 27-9; 'Soldier in Reverie', p. 29.
- <sup>111</sup> 'London, April 1939', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14; 'War generations', Bennett MS Papers 2377, 12.
- <sup>112</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].
- <sup>113</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].
- <sup>114</sup> Interview with David Cox, 5 July 1994.
- <sup>115</sup> CB to JC, 5 November [1939].

## **Chapter Six**

***Marking Time:1939-40***

## CHAPTER SIX

### MARKING TIME: 1939-40

In professing to Crockett that he had returned for his and Lissie's sake, Brasch was papering over a situation which had been less than easy for nearly twelve months. The honeymoon period at the Abbey, although intense, had been brief. At Missenden, the tempestuous Crockett had clashed several times with Lissie. By January 1939, despite his more diplomatic nature, Brasch had also been forced to acknowledge that Lissie was neither as wise nor as kind as he had initially thought.

At the end of 1938, its financial difficulties compounded by the departure of several fee-paying students, the Abbey school had relocated to Grayshott, near Hindhead. The happy atmosphere of the previous summer had dissipated. Surroundings were not as congenial: the house was isolated and poorly heated, the countryside scrubby and dotted with sparse pines rather than beech and elm trees, and the weather grew bitterly cold. Servants refused to stay in such conditions so that the older pupils were forced to cook and clean; Crockett, whose colourful personality had livened up the atmosphere, had tired of his battles with Lissie and moved on.

Afterwards, Brasch had only sketchy memories of this time. In contrast to the minute detail with which he remembered the layout of Missenden Abbey, he found he could only describe the Hindhead house by recourse to photographs, and these were only of the outside:

Of the inside I have no recollection except for a vague picture of my own room at the top of the house. Lissie's room had an open

fireplace which was able to burn big logs, otherwise it has completely vanished from my memory. Of the surroundings too I remember nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Attributing this to the fact that he was there for only a term, he was also aware of the probability that those few months had been consigned to his subconscious. For this was, he realized later, the 'worst time [he] had ever known':<sup>2</sup> a time both of political unrest, as the Spanish Republic crumbled and Barcelona fell, and of personal sorrow. With the death of Yeats, he saw the world robbed of the greatest English poet since Wordsworth. Closer to home, the time at Grayshott was shadowed by Lel's death, and marked the beginning of a gradual estrangement with Lissie.

By the time the school moved, Roger Cox was a permanent part of Lissie's entourage. A brilliant scholar, he was emotionally unstable and soon became dependent on Lissie (something she encouraged in the young males around her). As early as December 1937, the increasingly close friendship between Lissie and Roger had made Brasch feel excluded: a reaction which, typically, he attributed to his own insecurity:

Their responses were often close, and they came to share more and more. I began to feel that I was in their way, and even wondered if Lissie would grow tired of me and find she hated me. I could not get up and go, I was so near to them both, but I had fits of being touchy, jealous, cold, for which I hated myself still worse. I should not have gone back to the Abbey. And how little, then, I had learned from it.<sup>3</sup>

Lissie both inspired intense adulation in, and encouraged rivalry among, those around her. Tall, elegant, slightly masculine (emphasized by her cropped hair), she had an air of independence which was attractive to male and female alike. In November 1938, before the school left Missenden, the secretary Mrs Marshall had given notice: 'jealousy, apparently',

Brasch wrote to Crockett, 'of Roger and me, "the men who never let her get near Lissie"'.<sup>4</sup> At this stage, his sympathies lay with the headmistress; 'Mrs M', he stated, was moody, temperamental, and incompetent. In January, with the Abbey's paperwork in chaos and accounts well behind, he may well have wished her back. And, after only two months, he had an insight into her reasons for leaving, as he found himself the victim of Lissie's unpredictable temperament.

Crockett had already fallen from grace and, more headstrong than Brasch, had made his displeasure clear. Living in London, painting all day and dancing with a ballet company at night, he had kept in touch with Brasch but severed all connections with Lissie. After some months of wheedling, Brasch had persuaded his temperamental friend to write and establish an uneasy truce. Now, somewhat ironically, he found himself giving all he could to maintain his own friendship with Lissie. His efforts took their toll elsewhere. In trying to save his friendship with her, his relationship with his sister suffered deeply - a breach which was never resolved.

## I

In July 1938, he had left Lel in New Zealand in reasonably good health but, by October of that year, he had already received bad news. Her relationship with Hyam (which, although better than his, had always been strained) was deteriorating. She was nervous and ill, and a fresh abscess had opened in her old wound. She wished to return to England, to the care of Dr McCarron in whom she had enormous trust. Brasch had already expressed reservations about

her treatment. Secretly fearing the burden of responsibility which would once again fall on his shoulders, he advised her to stay at home.

But Lesley was stubborn. Against his wishes, she made the long voyage by sea, arriving at Southampton on a bitterly cold day in January 1939. Esmond and Mary de Beer, muffled up against the raw wind, were waiting for her. Brasch, furious at her obstinacy and backed in his stance by Lissie, was nowhere to be seen.

Lissie had never met Lel, but her opinions about the effect of the psyche on general health were decided. After the death of her young son some years before, she had been to the psychoanalyst Dr H. Crichton-Miller, one of the first to practice Jungian techniques in England.\* During the time Brasch spent at the Abbey, he too became interested in psychological theories and systems, reading Jung, Freud, Adler, and other writers. The very assurance with which Lissie expounded her adopted theories, and applied them in the 'cure' of her young pupils, was impressive. She appeared to Brasch as a 'doctor of souls',<sup>5</sup> and the belief he subsequently formed, that medical treatment was useless without an intuitive application, stayed with him for life.† Although remaining adamant that he would not jeopardize his creative imagination by subjecting his mind to another's, her theories possessed him so strongly at that time that he was guided by them rather than by his own instincts.

Hearing of Lel's proposed trip to England, Lissie stated that the dependence on Dr McCarron was due to the lack of emotional support in the father/ daughter relationship. The case, she told Brasch (never having met either Lesley or Hyam), was transparent. His sister should give up McCarron in favour of a psychoanalyst. Brasch's unequivocal agreement had little to do with Lel, and much to do with Lissie. Things between them were rocky and,

---

\* It was he who had suggested the Abbey project, as a way to control and channel her grief.

† In 1973, shortly before his death, he wrote 'Night Cries, Wakari Hospital' (HG in CP, p. 200), in which he refers to the writings of Sangor Ferenczi, the Hungarian disciple of Freud's: 'It is the physician's love heals the patient'.

subconsciously or not, he had no wish for them to worsen. On her part, familiarity with him had been followed by a casual dependence on his help. Now even this was falling away, to be replaced by a hurtful indifference:

What attention she could spare from the Abbey's urgent problems, Lissie was giving to Robert [Roger], whose need was indeed extreme. But I resented that, and was cold and jealous in consequence. Without consulting Lissie I wrote to Lel to explain her illness. I wrote more coldly and reproachfully, I think, than sympathetically, not stopping to consider how ill she must be. Arguing that it was clear she would never get better under Dr McCarron, I urged her need of psychoanalysis, which would prove to her what I was explaining. I said that I could not consider looking after her if she persisted in continuing with McCarron as before. I felt desperate, and wanted to shock her into agreement. But she thought only that I was abandoning her.<sup>6</sup>

Despite hearing from Mary that Lel's condition had worsened on the trip out, he refused to meet her ship. By the time of her arrival, she was so weak that she was taken to London by ambulance.

His sense of duty soon overcame his anger. For the next few weeks, several times a week, he travelled through the bleak wintry countryside between Grayshott and London, sometimes staying overnight with Crockett in Camden Square. With his loyalties divided in this way, Lissie's apparent lack of interest in him increased. In desperation, he went a step further, overriding Lel's wishes and calling in Crichton-Miller.

The visit was a disaster. Brasch blamed Lel for refusing to cooperate, while she was so furious that she refused to see him for several days afterwards.\* Throughout the third week of January, he stayed away, his mood as grey as the midwinter sky. On the Friday, having a

---

\* One of the Abbey pupils, Hazel (refer *Ind.*, p. 282), had been to Crichton-Miller before beginning at the Abbey and had also resisted his treatment, horrified by his attempts to hypnotize her (interview with Hazel Chivers, 20 July 1994).

dentist's appointment in London anyway, he ventured in to see Lel. He could not stay long, however, for - as he had already explained to Crockett - 'Lissie [was] away and the secretary new and a little uncertain of herself'.<sup>7</sup> The new term had started the day before; clearly, he felt as responsible for the school as he did for his sister. Even in absentia, Lissie was exerting her power.

The brief visit was no more successful than the last one. Once again, he returned to Grayshott with mixed feelings:

I am feeling rather callous [he wrote to John] about my sister, which makes me ashamed and disgusted with myself. She really has a hell of a time and is very brave, in spite of her obstinacy and difficultness from my point of view. What a loathsome mess one's feelings can be; I'm just incapable of thinking straight, can't trust myself or anybody else, and sometimes find both black and white becoming an indifferent grey. A sorry sight.<sup>8</sup>

Although he thought Lel a little better, over the next few days she went into a rapid decline.

Lissie returned to her post of duty on the Wednesday, and the following day Lesley died.

She and Brasch had not had the chance to resolve their quarrel: 'she had not the strength', he wrote later, 'and I was afraid and remorseful'.<sup>9</sup> Struggling with a dark fog of depression, he needed Lissie more than ever but, aware of the distance between them, he was too diffident to ask for her help. She, perhaps conscious of the part she had played in this tragedy, remained aloof. After the funeral, Brasch arranged for Lissie to meet him at the station at Haslemere but, missing his train, he ended up walking through the snowy dark fields to Grayshott. Afterwards, he saw their aborted arrangements as symbolic: 'Because we failed to meet then, we did not meet at all, properly speaking'.<sup>10</sup>

It was as if this signalled the end of his Abbey life. His published account of how he came to leave the school - a 'cool, but not bitter' parting<sup>11</sup> - was characteristically guarded.

To Crockett, he was more open, describing the atmosphere at Grayshott as 'chilly', and confessing his relief at leaving.<sup>12</sup> The school was no longer the refuge it had once seemed.

Despite his sense of betrayal, he maintained a strong regard for Lissie's opinions. Three months later, writing from New York, his mind was still full of her:

Henriette said marriage would solve all my problems for me; but that I didn't feel I could discuss seriously; she is not Lissie.<sup>13</sup>

The disconcerting conversation with Henriette prompted introspection not only on his personal relationships but on his role as an artist; in this, too, he turned to Lissie's maxims for comfort. Coming to the conclusion that to write good poetry was the only thing that mattered, he repeated her definite statements on art in the hope of reinforcing his own beliefs:

Privately my end is not to lead a full and happy life; in a sense that is irrelevant. Lissie used to say that the artist does not matter, only his work, and that is what I mean. - This is the theory and in part I follow it, but not as singlemindedly as I ought; I am hesitant and full of fear and distrust.<sup>14</sup>

While in America, he was anxious to hear news of Lissie, and he wrote several times to Crockett (still in London) asking whether she had made contact. When at last he heard that the rift between the two had been mended, he was pleased and relieved:

I'm very glad Lissie wrote to you as she did. I was hurt and shocked when I returned to the Abbey last year and found you gone and that she didn't want to talk about you; and for a time very puzzled too; but then her very exasperation showed me clearly enough that she was as fond of you as ever even tho' it

annoyed her so that she disliked admitting it to herself. And one day before I left in April she told me it was so; thank goodness she could tell you too now.<sup>15</sup>

His dependence on Lissie's approval was almost child-like (she was, after all, some twenty years older). In her, he had found the mother figure hitherto absent in his life.

Despite her importance to him, he dedicated no poem to Lissie as he did with so many of his other friends. Yet a poem written years after losing touch with her contained the essence of his hopes for their relationship, and explained his readiness to overlook her small betrayals time and again. 'Lady Engine'<sup>16</sup> refers directly to his lost childhood and, in describing a dream he had had when very young, exposes his longing for a controlling maternal presence. In this curious dream, the 'Lady Engine' - an actual engine with human characteristics - steams through the streets of Dunedin, and mesmerizes the boy. Before her approach, his predominant feeling is fear: but in her presence, a calm certainty fills him:

Slowly passing, she looked at me,  
Not turning her head.  
Grave, kindly, silent. Looking.  
I gazed back. We gazed at each other.  
Nothing was said.

The recognition, the intuitive knowledge, of himself by another was something for which he searched all his life. Family and sexual relationships had failed him, but he thought he had found such understanding and acceptance with Lissie.

The poem is redolent with loss. Once the Lady Engine has passed, there is no trace of her, no sound or smoke or sign of tracks. The real-life relationship with Lissie followed a similar pattern: an intense spiritual bond being succeeded by a realization of aloneness. Yet, with her air of wisdom and her decided pronouncements, for a long while she appeared to be the

presence which he had sought. Her assurance became his, her view of him, his truth.

Believing that she knew him, intimately, psychologically, gave him a sense of stability. It is hardly surprising that he doggedly nurtured their friendship, even in the face of her growing indifference. His very survival, it seemed to him, depended on it.

## II

Arriving back in England in early November, Brasch learnt from Anne that Crockett (to whom she was now engaged) was living in a pacifist settlement in Hertfordshire. His friend's new life-style came as 'something of a shock';<sup>17</sup> he had been hoping to visit the following weekend, but staying in a ramshackle hen-house held no appeal. He remained in the de Beers' comfortable house in Sussex Place, and asked Crockett for Lissie's new address. Depending on her circumstances, he thought, he might stay with her.

After a visit to Oxford to catch up with Joy and Charles Elton, and Leonie Zuntz,\* he travelled by train into the Hampshire Hills to stay with Lissie and Roger. They had moved from Grayshott on the day that war was declared, and were living in the village of Binsted, near Alton. Although three of her former pupils had remained with her, Lissie was no longer running a school; as usual, she was in a financial predicament. To help her, Brasch became a paying guest at Roxford House; and he persuaded Crockett to join them.

John, who had been at the Welwyn settlement for little over a month, was only too ready to leave. The spartan conditions were bearable, but he mistrusted the motives of the

---

\* Colin had begun secret Government work and had been relocated outside the city.

Conservative organisers, who appeared to have set up the outfit as a way of helping their cronies avoid military service.\* Shortly after arriving at Binsted, however, he was to look back at his draughty hut with some nostalgia. The months spent with Lissie during the first winter of the war were ones of extreme discomfort, both physical and emotional.

To begin with, both Crockett and Brasch were reasonably happy. Although rather ramshackle, the fifteenth-century house was pleasant. It overlooked a Norman church, beyond which stretched gentle farmland and rolling hills; Gilbert White's Selborne was only a few miles away. Late in December Brasch wrote to Bennett in New Zealand:

I like being here.... I'll probably stay another couple of months. Then, possibly, London; though not if it becomes likely that London will be ruined by air raids.<sup>18</sup>

The household was isolated, however. It was situated in the tiny village of Binsted, which was two and a half miles from a station and whose lanes became impassable after heavy snowfalls. Ironically, having longed to escape the isolation of New Zealand, Brasch found himself equally cut off here. He met no one new; petrol rationing and bad weather meant that he was rarely able to visit London. Had he been able to use this solitude to write, it would have been profitable, but very soon he was disturbed by the tempestuous atmosphere which Lissie inevitably created about her. Shortly after his arrival, although telling Bennett how happy he was to be back in England, he was qualifying this: '[I] find I dont have enough continuous uninterrupted time, and have written practically nothing'.<sup>19</sup>

Some months earlier, while in America, he had written to Crockett that he wished to 'digest the events of the last 2 years, and work them out in writing'.<sup>20</sup> Not until he had done this would he consider looking for a job, for he had discovered at the Abbey how easily he

---

\* These men were, he later declared, 'about as pacifist as Winston Churchill' (Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/3).

was distracted from his writing. By Christmas, he had already found that the atmosphere at Roxford was even less conducive to writing than the happy chaos of Little Missenden.

The winter that year was particularly bitter. Branches encased with ice splintered from the trees, frozen pipes burst; in London there was skating on the Serpentine. Life at Roxford House was miserable. Draughts whistled through the poorly-heated rooms, and provisions had to be obtained on ration cards from either Alton or Farnham (some seven miles away). Lissie, although capable in other ways, was not domestically competent. Throughout an icy January, the household existed on goulash (the one dish she could cook), or made do with bread and jam.

The physical discomfort was mirrored by a growing emotional tension as, in their comparative isolation, the four friends were thrown on each other's company. John was the only one working away from home, labouring on a neighbouring farm seven long days a week. Frequently harangued by the other labourers for his 'Communist' sympathies, he would arrive home in a 'rebellious and short-tempered' frame of mind,<sup>21</sup> and was usually too exhausted to paint. As for Brasch, writing was impossible. His energies were largely devoted to keeping the peace between the other three.

This was no easy task, for all three were naturally volatile. The irrational moods which Lissie had displayed at the Abbey now became more pronounced and prolonged. Crockett, less forgiving about this than Brasch, was shortly at breaking-point. 'The discomfort, the terrible food and the cold might just have been tolerated,' he wrote years afterwards,

but the savagely charged atmosphere in the old house had become quite intolerable. Even now, after over forty years later, that memory is painful. And tragic.<sup>22</sup>

Lissie had metamorphosed from 'the delightful and amusing companion' they had first known into a stranger, 'as cold and forbidding and remote as some Gorgon'.<sup>\*23</sup>

He was less surprised than angered, having encountered such inimical behaviour at the Abbey. But Brasch was shocked and saddened. He had blamed the coolness at Grayshott on his own jealousy, but now was forced to accept that Lissie was at fault. Roger's mental instability was worsening, to the extent that he followed Lissie's lead in everything, including her attitude of animosity. An incident early in 1940 put paid to any notions Brasch might have had of a reconciliation:

When [John] gave notice on the farm, expecting his tribunal, he began a double portrait of Robert Maddox [Roger Cox] and me. Robert was very cold and grudging about sitting to John for the double portrait. When he refused the final sitting which would have allowed John to finish, John said very quietly, almost politely as if making some gentlemanly remark, 'Then I think you're a shit', and Robert as he left the room said equally quietly in his low refined voice, as though he were saying goodbye, 'And I think you are too.' John had his revenge (if it was that) by making Robert look shockingly neurotic; corpse-like.<sup>†24</sup>

He himself felt the situation irretrievable. The chilly atmosphere affected his spirits so that he felt insecure and unable to concentrate:

By the end of the year I wanted to leave Binsted. I could not settle down to read or write there. Living was too taken up with our reactions to each other, all relationships generated so much feeling that my energy was consumed by emotion which led to nothing. Lissie seemed to need an atmosphere of crisis; life with her had no flow and settledness.... As soon as I told Lissie I

---

\* Although at the time Lissie's behaviour seemed incomprehensible and motiveless, from the evidence of old journals Crockett dated her volte-face to the weekend Anne stayed at Roxford. In hindsight, he believed that Lissie's possessiveness over her male friends had festered into poisonous jealousy.

† This portrait is now part of the Brasch Collection in Dunedin's Hocken Library. For reproductions, see *Islands* 5 (Spring, 1973) and Plate 46 in *Indirections*.

wanted to leave, a wall of coldness descended and I was made to feel that I was not One of Us ... my last month at Binsted was miserable, with meals passing in silence, Lissie and Robert speaking only to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Crockett, too, was 'put in Coventry' but was less affected by it. Lissie's treatment of them rankled. He resented being banned from her sitting-room (which, at the Abbey, had been their favourite place to sit and chat), and later recalled with sarcasm the deathly silence at meagre meal-times, broken only by 'necessary nuggets of conversational bonhomie like "Could you pass the salt please?"'<sup>26</sup> He was openly pleased at the prospect of escaping at the end of January; some loyalty in Brasch prevented him from showing similar relief. He wrote to Bennett only that he was 'writing from Hampshire, but mov[ing] to town next month; here it is impossible to think or write'.<sup>27</sup>

In the last week of January, he travelled to London to look for a flat. From the opulent comfort of the de Beers' house - its warmth and genial atmosphere all the more welcome by contrast with Binsted - he wrote a postcard to Lissie saying he would not be returning for the weekend. To Crockett (grimly enduring his last few days at Roxford before departing for town on the Saturday), he was more forthcoming. He was staying in London, he said, because it was highly probable that Lissie would have neither coal nor food.<sup>28</sup>

He took a flat in Lawn Road, off Haverstock Hill. But a brief return to Lissie's house, to pick up his remaining belongings, was inevitable. Reluctantly, he travelled back to Binsted by train. His parting with Lissie was similar to Crockett's departure from the Abbey. Affecting not to notice Brasch's presence or hear his goodbyes, she continued writing letters as if alone in the room. He was distressed, but his reluctance to sever the link with one who had been a friend, mentor, and confidante to him was great, and he continued to hope:

I knew she had not ceased to care for me, nor I for her. We should be able to meet again in the future on a different footing. Meanwhile I was already the past, while her thoughts were on the present and what was to come.<sup>29</sup>

Showing a surprising capacity for forgiveness, once in London he made efforts to keep in touch with Lissie and Roger. He asked Crockett anxiously to let him know if he heard any news:

That is such a foolish affair. I know that I love her as much as I ever did, and I believe her feeling for both you and me is unchanged, at bottom. But this is symbolical of the state of all the world: men do love one another, if one could only refine away what separates them and seems so insuperable, and yet they are never able to live together.<sup>30</sup>

In an attempt to reconcile himself to the split, he turned to Freud: “the love of our neighbours is the source of all morals”, he quoted to a sceptical John. ‘I do believe’, he continued, ‘even physically it is more important than the things we think of as indispensable necessities’.<sup>31</sup> The source of his reassurance revealed the extent of Lissie’s influence. Even while explaining away her inconsistencies, he echoed the philosophies she had professed to stand firm by.

The winter ice melted, the parks in London were pink and white with blossom, and still he heard no word from Binsted. On 29 June, John and Anne were married. His happiness for them was somewhat marred by the absence of Lissie and Roger. Through a long golden July, he waited nervously to be called up, yet even this could not block out his yearning to see Lissie once more. At last, in the middle of August, he received a letter from his favourite Abbey pupil, Connie, who had visited Binsted. Immediately, he passed the news on to a less interested John:

Before I forget it I must give you Connie's news.... She went to Binsted; and thought Lissie looked better than formerly, and felt there was peace in the house. She does not know what she will do next month when the [tenancy] year is up; she has a little boy there now.... Roger, Connie said, was working in the garden, unshaven as usual; he had registered and was waiting for his medical examination.... Sybil must find a job because L. can't go on supporting her indefinitely.<sup>32</sup>

The indirect contact failed to satisfy. Over the following months, he tried to summon the courage to write to Lissie but, fearing rejection, continually postponed the task. As the leaves on the plane trees turned to gold, he wrote to Crockett, again asking if he, or any of their acquaintances, had heard word of her. From Connie (who had returned to Grayshott and was teaching at the chaotic school which had replaced the Abbey), he learnt that Lissie and Roger had moved to London. Other than this, his repeated enquiries drew a blank. Finally, one dreary December night, he sat down and penned a tentative note to her. To Crockett, he wrote a 'fumbling crazy' letter in doggerel, telling of his nervous anticipation:

... So I at last,  
Hoping it will not simply be a waste  
Of resolution, stamps and paper, have  
Written a note to Lissie, ending "Love  
As always"; it seemed better to ignore  
The past completely....<sup>33</sup>

A second spring lent beauty to the grey war-time world, and still there was no word from her. In desperation, no longer sure why he was bothering, Brasch sent another conciliatory note. At last, in May, he received a reply. She and Roger had gone to Bristol, she wrote: she was working as a driver for the Ambulance Corps. Yet her style was brusque, her information minimal. Upset, Brasch wrote to Crockett (who was certain to understand): 'It was a very short and cold note, and I do not want to write again'.<sup>34</sup>

For the next few weeks, he was busy with work at the Foreign Office (he had gained a job there through Colin), and this helped to keep his mind off his sense of betrayal. But the hurt remained, and he was unable to shrug it off as Crockett had. Returning from work one evening in early September, he was surprised to receive an envelope from his landlady, addressed to him in Lissie's hand. She had moved back to London, and wished to meet him for dinner. Apprehensively, he agreed. 'I should be miserable', he wrote to Crockett, 'if it were a complete failure'.<sup>35</sup> He did not confess the extent of his misgivings to anyone, however. Not only was he dreading the inevitably stilted conversation, but he was also worried about Lissie's effect on his sense of purpose:

I feared her penetrations and probing. For weeks I had been in a state of listless despair, and feared that she would inject into it a restlessness which would be torture; that she would sharpen my self-temptation by making my weaknesses seem interesting; and much more.<sup>36</sup>

Although not a 'complete failure', the meeting was not a success. At the time of writing to him, Lissie had been living alone; Roger was convalescing at his parents' place for some weeks. This explained the motivation for renewed contact: Lissie liked to have at least one close male friend at hand.\* By the time she and Brasch met for lunch in Old Compton Street, Roger had recovered, was back working at the BBC, and Lissie's manner was again confusingly cool. Not until two weeks later did Brasch gather his thoughts and describe to Crockett the ordeal at the Cafe Bleu:

---

\* Roger's brother, David, considered the relationship between Roger and Lissie to be dangerous, and one of an unhealthy dependence. The gentle Roger was entirely submissive to Lissie and, as his schizophrenia worsened, she played on his fears. After her death, he was committed to St Lawrence's Hospital on Bodmin Moor. (Interview with David Cox, 5 July 1994)

A fortnight ago I lunched with Lissie in town, at her suggestion. It was polite and conversational, but I do not expect it will be repeated. She looked very stiff and hard in a long straight uniform of air force blue, a white collar and dark tie, and an ugly conductor's cap. We discussed the Abbey children.... Rather pointedly, I thought, L. did not ask about you, but of course you came up, and I told her where you were.<sup>37</sup>

He had not been sufficiently persuaded of Lissie's goodwill to suggest another meeting, nor did she make any effort to consolidate this tentative beginning to a new friendship. It was eighteen months later, in the spring of 1943, that she once again contacted him out of the blue, ringing on the premise of wanting a key which had once opened her bureau at the Abbey. Brasch, oppressed by the seemingly endless greyness of his wartime existence, no longer had the energy for nervous anticipation. It was his sense of duty which prompted him to go, as requested, to her new flat off the Brompton Road.

There he found a weary Lissie, less severe in manner, and aged in looks. Failing to open the bureau with any of his keys, he accepted a cup of tea, made polite conversation, and gathered up his coat and hat to go. To his surprise, Lissie asked him, with genuine warmth in her voice, to stay to dinner: Roger was due home at seven, and she was sure he would want to catch up with Brasch. Rather reluctantly, he agreed, only to find that his old friend did, indeed, seem delighted to see him:

[he] said I had not changed (though I felt years older, uglier, sourer), and was so warm and friendly and happy to see me that I was moved and a little embarrassed - what had I done to deserve his affection? we had not met for three years.... [Lissie] and Roger seemed completely trusting and at peace with one another, and I no longer felt any jealousy at that. But I saw them very forlorn and helpless together in their world of understanding and love in that fragile matchstick little house....

This reconciliation made me deeply thankful. I had come to

them open-minded, neutral, unembarrassed (at least to Lissie), expecting nothing. We did not talk about the past; no explanations were needed.<sup>38</sup>

He did not write about this to Crockett, for over the past eighteen months he had lost much of his idealism, and now realized that a reconciliation there was not to be.\* But Lissie's philosophies had affected him deeply, and he continued to think of them: she had, too, reinforced his belief in himself as a writer.†

### III

From the discordant time at Binsted until the end of the war, Brasch was surrounded with people, and concentration on his poetry could only be spasmodic. Yet before the outbreak of war, before his trip to Hawaii, he had retreated to the country as he had done in 1936. He needed physical isolation to sustain any steady emotion; even dealing with friends and relations kept him on a knife-edge of nervous energy.

The beginning of 1939 had shaken him to the core. Lesley's death, combined with Lissie's growing coolness, reduced him to a state where he could barely think, let alone write. Crockett was in London; Bertram too, although temporarily, for he was about to leave for

---

\* After the bitterness in 1940, in fact, Crockett and Lissie never saw each other again. In the mid-1970s, Crockett visited Mary and Donald Potter in Bryanston, Dorset, where Lissie, now an old and ill woman, was staying. Having maintained at the Abbey that Mary was her adoptive daughter, she had now brutally disclaimed her; equally adamantly, she refused to see Crockett and remained in her room. She died some months later.

† His forgiveness of past wrongs was total. On trips back to England (in 1957, 1962, 1967, and 1972), he made a point of visiting Lissie and Roger in the house in St Ives which Roger had bought with his inheritance. Although twenty years younger than Lissie, Brasch died three years before her, and left her a substantial amount of money in his will.

China. Rejecting the suggestion that he might accompany Bertram - this would only compound his problems - he found a more viable solution. Ten days before he was due to leave Grayshott, he heard of an acquaintance of Bertram's who wished to let a cottage in Wiltshire. Early in the spring, when London's parks were golden with daffodils, he packed his bags and, guilty but relieved, made his escape to the windswept space of the north downs.

Apart from a row of labourers' cottages nearby, the house stood alone: red brick, some two or three hundred years old, with the evocative name of 'Bishop's Barn'. 'I think you'll like it', he wrote to Crockett after his first inspection of the place: 'it is old and isolated, high up on the downs south of Hungerford'.<sup>39</sup> Crockett was allowed to visit, as were Joy, Leonie, and the Bennetts. But few others were given the particulars of his new hideaway, for he wished to conserve his time and energy for writing.

Despite his anxiety over the growing unrest in Europe, for a time he was completely happy. Having gained his driver's licence the previous year,\* he was able to visit London or Oxford, spend an evening at the theatre or attend a performance by Crockett's dance troupe. But most of the time, as the sun grew warmer day by day, he walked on the downs, or read, or wrote. During these few months he began to experiment with the sonnet form, a convention he had been too uncertain to tackle earlier. His first attempts were forced, as he conscientiously worked his chosen subject into the required shape:

We have no law but growth; and all things wait  
Offering their strength and their designs  
To nurse the seed in us. But we are free,  
No shape is fixed as ours, no final state,  
And we can outgrow their perfected lines  
That guide us so unerringly.<sup>†40</sup>

---

\* His car had been stolen from Grayshott in April, but was recovered a few days later.

† See Appendix, p. 357.

His desire to write universally relevant poetry resulted in a tone which was self-conscious, and at times self-righteous:

We choose, and always wrongly - but must hold  
 Fast to our choice, for there is no escape:  
 Clasped like lovers good and evil sleep  
 Inseparable for ever. We are called  
 Not to part and weigh them and condemn,  
 But lose ourselves in their creation.<sup>41</sup>

The most personal of the sonnets was one which he later called 'Sorori',\* and which represented an attempt to resolve his feelings about Lel's recent death. Guilt still weighed heavily on him, and his sonnet was both a tribute to his sister's courage, and an apology made too late:

All pain can teach, you learned, and were not sad.  
 We take a lifetime over the hard lesson  
 You mastered in three years, grow dim and bowed  
 And still are not content to wait and listen.<sup>42</sup>

Beneath the surface of the poem was a pervasive note of fear, for he knew that his own reaction to imminent death would be very different. Lel's stolid nature, which had so infuriated him when they were children, had become her salvation. Her spontaneous rather than cerebral responses had enabled her to make the most of her limited life:

Though suffering would never cease, you hoped,  
 And still could love the life that you were losing,  
 Life that was loth to go.

---

\* See Appendix, p. 358.

A wistful self-reproach echoes in every line. 'You were wiser and without pretension', the second quatrain begins, ending with a description of Lel existing in a 'clarified dimension/ Where everything is relevant'.

For one who described himself as a 'broken mirror reflecting in a separate fragment of self every situation and every person [he] met',<sup>43</sup> this state was enviable - and unattainable. Not only Lel's nature, 'Sorori' implies, but her terminal illness had bestowed this certainty on her. In coveting this certainty, Brasch felt his guilt at his own considered judgement compounded. In his last week at Bishop's Barn, Scovell sent him a poem called 'The Apple', which also dealt with Lel's death.\* By contrast, his own tribute became diminished in his eyes; it seemed both mannered and excessively objective. He did not admit this to Scovell until he had reluctantly left Wiltshire, and was preparing to depart for America. Writing from London on a mild blue evening in June, he confessed: 'You have felt in [your poem] as I try to feel'.<sup>44</sup>

The complexity of emotion beneath the orderly exterior of 'Sorori' was not resolved easily, and he remained obsessed with what he saw to be his unnatural feelings. The outbreak of war forced an acknowledgement of an attitude only implied in his sonnet:

I thought of death as an ally. Whenever I heard that someone was ill I thought at once that he or she would probably die, and I looked forward to that half in eagerness and hope. Death would be so easy a way out, it would solve everything; in so far as it concerned me I would have no more trouble - relations with the dead are easier than with the living.<sup>45</sup>

The desire for another's death was mirrored by a wish for his own. Lel, by her early death, had stepped off the numbing and tedious treadmill of daily life - and had escaped the horror of the approaching war. The secret longing for oblivion shocked him as much as his relief at

---

\* She had grown to know Lel over the years spent at Primrose Hill.

being freed by her death. He could not exonerate himself until long after he left England, when he began to see his attitude stemmed from his repressive upbringing:

Perhaps it began in relation to my father, and then I think the wickedness of it frightened me. Later I saw it as treachery towards life and towards the person in question, the treachery of impatience. In the later stages of Lel's illness I was well conscious of what I thought. I regretted it, but without deep feeling, or desire or power to change. The only way to change, it seemed, would be to stop seeing myself as the centre of the universe. That meant either to love someone so much that I forgot myself, or to give myself up to some work larger than myself.<sup>46</sup>

At Bishop's Barn, the only work he had was his poetry: a necessarily self-absorbed activity. The submersion of self in a poem such as 'Sorori' was counter-productive; although it objectified his emotions, it also magnified them. In other sonnets, however, he began to explore less personal themes, and to achieve a balance between heart and head. He had stumbled on his 'own' topic several years earlier in Cornwall, writing of the country he had left behind, but had had insufficient experience to express it successfully. Now, the foundations of his two worlds - New Zealand and England - were threatened by the coming war, and the certain loss of this security sharpened his vision. It was during these summer months that he wrote his first 'real' poems about the country he had left behind.\*

The success of 'Always, in these islands' inspired other sonnets on similar themes. None was as successful but they, too, held the beginnings of an increasingly mature poetic voice. The knowledge of future insecurity filled Brasch with fear, but it also inspired him to write. 'The terror that hung over us', he reminisced,

---

\* See Chapter Four, Section IV.

made the beauty of the country and the shining weather almost unbearably poignant. Everything we knew and loved glittered and trembled as if about to vanish for ever....<sup>47</sup>

His sonnets spoke reassuringly of endurance. 'Only the stones are perfect', one asserts, 'and the unchanging generations of the flowers'.<sup>\*48</sup> And another begins:

Earth and water are the same forever,  
And we are sure because they limit us;  
We cannot bend them to our will, but must discover  
Their laws, which will befriend our powerlessness.<sup>†49</sup>

Although his home country became the object of his thoughts, when surrounded by the rolling green Wiltshire downs Brasch made no nominal references to New Zealand. His later revisions included slight geographical tags, specifying the context of the themes of transience and permanence. No place-names figured in the original version of a poem describing the fierce meeting of sand and sea:

The sweet sun and the wind's light stroke  
Charm that fury into smoke  
And music, twirling the blue spray  
And lighting rage with a fierce joy,  
That of the wasting strife appear  
Only a lulling ghost of war  
Intoning in a measured chant  
The history of a continent.<sup>50</sup>

---

\* See Appendix, p. 358.

† See Appendix, p. 357.

Although this was clearly a metaphor for human warfare, part of his mind was far from Europe. The poem was later called 'Pipikariti', after one of his favourite Otago beaches.\*

Although his thoughts were increasingly preoccupied with war, the months at Bishop's Barn were calm, at least on the surface. Brasch soon established a quiet routine, writing in the mornings, taking the afternoons off to walk and drive on the downs. Halfway through April, he invited Iris Wilkinson to stay. He had met her earlier that year through Bertram, and knew her 'as the novelist Robin Hyde, as a journalist, as a writer of lush romantic verse, a gifted adventurous rather reckless temperamental New Zealander'.<sup>51</sup> Caught in the war in China, she had been recovering in the Middlesex Hospital, and she came to Wiltshire to convalesce, and to continue writing up her experiences in China.<sup>†</sup>

As the sun grew warmer and the days longer, Brasch carried a desk outside for her to work at, while he wrote in the dim coolness of the cottage. Although neither particularly interested in, nor impressed by, her journalistic writings, he was excited by her poems, which were not only on Chinese but also New Zealand themes.<sup>‡</sup> While she was well and happy, her company helped him in his own writing. Evenings were spent sitting by the fire discussing each other's work, commenting, criticising, and arranging poems which spoke of a land half a world away. Hyde returned to London for three weeks to work on a theatrical adaptation of her novel *Wednesday's Children* and, as if in sympathy, the fickle spring weather broke. When she returned to Bishop's Barn, she brought with her the sun, and Brasch looked forward to another pleasant interlude of writing, walking, and talking.

Yet her moods were unpredictable, and her anxiety over her play threw her into a depression which shattered both their working and personal relationships. By the time Jack and Edith Bennett came to visit in May,<sup>§</sup> Hyde was so nervy that Brasch was uneasy at

---

\* As a child, he often walked here and on other 'special beaches' with his grandfather and Lesley (refer *Ind.*, pp. 18-19).

† Published as *Dragon Rampant* (London, 1939).

‡ Published by Caxton in *Houses by the Sea* (Christchurch, 1952).

§ They were sailing to Auckland early in June, for Jack to take up a lectureship for several months.

leaving her. He drove to Oxford to pick up the Bennetts, and back to Bishop's Barn, as fast as possible. The talk of New Zealand sustained them all, but the day after Jack and Edith left, Hyde made sexual advances to Brasch. Not at all physically attracted to her, he rejected her and, partially in consequence, she made two attempts on her life. Although shocked, after his time at the Abbey he was able to cope with such events (Sybil, too, had threatened to kill herself several times).

When Hyde returned to London, he felt both guilty and relieved.\* His life settled back into its calm routine, he was able to pick up his work again, and - as always - he was content with his own company. Other friends visited, Leonie several times, and together they made a weekend excursion to Glyndebourne to *Così Fan Tutte*. When a proposed visit by her for the third week of June fell through, he was disappointed. But Crockett decided he needed a break from his Kentish Town studio and his intensive practice routine. On a hot Saturday in the middle of the month, he caught the train to Newbury, and was met by Brasch with the car.

The two spent five golden days rambling through the drowsy summer countryside, and they talked late into the warm nights, about theatre and books. In retrospect, this short time seemed to Brasch to encapsulate the essence of rural England, now under threat:

we lingered on the Chute Causeway road to see the country stretching far away beneath, beyond Collingbourne Wood and the village of Collingwood Ducis to Salisbury Plain. There was the heart of southern England. The view closed in haze perhaps twenty miles away at most, yet seemed to offer immense distance in its infinite detail of trees, hedges, woods, houses, spires, villages, as if presenting a map of time as well of place, a conspectus of history itself.<sup>52</sup>

---

\* He saw her only once more, on 29 June, before sailing for America. In September, while in Hawaii, he heard of her suicide which had occurred in London, on 23 August. Later, he wrote a poem entitled 'In Memory of Robin Hyde' (refer *DG* in *CP*, pp. 35-6).

During their walks, he discussed with Crockett the contrast between England and his homeland, a contrast which was becoming more and more apparent to him. Their conversations helped him to focus on, and redefine, the themes of his recent poetry: distance, alienation, emptiness, and the passing of time. 'We looked at the present,' he recalled,

and saw it composed of countless layers of the past, one barely distinguishable from the next; that is, every natural and manmade object seemed to evoke the many generations of men who had never been associated with it, a few of them known by name or fame but most unknown, as if it swam in a sea of years and lives all but tangible. This is a sense one never has in New Zealand, where the landscape speaks of time but not of history, of impersonal time empty and unrecorded, so that however old it may be it wears also an unexpected immaculate youthfulness that goes with the often extreme clarity of the air.<sup>53</sup>

The populated countryside around Bishop's Barn was the antithesis, both physically and historically, of the landscapes of his childhood. Most of the early New Zealand literature he had read expressed a sense of constriction and claustrophobia: a longing for the security of a familiar world. His own writing, and that of his contemporaries such as Fairburn and Glover, contrasted with such a view, by focusing on the vastness of New Zealand's natural forms. A year earlier, during his trip home, Brasch's visit to Queenstown had emphasized this for him more strongly than ever:

Wakatipu had lost none of its hold on my senses and imagination. I was struck now by the vast simplicity of the landscape, disposed in the vast masses which are its elements - Cecil, Walter, Bayonet, the Remarkables, huge initial letters of an alphabet of countless signs, or the thunderous opening notes of a symphony in which every leaf, grass and stone had its own distinct vibration. Detail was secondary, subdued in the splendour of those ample forms: in England by contrast detail is everything, because the landscapes offer few large forms.<sup>54</sup>

Then, he had been too unsettled, was missing England and the Abbey school too much, to write. Now, he had the time and space to capture in poetry, not the more intimate landscape before him, but the great spaces he had left behind.

The view of the green downs from the cottage door was strangely reassuring to him. Bertram's England was a country of poverty and political turmoil, whereas his own was 'more lasting, more deeply founded':

the England that spoke through Chaucer and Langland, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Hardy, Lawrence, Forster, sceptical contentious men, visionaries, realists, idealists.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the precarious political climate, he clung to the belief that this England, home of the bards and the dreamers, would survive, and that New Zealand would in time have such a history of its own. Had he realized it, he had already begun his part in building such a history for his home country, in bestowing a voice on the 'silent land'. The poetry he wrote during 1939 came to be regarded as one of the foundation stones of New Zealand's literary canon.

#### IV

The summer in Wiltshire later seemed to represent a last glorious moment of perfection. England continued to flaunt her physical beauty, still wore the rich tapestry of European culture; but as the threat of war loomed large, it became increasingly obvious that Brasch's privileged existence could not continue much longer. He saw the trip to Glyndebourne with

Leonie imbued with a dark significance, indicating his growing unease. Mozart, he felt, voiced the dangerously ambivalent attitude of a country preparing for inevitable war: a country which knew full well that the exquisite music it indulged in was no ordinary song, but a swansong:

Why did Mozart express that time better than any writer or painter? Because no one has evoked as he does that sense of civilization, of music, of life itself, poised over the abyss, of beauty, youth, refinement, passion and despair, longing and ecstasy, all present and all about to vanish.<sup>56</sup>

The England he returned to six months later fulfilled his premonitions. Although determined to do his duty, when confronted by a city of sandbags and boarded windows he had more than a few misgivings. The previous summer - the long days writing under steep-roofed eaves, the balmy evenings on the downs - now seemed more than ever to mark the end of a pleasurable and sheltered lifestyle. Although he had often chafed at the constraints of family loyalty, he had nonetheless ultimately pleased himself in his movements - until now. As the effects of war swept over Britain, the privileges of an individual existence were submerged. The 'pot of British society', he quickly came to see, was being 'mixed ... as [it] had never been mixed yet'.<sup>57</sup> With apprehension, he waited to see how this would affect his own life.

Mary de Beer, who had only ever done volunteer work, began shifts as a telephone operator for a central fire-station. Tim Thompson sailed into London on the *Imperial Star*, eager for anything the Navy might bring. Colin had taken a 'quite unsuitable' government job,<sup>58</sup> Crockett, living rough and working hard, was in Hertfordshire on a pacifist land-settlement. Brasch had no idea what service he himself could offer. But, just as the summer of 1939 had seemed a conclusion, now the harsh winter months at Binsted signalled the

beginning of a new phase in his life: a time for submitting to the yoke of common good, for living out the British ideal of 'team work'.

For his poetry, too, those tense months were something of a portent. His role at Binsted had been peacemaker rather than poet and, over the next five years, his writing suffered similarly from external events beyond his control. Much of his fear on returning to England was due to uncertainty. Would he be able to procure the time to write? What effect would an enforcedly public life have on his development as a writer? He quickly became weary of the constant noise and sheer difficulty of living in wartime London, and complained to Crockett:

The surface of the war is obsessive - and meaningless; yet I cant get beyond it, I remain baffled and in the dark. Partly it is that communal living affords no time for thinking; partly because one has to forget a good deal or life would be unbearable. In London, worse even than the disembowelled houses are the queues waiting to sleep in the deep underground stations.<sup>59</sup>

Paradoxically, the effect of such living inspired him to write. Uncertain at first of how to interpret the chaos around him, he characteristically expended much time and energy worrying about his inability to shape this unfamiliar world. But because of his need for escape, he began to slip back in time to a place which held the memories of solitude and wilderness. Throughout the first year of the war, his mind took refuge from the crowded London streets by once again inhabiting white deserted shores, by hearing only the roar of wind in the pines. Hedged about by bureaucratic rules, he recreated the peace of a country where the only ruling force was the hand of nature. The vision in his New Zealand poems became increasingly real to him, and he began to think of them as the culmination of his long search for a poetic voice.

With a new confidence, partly due to the encouragement of fellow New Zealander James Courage,\* he submitted his recent work to *New Writing*, the most prominent of the journals continuing in spite of the war. The universal appeal of his poems was not lost on John Lehmann, who invited him to call at the Hogarth Press. Although initially intimidated by the editor's cool authoritative air, an hour later Brasch was striding through leafy Mecklenburgh Square as if walking on air. Not only had 'In These Islands' been accepted, but also 'The City' and 'The Silent Land'; they would be published in the autumn issue. Wanting to share his good news at once, he hurried straight round to Sussex Place to tell Tim (about to embark for Canada) and the de Beers.

It was certainly a significant achievement. The contents page of the autumn issue placed him in the company of not only two Oxford contemporaries, Spender and Day-Lewis, but also Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, Laurie Lee, and V. S. Pritchett. More importantly, it defined for him an identity for which he had long been searching. Lehmann considered him to be one of the leading writers in a significant New Zealand movement. 'I had never thought of it as that,' Brasch wrote later, 'nor of myself as one of a group.'<sup>60</sup> Also in this issue was the work of a fellow countryman, Roderick Finlayson, who had already published a book of short fiction (*Brown Man's Burden*) in Auckland. Finlayson, Lehmann stated, was 'one of the most interesting of a group of New Zealand writers who have recently made their mark in the Dominion'; Charles Brasch was 'another of the same group'.<sup>61</sup>

Brasch's dual-edged vision of New Zealand had suddenly taken on a contemporary relevance. Its newly-settled race of Europeans provided a parallel for the insecurity of wartime existence, while the country itself had become for him a refuge, a promised land, a 'paradise on earth'.<sup>62</sup> He did not consciously examine the complexity of these seemingly antithetical motifs until several years later. But although unacknowledged, the feelings which

---

\* Courage was also living and working in London.

prompted this new writing were fortuitously timed for his poetic career on both sides of the world. A growing interest in colonial literature meant that he became established as a New Zealand writer before returning to that country to live. From this he gained confidence (which was reciprocated by others) that he was a poet of intent, and a suitable candidate for the editorship of *Landfall*.

The autumn issue of Lehmann's journal in which Brasch's poems appeared was, in fact, no longer *New Writing*, but *Folios of New Writing*. Inside the front cover was an editorial note which was part apologia, informing readers that, due to wartime difficulties, *Folios* would appear at irregular intervals. The war was also the reason for 'the absence of any contributions from the continent of Europe'.<sup>63</sup> Lehmann ended his note with the wish that his British Dominion writers would continue to submit work, 'as long as a common destiny binds our countries together'.

This kind of patriotism was something which Brasch had noticed the moment he disembarked at Southampton the previous November. Absent from England for several months, he immediately perceived the attitudinal difference between a country on the brink of war, and one finally committed to it. Curiously, it was relief which he found prevalent among those he knew. The insecurity which had shadowed them for years vanished, and the civil population 'prepared itself for routines and disciplines in which everyone had some definite task'.<sup>64</sup> But he himself had no task defined for him. Although the school which was once the Abbey continued, negative rumours were circulating about it, and he had no desire to return there now that Lissie was no longer principal. The miserable winter at Binsted distracted him sufficiently from his feeling of uselessness but, once established in his Lawn Road flat, the guilt at his idleness grew.

Early in July he was required to register, which he did at the Marylebone National Office. Having named his occupation as 'writer', he was asked to be more specific ('did I mean

journalist')<sup>65</sup> and wrote 'poet'. Of the likelihood of being drafted into the army, he wrote with apparent calm to Bennett:

I've been sending your *Horizon*\* to Auckland ... but if & when I'm in the army you wont get any more - I register today week.<sup>66</sup>

Three weeks after registration, he was expecting to be called up before the end of the year; his medical, he told Jack, would be any day. Beneath his apparent calm lay a morass of fears, conflicting in reason and exhausting in their constancy. Although the formalities of registration had taken only a few minutes, the identity card with which he left seemed a significant token of change, and the golden summer day was curiously unfamiliar. He was no longer able to shape his own future, and the realization of this brought, paradoxically, a sense of both restriction and relief.

Even before being caught up in civil action, his thoughts had been working and reworking the theme of war. The anxious weeks in Hawaii, the whirlwind of activity in New York, the cold winter months back in an unfamiliar England: all had contributed to the confused emotional state in which he entered 1940. The images of war, the language of conquered and conqueror, which emerged in his poetry arose subconsciously from his struggle to interpret an alien and inhospitable environment. As always in times of difficulty, he turned inwards and his struggle became a personal one, an attempt to define and maintain an unequivocal stance. Although, externally, he had labelled himself a writer - and Lehmann's acceptance of his poetry at about the same time had 'proved' this - he remained in turmoil, undecided how to reconcile his feelings of duty with his desire to be true to himself.

Never politically minded at any time, he had arrived back in England with rather vague pacifist notions. In the years leading up to the war, with a typical sense of duty, he had set

---

\* Recently begun by Spender.

about 'researching' alternative trains of thought. Reading about Ghandi's work had reinforced his belief in non-violent methods. After studying R. B. Gregg's *The Power of Non-Violence*, and Aldous Huxley's pamphlet *What Are We Going To Do About It?*, he had become 'convinced ... that pacifism was right, and with sufficient determination might be successful, and that it must be tried'.<sup>67</sup> When the Peace Pledge Union was launched by Canon Dick Sheppard, he felt obligated not only to sign the pledge, but also to attend the inaugural meeting in north-west London and to join the committee. Yet, even at this early stage, he was less than sure how to put into practice the theories he was espousing. And this was bound to happen, for Nazi Germany was gaining strength at a frightening rate:

I found it hard to foresee how we should or could behave as pacifists in the hypothetical situation we tried to imagine. We seemed to be both unrealistically isolated and uncomfortably exposed; I had no sense either of a directing force of ideas or of the influence of any magnetic personality working through or upon our polite earnest forlorn small group.<sup>68</sup>

Not surprisingly, he was influenced by Crockett's zeal for the cause, and also by Roger Cox, who also had an enviably definite outlook:

[Cox] had consistent coherent views about almost any subject that came up, such as the nature of the state, which we argued over again and again; whereas I lived usually in a shifting haze of ideas that I was seldom able to formulate clearly. I found it hard not to adopt the views or attitudes of any friends whose sympathies I shared closely, views that seemed inevitable, unanswerable, while I was with them.<sup>69</sup>

To support England and all she stood for, while remaining on safe moral ground, constituted his general theoretical stance, but this was no help in finding a daily occupation.

After moving from Binsted, he reasoned with himself that his writing would suffice; this was at least maximizing a natural talent. But, over the next few months, he discovered that his conscience would not allow him such an existence. In order to write well he had first to put a name to himself, for how could he write from the centre of himself if this centre was hazy and ill-defined? In Hawaii, at least, at a distance from war, he had no doubts that he was a pacifist. This, he wrote to Dora while waiting to tell Hyam that they would be parting company, was one of the reasons against returning to Dunedin. 'They'll probably "concentrate" pacifists in New Zealand', he predicted; '& even if they didn't it would be miserable & isolated enough'.<sup>70</sup> He expressed vague hopes of doing peace work with the Quakers in New York, but this was overthrown in favour of returning to England and to Crockett, who had more influence over him at the time than any other friend. Not surprisingly, after the household at Binsted had splintered, and he and Crockett were no longer living together, he began to reconsider his pacifist views.

The flat he took in Lawn Road, just off Haverstock Hill, could hardly have been more of a contrast to the huge draughty barn from which he had fled. Small, self-contained, it was part of a modern block called the Isokon which (coincidentally) had been designed by a New Zealander, Wells Coates, in the Thirties. There was a common dining-room and bar (inevitably nicknamed the Isobar) on the ground floor, which became a natural shelter during air-raids, but apart from this contact Brasch maintained a distance from his neighbours.\* In his neat, book-lined cubby-hole, with its view of cherry trees and hawthorn, he now had the mental space to examine his motives for upholding a pacifist stance.

By May, he had come to the conclusion that, to be true to himself, he would have to renounce this stance, and he braced himself to face the consequences. Crockett, who was temporarily living at Anne's family home, was the first person to receive the news.

---

\* Later, the crime writer Agatha Christie became one of the residents at Lawn Road but, although he observed her movements with interest, he was too in awe of her reputation to approach her.

Responding to an urgent request, he met a 'tense and anxious' Brasch at a pub in St Martin's Lane:

He told me [Crockett recalled] he could no longer hold his pacifist views. I think he expected me to react as if he was some sort of back-sliding traitor! He explained that because he was Jewish he could no longer stand apart as the suffering of the Jewish population became more and more terrible.<sup>71</sup>

Crockett's reaction could not have been further from the outrage Brasch had expected. He continued to uphold his pacifist beliefs (he, too, had joined the Peace Pledge Union three years earlier), but he sympathized with Brasch's decision.\*

Characteristically, Brasch viewed this crisis in intensely personal terms. First, his conversion was caused by guilt born from his awareness of his Jewish ancestry. Secondly, his main fear following the conversion was that it would cause a rift in one of his closest relationships. Furthermore, although he stated that he identified more strongly with a group other than the pacifists, he already knew from past experience that he was unable to wholly commit himself to any cause. When writing of his pledge to the Peace Union, for example, he admitted sketchy attendance and a lack of faith which soon overrode his initial sense of duty:

I had always shrunk from aligning myself with causes and parties.... In any case the desperateness which had driven me to sign the pledge was not going to continue to operate in such a way as to keep me for long an active member of a group.<sup>72</sup>

---

\* They continued to be close friends and, when Crockett formed a peace settlement near St Ives, Brasch spent several happy holidays there.

His mistrust of conformity made it unlikely that he had any intention of actively championing the Jewish cause. Once again, he was acting on strong ideals rather than practical plans, and he soon realized that taking such a seemingly decisive step had achieved little.

After registering, the thought of joining the army filled him with a similar dread: the dread of losing his individuality. Before long, his introspective nature had led him to conclude that, in both pacifist and pro-active stances, he was primarily operating on selfish motives. At the beginning of 1941, still waiting apprehensively to be called up, he confessed to John:

I, like so many others, am afraid of my own fear; and my fear is alarmingly real and strong. Indeed I think I fear myself-in-the-army, more than actual army life, because I fear to be reduced to shapeless khaki state of mind, or to a dodger - into some form of spiritual death. When I see clearly, I see that it wouldn't matter at all if after entering the army I never wrote a line of verse (or prose) again, so long as I could somehow control what is base and cowardly in me and assert what is human. But I doubt my ability to do so; I am shamefully weak.<sup>73</sup>

And so began another dilemma, no less difficult to overcome than his pacifist views: partly caused, in fact, by their renunciation. Having made himself available for military service, he began to suspect that this was simply another manifestation of his own cowardliness ('as always I wanted to conform, to be thought well of, and so to find some kind of security')<sup>74</sup> and of his selfishness ('I wanted time to think, to be free to write, and to be exposed to the war without a veil of work and interests').<sup>75</sup> Soon after the meeting with Crockett, he was again suffering doubts but this time, ironically, over his reasons for doubting the fundamental theories of pacifism in the first place. He wrote to John:

Sometimes I don't understand why I'm no longer a pacifist, & feel that my emotions stampeded me into the change - which nevertheless I don't regret. I'm afraid that for me pacifism may merely have been another form of escapism. Anyway for the present the change too is an escape, a relief - I felt stifled & I can now breathe again. God knows why; & it seems so contemptible trivial, [sic] so irrelevant, in face of what the war is.<sup>76</sup>

To Jack Bennett, also a pacifist, he stated even more clearly that renouncing the cause was a cowardly desertion rather than a positive commitment to another school of thought:

I must tell you that my beliefs have been overturned - I feel very sick about it, but I can't be a pacifist any longer, & when I am called up I shall have to go. It may be weak, I don't know, but I cannot sustain a simply individual refusal. Still I hope there will be a lot of unswerving pacifists - I believe they are valuable. A good number of communities have started in different parts of the country ... they will need terrific determination - courage - I know in some places there's a good deal of feeling against them. But I can't help feeling they are somehow, as communities, in a false position, simply because if the Germans were to win they would not be allowed to survive; it is different for the individual pacifist. I should be sorry if you were shaken - as I say, I am rather ashamed of myself for failing in what is the first real test.<sup>77</sup>

A period of unease followed, as he nervously waited to be called up. He had no idea how he would cope if required to fight; looking inwards, he saw a lack of courage which appalled him. The Spanish war had already raised this issue in his mind. From the safety of the Abbey he had watched Auden and Spender make their journey to Spain, and had responded to their interpretation of the situation 'like a leaf to the wind'.<sup>78</sup> His admiration for them was as much

to do with what he took to be their courage as with their literary talent, for he knew himself unequal to such a challenge:

it did not occur to me even to think of going to Spain myself. Instinctively I shunned war and everything to do with it; I was not a practical man, I was timid and cowardly, and I had no wish to die, for however good a cause.<sup>79</sup>

The reasons for his decision to register, then, were several, and so complex that even in retrospect he found them difficult to define. As late as 1944 he was still mulling over exactly what had prompted him to abandon pacifism, and whether it had been a wise and justifiable move. 'Perhaps I was too much influenced by my Jewish blood', he wrote to Crockett. And yet, he continued, it had been Auden who had influenced him more than anything:

[his lines] still seem valid, though the consequences of doing as he commends are what we see:

*And to the good who know how wide the gulf, how deep,  
Between Ideal & Real, who being good have felt  
The final temptation to withdraw, sit down or weep,  
We pray the power to take upon themselves the guilt  
Of human action, though still as ready to confess  
The imperfection of what can and must be built,  
The wish and power to act, forgive, and bless.*

But all - all human action seems to involve guilt; there is no good policy, there are only better & worse ones, & to weigh them daily & daily make one's choice again is something beyond my strength, for it demands one's whole energy; & so in spite of my increasing doubts I have never dared to raise the question again.<sup>80</sup>

From 6 July 1940, he had committed himself to a course of action to which he felt he must adhere, although his very nature was against it. It remained for him to negotiate his way through the confusion of day-to-day living in a manner tolerable to him which, nonetheless, did not negate the principles which his conscience had dictated for him.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ind.*, p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.*, p. 335.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 457.

<sup>4</sup> CB to JC, 28 November [1938].

<sup>5</sup> *Ind.*, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 461.

<sup>7</sup> CB to JC, 18 [January 1939].

<sup>8</sup> CB to JC, 21 [January 1939].

<sup>9</sup> *Ind.*, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> *Ind.*, p. 335.

<sup>11</sup> *Ind.*, p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> CB to JC, 'Grayshott, Tuesday' [March 1939].

<sup>13</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].

<sup>14</sup> CB to JC, 23 July [1939].

<sup>15</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1939].

<sup>16</sup> 'Lady Engine', *NFO in CP*, pp. 116-17.

<sup>17</sup> CB to JC, 5 November [1939].

<sup>18</sup> CB to JAWB, 29 December [1939].

<sup>19</sup> CB to JAWB, 29 December [1939].

<sup>20</sup> CB to JC, 10 July [1939].

<sup>21</sup> *Ind.*, p. 352.

<sup>22</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1/4.

<sup>23</sup> JC to David Cox, 13 May 1986.

<sup>24</sup> *Ind.*, p. 352.

<sup>25</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 498.

<sup>26</sup> JC to Bill Goodwin, 28 April 1986.

<sup>27</sup> CB to JAWB, 22 January [1940].

<sup>28</sup> CB to JC, '11 Sussex Place, NW1. Wednesday' [February 1940].

<sup>29</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 498.

<sup>30</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd, Tuesday' [1940].

<sup>31</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd, Tuesday' [1940].

<sup>32</sup> CB to JC, 22 August [1940].

<sup>33</sup> CB to JC, 5 December 1940.

<sup>34</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1941].

<sup>35</sup> CB to JC, 16 September [1941].

<sup>36</sup> *Ind.*, p. 579.

<sup>37</sup> CB to JC, 22 October [1941].

<sup>38</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 580.

<sup>39</sup> CB to JC, 'Grayshott, Tuesday' [spring, 1939].

<sup>40</sup> Untitled sonnet, 'Earth and water are the same for ever', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Untitled sonnet, 'Every choice is wrong', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Untitled sonnet, 'All pain can teach', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 418.

<sup>44</sup> CB to JS, 25 June [1939].

- <sup>45</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 574.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 575.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ind.*, p. 336.
- <sup>48</sup> Untitled sonnet, 'Only the stones are perfect', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>49</sup> Untitled sonnet, 'Earth and water are the same forever', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.
- <sup>50</sup> 'Pipikariti', *TLP* in *CP*, p. 3.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 337.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 477.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 477.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ind.*, p. 320.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind.*, p. 337.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ind.*, p. 342.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ind.*, p. 351.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ind.*, p. 347.
- <sup>59</sup> CB to JC, 13 October [1940].
- <sup>60</sup> *Ind.*, p. 362.
- <sup>61</sup> 'About the Contributors', *Folios of New Writing* [hereafter referred to as *FNW*] (London, 1940), pp. 8-10.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ind.*, p. 379.
- <sup>63</sup> *FNW* (London, 1940).
- <sup>64</sup> *Ind.*, pp. 350-51.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ind.*, p. 352.
- <sup>66</sup> CB to JAWB, 29 June [1940].
- <sup>67</sup> *Ind.*, p. 267.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ind.*, p. 267.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ind. MSS*, pp. 494-5.
- <sup>70</sup> CB to D. de Beer, 8 September [1939].
- <sup>71</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-4.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ind.*, p. 267.
- <sup>73</sup> CB to JC, 16 January [1941].
- <sup>74</sup> *Ind.*, p. 355.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 493.
- <sup>76</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd. Tuesday' [1940].
- <sup>77</sup> CB to JAWB, 12 June [1940].
- <sup>78</sup> *Ind.*, p. 292.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ind.*, p. 292.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ind.*, p. 292. The lines quoted by CB are from 'Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament', in *Letters from Iceland*.

## **Chapter Seven**

***Words Have Lost Their Tongues:1939-44***

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### WORDS HAVE LOST THEIR TONGUES: 1939-44

After registering in May, Brasch hoped for several months of uninterrupted time in which to write. It was not as simple as he had hoped. Lacking confidence in his own ability, he continued to question the validity of writing as an occupation. He had renounced pacifism to avoid closeting himself away from the war; now he found that he had neither the motivation nor the experience to shape a comprehensive vision from the alien world around him.

Adding to his confusion was the fact that, superficially at least, English life continued to offer some of its old attractions. The England that he had pined for back in 'philistine' New Zealand, that England of opera and ballet and theatre, limped on through the early 1940s. After nights spent sleeping in the basement of his apartment block, or trudging the streets fire-watching, he was still able to attend ballet or film matinees, or to read the latest issue of *Horizon*. The National Gallery remained open for viewing, and held daily lunch-time concerts for the price of a shilling. The London Library, although working to a reduced timetable, also opened every day.

In September of 1940, he wrote to Crockett (who was working as a CO on a farm in Cornwall) that London appeared 'surprisingly normal':

there was a raid on the whole morning, but people walked the streets all the time, some buses ran and quite a lot of shops were open.<sup>1</sup>

The following month, staying just out of London in Hemel Hempstead, he described his days as being so peaceful that one 'would not know it was wartime'.<sup>2</sup> And he wrote in similarly reassuring terms to Bennett, who was in America after his trip to New Zealand:

[London] remains surprisingly normal, in spite of barbed wire here & there & little fortresses, & countless air raid shelters in the streets. I went today to a matinee of the Devil's Disciple, & I think every seat was taken. Shops are full, & restaurants.... The pigeons in Trafalgar Square are still fed; the Heath is still crowded at weekends.<sup>3</sup>

But an optimistic outlook was to become less and less possible, as England settled in for what looked like being a lengthy term of deprivation.

## I

As the months progressed, Brasch felt his tenuous hold on an all-encompassing perspective slipping; as a consequence, he became less and less able to put what he saw into words. In November 1940, he complained to Crockett that he felt unable to 'master events', either emotionally or creatively:

Too often I feel a dwarf who cannot ever see their height and extent, lost and dumb in the shadow of them. Only once, perhaps, have I felt that I had some insight into what was

happening, some grasp of the whole; and that was at the very beginning of the war when I was alone in Honolulu and watching with horror the overrunning of Poland.<sup>4</sup>

One of the objections he raised against the pacifist cause was that it provided insulation against the chill wind of reality:

What people were doing seemed to come between them and the war: war, the state of enmity and mortal struggle, ruthlessness, evil, destruction and waste. Even political aims had retreated into the background. The war seemed more remote in London than in New York. It was almost as if, in their busy-ness, people had turned their backs on it, which was the last thing I wanted to do.<sup>5</sup>

He remained baffled, and unable to interpret the subject he most wanted to capture in his writing. As air raids became more frequent in London, he found that it required his entire energy simply to get through each day.

Ironically, the success of his poetry with Lehmann had compounded his dilemma. For years, publication in a respected English journal had been the pinnacle of his ambitions. Now that this milestone was behind him, he found that the thicket in front of him was almost more impenetrable than before. His expectations of himself remained onerous, as they were to be all his life. And that which he described as his 'outward' life was no less of a struggle than previously.

Had this been a time of peace, acceptance of his achievement and its consequences might have been simpler. But late in the summer of 1940, as the Battle of Britain raged, the attention of his friends and associates was given to the development of the war. The realization that achieving a long-held literary dream had signified little hit him hard:

Inwardly, this [achievement] marked a stage in my life. That poems of mine should appear in a periodical which published Auden and Spender and other writers I admired, English, French, Czech, Indian - that in itself seemed an unmistakable accolade, singling me out by the company I was placed in. It was a declaration to the world that I was a poet, that I had not lived in vain. If that allowed me, at moments, to hold my head just a little higher, it made not an iota of difference to my outward life or to the way other people thought of me. Life was no different, no easier, because I was a poet.<sup>6</sup>

The questions in his head continued to clamour. As a hot August gave way to a sultry September, he found it impossible to concentrate on his writing. He received the proofs of his poems from Lehmann in the first week of September. The accompanying biographical notes described him as a writer and ex-archaeologist; he was 'at present living in this country, waiting to be called up'.<sup>7</sup> This matter-of-fact statement read strangely to his eyes for, although this was exactly what he was doing, his anxiety was so great that it made daily living almost intolerable. With every month of waiting, his sense of being a drifter with no purpose intensified. Some years later, he analyzed his predicament:

One's place in the world, one's relationship with other people and with society, is never fixed but always in flux, changing subtly or sharply and often extremely hard to be sure of. If you have a regular job, a settled home, well-defined permanent interests, you can at most times tell pretty accurately who you are and what and where; you can as it were point to a recognized position which you occupy on the map of society. Or you can make a place for yourself by your own efforts in any number of fields. But there are always people whose status, and even identity, remains undecided.<sup>8</sup>

The decision to register had proved no conclusion. It marked instead the beginning of another period of indecision, all the more tiring because it was no longer he who determined when it would end. Nominally, he was free to live as usual until he was called up:

But to live as usual was, since I had given up teaching, to live as a writer; and in almost everyone's eyes that of course meant to do nothing. How can a young fit man do nothing when his country needs him in wartime? ... As always I wanted to conform, to be well thought of, and so to find some kind of security.<sup>9</sup>

Adding to his anxiety was the lack of stability in his living arrangements. Early in September a bomb had fallen close to the block of flats at Lawn Road. He and the other residents, sleeping in the Isobar, were showered with glass but emerged unhurt. On the upper floors, however, the damage was more extensive, and his own flat was uninhabitable. After two nights spent with the de Beers (who were determined to stay in Sussex Place regardless of the heavy raids), he moved out of the city to stay near Hemel Hempstead with his Hallenstein cousin, Enid Cianchi. He had been a frequent visitor to her house at Felden throughout the summer, for her Italian husband had enlisted his (somewhat reluctant) help with a book on 'Alfredo's usual theme - how science can save the world'.<sup>\*10</sup>

Now, he camped in Enid's and Alfredo's room, the only one blacked-out; for he could not bear the claustrophobic dug-out shelter where the rest of the family were sleeping. The atmosphere of the house was not conducive to creativity, being dark and sombrely furnished. Fancifully, he imagined that all those who inhabited it would gradually become similarly 'hideous in body and mind'.<sup>11</sup> The need for a constant state of watchfulness, which

---

\* By September, the book was in the hands of the printers, but the many weeks spent 'Englishing' the text proved to be wasted. The project, which Alfredo had promised would lead to 'endless' promotional work, came to nothing.

extended to sleeping fully-dressed, left him with little surplus energy. 'We were all,' he recalled, 'individually and collectively, under sentence of death. To stay alive, living from day to day, took all one's strength'.<sup>12</sup>

Solitude was a luxury which belonged to the past. Writing to Bennett in the States, he told of the difficulty he had had in London settling down to write. His current situation, he lamented, was equally impossible:

For myself, I feel fatalistic, rather numb about the future. Sometimes I wish the army would hurry up & send for me; I cannot write, not living alone, & that is troubling....<sup>13</sup>

In the period from August to November, he wrote nothing of worth: a little revision, and some reading of Goethe, Shelley, and Byron (poetry seemed the only 'adequate' medium)<sup>14</sup> was all that he could manage. He drew a little comfort from the news that Crockett, in Cornwall, and even James Courage ('till now so admirably regular')<sup>15</sup> were similarly affected. Even the allocation of an attic room for a study failed to provide refuge in the excitable Cianchi household. Although grateful for their hospitality (they refused to accept payment for board), he grew more and more frustrated as one unproductive week stretched into the next:

All the talk on the floors below came up to me as if it were going on just outside my door. There was incessant domestic activity; the house was cleaned remorselessly, punishingly. There was morning tea, visitors came in, and we had to suffer every wireless bulletin from breakfast to bedtime. Hell would be like that, I thought; news bulletins every hour, each as meaningless as the last, to which everyone would be forced to listen.<sup>16</sup>

Exasperation was followed by doubt: had the 'great shade' deserted him so soon?<sup>17</sup> In desperation, he contemplated renting a room in the farmhouse next to the Crocketts' in Cornwall. But he was likely to be called up at any time, and he was also in the rare situation of running low on funds, for it was six months since any family money had come through from New Zealand. The best he could manage was a ten-day holiday in Cornwall, early in 1941, which at least provided a breathing-space. He returned to Felden with a more optimistic outlook, writing to John in mid-January:

Now I must say a heartfelt thank you to you both for my happy week. It is such a satisfaction to know how you are living, what you look out on in the morning, what you have to hope for & to fear.... Now I shall dream sometimes of your east wind & your stream, of Castle an Dinas & the light over Mount's Bay, of the colour of the moors, the colour of stone in St Ives & the seagulls sweeping across the harbour; & wake & be grateful to you for the dream. But for more than the dream too.<sup>18</sup>

The break in Cornwall did more than restore his body and mind to health; it reaffirmed the things important to him, and thus reaffirmed his identity. With John, and sometimes with Anne and Bettina, he walked the windswept moors. Their bleak, empty beauty was a world away from the London streets, crowded with the homeless and scarred by bombs. His diaries became full of colour once more as he wrote of 'chalky blue' lakes, of colourful fishing boats, of water bronzed by 'spotlights' of sun. Here was a subject which had remained constant despite the madness of war, which provided him not only with solace but with inspiration. More significant still was his instinctive comparison between this landscape and his homeland. The 'great slabs [of rock]... piled one on top of each other'<sup>19</sup> reminded him of the

hills in Central Otago, and with this memory came a reassurance that poetry would return to him. He had written of New Zealand with notable success; he would do so again.

A love of landscape - or more specifically, the acknowledgment of a love of landscape - gave him back himself. Like Eliot's Fisher King, he shored what fragments he had against the ruins he perceived around him. Many years later, he was able to assess what had been a largely instinctive act of self-preservation:

I began to see that the only way in which I could save myself from dissolution in the bewildering formlessness of time was to draw distinctions, establish small islands of meaning, and so gradually build up a living centre of my own. Narrow, fragile ground; but when systems of belief have crumbled the individual is necessarily alone, and with little more than his own experience to guide him. He cannot foresee the future but he possesses the past, which tells him that certain things must always be true; he has a sense of relationship with all that is....<sup>20</sup>

A return to the reassurance of the natural world became one of his 'islands of meaning'. The other absolute in his life was friendship and this, too, was reinforced by his time in Cornwall. Staying in the tiny four-roomed cottage above Nancledra, he was reminded of the potential goodness of human relationships. Although John and Anne frequently flared up at each other, it was clear that they were very much in love, and the honesty which existed between the two of them and the equally uninhibited Bettina reaffirmed his belief in human nature.

His own reserved nature was vastly different, but he was nonetheless drawn into the circle of life at Georgia. There were several pacifists living nearby and, although life was 'harsh and primitive' and chores 'endless',<sup>21</sup> it retained a sweetness which countered the atrocities committed elsewhere. There was far less space here than at Felden - visitors slept on a camp stretcher in the living-room - but the company was congenial and artistic. On wet days, John painted, while Anne and Bettina read *Cymbeline* aloud, or acted, or danced.

Despite the lack of privacy, Brasch found a mental space which had been unattainable for many months. For Bettina's twenty-first birthday he was able to write a celebratory poem 'to order':\* an achievement which would have been impossible only weeks earlier.

His tribute, in the manner of a Victorian ode, was headed formally: 'To Bettina Stern on her 21st Birthday January 10, 1941'.<sup>22</sup> Yet it reveals affection for a friend who was 'outgoing and exuberant, full of feeling', and affectionate in return. Brasch worked hard over the three stanzas; even when writing without publication in mind, he was meticulous and painstaking. The rhyme scheme of each stanza, consistent throughout, is classical and sedate, and there are polished touches, such as the reiteration and alliteration of the second stanza:

Cold the light that waits for you,  
Cold the wind in wait;  
Do not look by sighs to see  
Nature celebrate.  
Yet silently earth feels your human  
Nature ripened, knows you woman,  
And through her waters and her rocks  
Is secretly elate.

The chill hours before daybreak - the time when, sitting up in bed, he usually wrote his diary - had been productive ones.

Despite the well-crafted feel to the poem (for he insisted that poetry was as much a craft as an art), the occasional clumsiness suggests a less self-critical approach in play. This was not, after all, an offering to *New Writing*. The rhythm of the third stanza lurches slightly, creating an off-beat effect in the second line:

---

\* See Appendix, p. 359.

Though the moor hang out no flags  
And low the stream sing,  
We, frail and mortal, offer you  
Mortal offering.

There was, too, an unusual intimacy of tone: 'It is for you, dear Twenty-one/ The world awakes to-day'. His words were copied out in flowing script by John, whose pictures framed the poem: putti crouching by a miniature Georgia Cottage, angels with harps hovering over clearly recognizable portraits of John (painting), Charles (writing), and Anne (reading).

The shops in Penzance and St Ives were scoured for any available delicacies. In the evening, a party was held in a neighbouring cottage: a rare feast with ham, eggs, and Cornish cream. It was just the kind of occasion in which Brasch sparkled, amongst close friends whom he trusted, and whose sensibilities matched his own. And although his tribute to Bettina was nothing more than a slight offering for a friend, it had given him back some confidence in his writing.

He had rediscovered, too, the evocative centre to his poems which Lehmann had noticed the previous year. The Cornish countryside had come alive for him, was captured in the net of his words. In 'To Bettina', the rocks and waters are silent but not inimical witnesses to the moors' human occupation. The moon, 'ignorant' of the birthday celebrations, marshals the tides; the bright sun slinks 'sullenly' behind the clouds. Gradually, he was feeling his way back to an instinctive poetry which he had lost in the confusion and fear of 1940. His gift to Bettina was equally a gift to him.

## II

After ten happy days at Nancledra, Brasch returned to Felden with renewed resolution, determined to conquer the apathy and crippling indecision which had blocked him in his writing. He was keen to leave the Cianchis as soon as possible, but his future was so uncertain that it was difficult to make plans. Only four days after catching the train back from Cornwall, he wrote to Jack Bennett (now working for the British Information Service in New York) of his desire for a definitive event:

What have I to tell you? Merely that I am still waiting & not knowing what is going to happen to me. But I've got to find out very soon; I cant hang on like this any longer living with other people & unable to work properly. I manage to read a little, but it's a fragmentary sort of life.<sup>23</sup>

So intense was his dislike of the prolonged waiting that it overcame his fear (also intense) of the army. By early February he had made up his mind to contact his nearest registration office for some - for any - information on his recruitment. But before he had done so, on 4 February, the summons arrived on the doormat of the Cianchis' red-brick house. He was required to attend a medical examination at St Albans the following Friday.

The appointment was short, less humiliating than he had feared, and had surprising results. Once his ordeal was over, he emerged from the shabby office building into a spring-like day whose sweetness reflected his elated mood:

The result of my medical [he wrote to John] was the greatest surprise - they put me in Grade 3 & told me I wouldn't be called up for some time. I was too flabbergasted to ask why, so I have to find out, & shall do so soon. I felt rather a fraud & wondered if it could be because I was so nervous & tense; but there were 5 doctors & it seemed a fairly thorough (& not too inhuman) examination.<sup>24</sup>

Elation quickly turned to lassitude: he had been too long under strain, his nerves stretched to breaking-point. He had overheard one of the army doctors mention emphysema of the lung; coincidentally, one of his cousins was dying of TB. Did release from the army simply mean incarceration of a different kind? His active imagination threw itself once more into top gear. He was an invalid, 'surrounded by interest and solicitude'; he was dependent on relations for the rest of his life, unable to write, creativity consumed by a dread disease. A visit to the local doctor, however, put a swift end to such self-dramatization:

[He] told me I was perfectly fit for the kind of life I wanted to lead. If I were subjected to severe exposure I might not stand it, and in view of my asthmatic past and because asthma was still latent in me the army medicos no doubt considered me too great a risk. Forget Grade 3 and live your life, he said.<sup>25</sup>

Reassured, Brasch estimated his respite to last at least six months. Meanwhile, the world was once more filled with colour and possibility. Spring that year seemed particularly beautiful. He no longer saw only a charred and blackened London; reprieved, he also noticed signs of new life. To John, he rhapsodized:

London is alight with golden forsythia and with almond blossom delicately foaming out of its black boughs; and little

leaves are opening everywhere, as if the trees, moored all winter, were being loosened and set afloat upon the air.<sup>26</sup>

With this reawakening came a renewed conviction that he could mould his wartime experiences into a creative form.

From the beginning of the war, the position of the artist in society - and, more particularly, a society in crisis - had increasingly preoccupied him. Throughout 1941 his thoughts clarified so that, when Crockett wrote to him in the same dilemma, he was able to offer considered and sympathetic advice:

I agree with you that some kinds of isolation are dangerous for the artist; it is dangerous to be cut off from the common life - from the life-giving, even if it be also the death-dealing. To forget the misery of the many in the midst of one's comfort & delight is fatal, is deadly, although for it to destroy or impair that delight is wrong too - possibly just as deadly. Life is a tightrope feat - no, worse - we walk on razor-edges.... Yes, the artist has to keep close to life, to shun provincialism, aridity, to fear even his own success. If in any sense you feel you are standing against the stream in such a way as to be cut off from it, whatever your reasons for standing against - then beware.<sup>27</sup>

Sassoon, he reminded Crockett, had felt the same sense of isolation. Although admitting that the experience of others could not be of much help, he nonetheless copied out for John those lines from *Letters from Iceland* ('certainly by Auden, though given to both him & MacNeice in the book') which had earlier proved a major influence in his own decision to renounce pacifism.

Auden had remained one of his literary heroes: a writer who had mastered the role of social poet, speaking for the masses while always maintaining an objective vision.\* Now he

---

\* For Brasch's poetical tribute to Auden, refer 'Paying my Devoirs', *NFO* in *CP*, pp. 129-31.

vowed to follow Auden's lead, and the Japanese attacks of December 1941 heightened his determination to continue with his writing:

After my first horror & sickness at the Japanese blow & the prisoning [sic] of the Pacific - this last gift of the white to the coloured people - I reacted, & felt that my chief determination ought to be, as far as in me lay, to create more, since every fresh act of destruction demands an uprush of creation to counterbalance & to outweigh it.<sup>28</sup>

Although drawing parallels between Crockett's predicament and his own, he was both less confident and more introspective than Crockett. For him, the balancing of internal and external expectations was a difficult and constant task. He continued to maintain that both Crockett and Roger Cox\* were justified in remaining aloof from the common experience of war. To waste their talents would be criminal, he argued, adding that there were some artists who did not need to 'plunge into the cauldron':

some can experience that imaginatively, & it is sufficient for them; some need, above all, recollection, tranquillity, discipline imposed from within, & a deep continuity.<sup>29</sup>

He hesitated to place himself in either category. He knew he was incapable of 'plunging' into active service; although it was ten months since his exemption, the dread of being called up was as strong as ever. Surrounded by daily evidence of others' courage, he was deeply ashamed of his own crippling fear. In the days after the bombing of Lawn Road, he had been

---

\* Like Lissie, he believed that Cox was close to genius in music, art, and intellect.

severely shocked, suffering shaking and nausea; during the larger raids on London, he admitted to being 'vilely & inhumanly' afraid. 'I know that I should be so again', he owned to John: 'It is humiliating to fear to such a degree'.<sup>30</sup>

Although he longed to avoid such situations, he sensed they could provide him with valuable inspiration. He envied his Oxford contemporary, MacNeice, for his insouciance: a quality which he commemorated in 'Discord on Louis MacNeice', on the occasion of the Irish poet's death in 1963:

Unbriable poet, assured voice  
 Like no other, salty, himself,  
 Unafraid to act himself only,  
 To live his own life - and how mockingly,  
 Stalking London on loudest war-nights,  
 He would trail his coat at death, smoke-grimed  
 From fires that licked at the dome of Paul's;  
 Unafraid to speak as he knew in the hubbub  
 Of that showbiz supermarket of living  
 He revelled in, laughed at, sadly felt for,  
 And caught in the longer memory  
 Of his feigning, flickering, gipsy poems.<sup>31</sup>

Such ability both inspired and depressed him. Oppressed by the vastness of war, he saw his own talent to be negligible. 'I cannot do much', he explained to Crockett in December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbour: 'I think I've told you before that I am bitterly conscious of being deeply flawed, of being only half an artist'.<sup>32</sup>

Yet there remained within him a seed of determination which continued to grow steadily. Damp chilly days gave way to the fresh green warmth of spring, and his fears of the army and his medical anxieties were lulled. Even before he had moved from Felden Barns, he was rejoicing to John that his 'months-long sterility' was over:

I have some plans of a v. general kind which might one day lead to 3 collections of poems; they will serve if nothing else to give me direction, & I think that is useful.<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, now that he had literary plans, they could not take precedence; for, more than ever, he felt he should find work of some kind. One Saturday shortly after his medical, he spent the day with Colin, walking to Tring.\* The two younger Roberts boys, Roger and Patrick, had already been called up, but Colin was engaged in intelligence work for the Foreign Office. His unit was understaffed, and he suggested that Brasch join them.

After several months of drifting in a haze of guilt and fear, Brasch knew the effect of indirection on his work and his nerves. He eagerly accepted the offer of a position, however lowly, in the Foreign Office. Leaving the Cianchis was a more difficult matter for, despite railing at the distractions of a noisy household, he had appreciated the stability family life had given him:

Day-to-day life in Enid's house at Felden gave me a firm basis of continuity and security through all domestic alarms and the outward horror of the time. The regularities of a household with children, and the animated moody intense life of the children that makes each day so different - nothing is more reassuring and diverting.<sup>34</sup>

Not only had life here distracted him from external events; it had provided him with an excuse for not writing. Following his first significant publication in England, expectations (not least his own) had arisen, and now demanded to be met. While he remained at Felden, he could at least justify his idleness by the lack of privacy. Shortly, however, he received another

---

\* Close to his familiar Chiltern Hills.

job offer which reinforced the decision to move. By the middle of March, he was installed in a room at Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead, and was working seven nights a week as a firewatcher.

This opportunity had arisen during a visit to Fred Manner, a former teacher of John's. Fred, whose position at Goldsmith's had lapsed indefinitely six months earlier, and his wife Dorothy (also an artist) were sympathetic and stimulating companions. When the flat in Lawn Road was damaged in the September raids, and Brasch had moved to Felden, he left many of his valued possessions with the couple. Through the first months of 1941, his visits to their home - the bottom floor of an old house in Adelaide Road - became more and more frequent, and his admiration of Fred in particular grew. Waiting nervously for an army summons, he was steadied by the older man's accepting, almost fatalistic, attitude towards the war. 'Fred is quite a sage in his way', he wrote to Crockett in January 1941:

He has a firm conviction that he will not be killed; hence his calm. How I envy him that - not, I mean, the conviction that he won't be killed, but the calm, the ability to live sanely and quietly amidst all this horror.<sup>35</sup>

In the middle of March, he had some particularly good news to share. The immediate threat of armed service had been removed after his recent visit to St Albans, and only the day before his doctor had reassured him about the results of his medical. It was a surprisingly mild day of pale sunlight and sweet-smelling breezes; the three sat in the small back garden, under the dappled shade of beech and lime trees, and drank tea, and talked. A colleague at the Finchley Road watch-room was leaving, Fred said, on the condition that he found another opening. Would Charles like the job?

As work at the Foreign Office would not be commencing for another few months, this seemed an ideal situation. It offered an income (firewatchers were employed privately), it assuaged Brasch's guilt at not contributing towards the war effort and, best of all, it allowed him a certain amount of free time in which to write. The only unfortunate thing, he wrote wryly to Crockett later, was that the buildings he and Fred were paid to watch were ones which they would gladly see burn.<sup>36</sup>

He began his new position in the middle of March, working a seven-to-seven shift through the night. His task was simply to watch, and to raise the alarm if he saw fire-bombs (it was the fire-fighters' duty to extinguish them). By this stage, the nights of frequent air-raids on London had ceased. During the three and a half months Brasch spent in the Finchley Road, there were only three heavy attacks - though these were bad enough. For each raid, he and Fred were out in the street, watching planes circle the City; missiles fell in red flashes, and all around resounded the sharp crack of shrapnel on roofs.

The majority of the time, however, the nights were reasonably peaceful. Initially, he had planned to finish at seven, sleep the morning away, and work at his writing in the afternoons. But as night after night passed without alarm, he found the hours before midnight to be the most profitable. At first he had found the watch-room despicable: blacked-out windows, soiled brown wallpaper, and tatty furniture filled him with a 'dull hopelessness'.<sup>37</sup> The helmets and coats hanging on hooks were an unwelcome reminder of the world outside, as was the air-raid shelter below the building. 'It seemed a place of death', he wrote afterwards:

where the spirit was dead, where light never reached, where man was no longer man; loathing and sickness of heart weighed me down.<sup>38</sup>

After a time, however, the physical aspects of the building went unnoticed. Five nights out of seven, Fred and Charles had the room to themselves and then it seemed 'a small fortress, even a kind of home'.<sup>39</sup> Fred's nature had much to do with this atmosphere of security, for he was a kind and steady, though never stolid, companion. Many cosy evenings were spent in front of the fire talking over coffee; later the two would wrap themselves in rugs and retire to deck-chairs to snatch a few hours of sleep. On other evenings, Fred was perfectly satisfied to occupy himself drawing, leaving Brasch free to read, write letters, and work at his poetry.

Two weeks after he had begun the job, he was able to write to Crockett that he had 'several pieces at the notebook stage', although they needed much revision and were not yet in a presentable form.<sup>40</sup> 'I haven't yet established myself in the routine of this life yet', he added as justification. But three weeks later, he copied three of them onto the back of another lengthy letter: 'Shepherd-boy's Song', 'Tryst', and 'Thornbush'.<sup>\*</sup> Although none was overtly indigenous, there was no doubt about what they represented for him. 'The setting', he stated, 'is New Zealand'.<sup>41</sup>

During those war-time nights, his nerves on edge and his ears alert for the sound of a raid, he created a directly contrasting world of quietness and space. 'Shepherd-boy's Song', simply told in the first person, conjures up a landscape of rocks, wind and water, whose only inhabitants are a boy and his flock. For Crockett, the vision may have been that of a rugged Cornish coast; for Brasch, it was the starkly beautiful countryside of Central Otago where he spent his childhood:

Down by the lake-shore I called to the waves,  
Riding riding they tossed me their lives  
In a foam of flowers  
With a rushing sigh.

---

<sup>\*</sup> See Appendix, pp. 359-61.

I lay in the tussock still and alone,  
 The hawks were hovering under the sun  
 But they could not find me  
 So shadow-still.<sup>42</sup>

The shepherd's world is as empty as that depicted in 'The Silent Land'. There is no saviour here, no redeeming presence: the pine trees are devoid of wind, the sun is 'sullen' and will not appear. But with the falling of night comes security and comfort:

Pale as rocks in the listening air,  
 Pale as the starlight's foaming fire  
 Are my heavy sheep  
 And the night is my dog.

Nothing escapes its everywhere eye,  
 Nothing can harm them, none of them stray,  
 And I can sleep  
 While the night watches.

The personification of the elements (a technique used frequently in Brasch's first two volumes) is reversed in the second of these pieces. 'Tryst', an even slighter piece of only eight lines, presents the union of two people as the falling of darkness over land: 'You lay like evening/ On the land'. The 'I' of the poem appears like a shadow, which 'Rose, hovered,/ And was the night'. The published form, entitled 'Tryst by Water' (1945), couples the original stanza with another twelve lines which develop the image. The union is both a physical and spiritual one, portrayed in extended metaphors of water and light:

Within your white torrential arms  
 Wakes the tumult and the wonder,  
 Stillness and evening of our loving.<sup>43</sup>

Compared to the New Zealand poems Brasch had written in Cornwall in the winter of 1935, there was a new maturity to this work. Confident enough now to pare down his style, he replaced the heavily symbolic emphasis on fire, water, and earth (present in 'Genesis') with a lighter but surer touch. The elements remain central but are used to convey human truths. The use of repetition too (both of words and sounds) is simpler and more effective:

Falling water, calling water,  
Weave for us a wall of sound  
And fold us in an isle of silence.

Although he claimed that these poems needed much revision, the first part of 'Tryst' (published seven years later) was in almost exactly its original manuscript form. The second line was altered from 'On the land' to the more atmospheric 'Graven land', and the shadow of the narrator 'crept' rather than 'streamed' from the rocks; but apart from this the quiet seascape of the imagination, born from incongruously chaotic circumstances, survived intact.

Such a dichotomy was not so evident in the case of the final poem sent to Crockett that April. 'Thornbush' is less detached from the grim conditions in which it was conceived. Never published, it is outstanding neither in imagery nor expression but provides another example of Brasch using natural imagery to suggest, rather than dictate, his message. 'The shadow is caught in the bushes', the poem begins; by its conclusion, this sinister shadow has set up a central image of entrapment. Artist by society, man by war, innocence by evil, youth by mortality: the possibilities are numerous, but all speak of the despair which threatened to engulf Brasch during the war years. His final metaphor mirrors the pessimistic state of mind which all too frequently overcame him. Neither the rushing wind, nor the sun pouring 'light in torrents', can release the prisoner:

The bushes will always be dark,  
Dark with the heavily hanging  
Death of the dark shadow.

Like its companions, 'Thornbush' is short and its lines spare. 'You'll see [the poems are] very slight', Brasch wrote somewhat disparagingly to John.<sup>44</sup> He had others, he explained, but they too needed working on. Despite feeling uncertain about the merit of his recent writing, he was at least sure of one aspect: the importance of New Zealand to his poetry. Following the acceptance of his work for *New Writing*, on Lehmann's request he had written an article about his home country for the *Geographical Magazine*.<sup>45</sup> The essay broadly covered its history, geography, and its (limited) culture. Now, a month after its publication, he elaborated on it to John, with reference to the poems he was sending:

As you guessed from the article, I do feel NZ. Indeed I carry it about inside me, constantly seeing it; & it is the only country I could write verse about. I am writing still; even in these bad days I often find myself trembling on the verge of poetry. And if it were not so life would be hardly bearable, sometimes.<sup>46</sup>

Even so, he found it difficult to work steadily on his poetry. London was crumbling under heavy air-raids; after particularly severe attacks, he would hurry round to check on the de Beers. He never doubted that fire-watching was preferable to the army, but even so he was living on his nerves: both his desire, and his ability, to write suffered. 'Ten o'clock', he wrote to Crockett one April night,

& we're drinking coffee. No warning yet. It's my turn to go out first, & this expectant uneasy waiting always troubles me because I can't settle to anything. I'm rereading *To the Lighthouse*; it is a book that needs to be read for hours on end, not in snatches - Warning: I must go out.

Tuesday. The alert was a short & quiet one; but when I came back we talked, then slept.<sup>47</sup>

It was after such nights that he longed for the luxury, never fully appreciated, in the years after Oxford: a flat of his own, unlimited time, and the resources of a culturally rich city. His nostalgia was accompanied by a sharper and more persistent feeling of fear. Lurking always at the back of his mind was the unwelcome knowledge that he could be called up to fight at any time.

### III

It was a relief when the promised position in the Foreign Office became vacant at the end of July, and he could abandon fire-watching to play the less hair-raising role of 'a clerk on a stool'.<sup>48</sup> His contract as junior assistant was technically only temporary but, in fact, he remained in the government department for the duration of the war. Based at the intelligence centre at Bletchley, he was involved primarily in translation. This required brushing up his sketchy Italian; later, he had also to learn Romanian, although most of this faded from memory after he returned to New Zealand. He said little to his friends, even to Colin, about his work. 'I never asked', Crockett recalled, 'what CB was doing.... One presumed it was not one's business'.<sup>49</sup>

Giving up his room in Hampstead, he moved into Colin's quarters in the village of Soulbury, close to Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire. For the remainder of 1941, in perfect accord, they lived in an old barn converted into a studio-bedsitter. Evening meals were taken with their landlady Mrs Burney, whose cottage stood beside the barn; it was part of the tenancy arrangement to keep her company until the nine o'clock news bulletin. They did their duty reluctantly: Mrs Burney served rich food and made poor conversation, and their days were so thronged with people that all they wished for at night was quiet time to read. But the barn was comfortably furnished, and Enid sent some of Brasch's belongings from Felden, including one of Crockett's paintings. 'We've taken down a darts board which Colin never used,' Brasch told John, '& in its place hung your haystacks. It is the only picture in the studio'.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout 1941-2, although corresponding reasonably frequently, he and Crockett saw each other only a few times. Work at Bletchley Park allowed one day off out of seven; day trips to London were possible, but the lengthier journey to Cornwall could only be undertaken during leave periods. Soulbury was a very small village with little congenial company, and he missed both John and Fred, with whom he had had almost daily contact. Yet their loss was compensated for by Colin's presence. 'To be near [him]', Brasch wrote, 'was the chief happiness the war brought me'. He had not lived with anyone in such close quarters since his days at St John's - and that past, too, they shared:

We had read and worked and eaten together, walked constantly and bicycled and travelled and swum and idled together, gone to church and heard music and watched plays and looked at pictures and exercised in the Home Guard, we had shared rooms and even beds and many of the same likes and dislikes, we had scrapped together like puppies, rolling over and over on the sand at Robin Hood's Bay; through it all talking, arguing,

and being content and silent and largely agreeing.... Partly in temperament, more in our thinking, and in a common love of poetry and all that is beautiful, we were as close as friends can be.<sup>51</sup>

When the office moved to London in March 1943, however, they once again took separate lodgings; and that summer, a change in departmental arrangements meant that they could no longer work together. Although they continued to meet at least once a week for lunch, Brasch missed the closer relationship. As with Fred, once contact was no longer on a daily basis, he valued his friend's virtues all the more, and looked disparagingly at his own contrasting nature. He wrote to Bennett:

I realize now even more than I did at the time how lucky I was to have been with [Colin] daily for two years, and what a profoundly good, positive being he is, how just and clear-sighted, lovable and gay, which my own filthy moods (thank goodness he has no longer to suffer them) too often hid from me.<sup>52</sup>

In his poem, written after the war, for Roberts, the time at Soulbury is directly referred to; for he saw his friend to be as exceptional in intelligence work as he had been in scholarship, and he had admired and envied this excellence:

And I still turn towards you when I cannot stand  
 Alone, as in those years that are most my theme,  
 Oxford, Soulbury, Llanthony, Trier, Venice, Kôm Aushim.<sup>\*53</sup>

---

\* Discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, Section VI, pp. 36-7.

In part, his feelings for Colin were a transference from Bertram, whom he had not seen since he left for China in 1939. In November 1941, James was reported to be in Hong Kong, ill with typhoid; in March 1942 the *Times* published a list of those missing, presumed captured, on which his name appeared. Brasch's feelings on receiving this news were complex:

For a long time I thought he was probably dead. Yet I felt I must not mourn him, but be proud that he had lived, as the earth itself must be proud. I dreamed of his returning - I woke with a start one morning dreaming that he had reached London and rung me up, but I did not know his voice at first and was so overcome I could hardly speak. In another dream of his return we met among other people and could only shake hands awkwardly ... when he spoke his voice was different, and I felt I could ask no questions in front of others, could say nothing personal and intimate; I wanted to talk to him alone; at the same time I felt a little afraid of him....<sup>54</sup>

Confirmed information did not filter through for another two years. Early in 1945, Bertram's mother wrote from Auckland to say that she had had two cards: one written in 1942 to say he was safe, and the second, dated January 1944, from a prisoner of war camp just outside Tokyo. Even after learning of his friend's safety, Brasch's fears were not allayed, although now they were of a different nature:

I feared for him and for myself; would our love for each other survive what he had endured, and what I too had gone through, such years of separation and anguish? What would we know of each other's minds now? Would we, afterwards, be able to meet and talk as before?<sup>55</sup>

When James left for China in the summer of 1939, he had suggested that Brasch accompany him, perhaps to seek work as a librarian at Yen-an. Brasch hardly considered the

proposal, but throughout the turbulent months of 1940 he began, and persevered with, a lengthy poem which was to be dedicated to James.\* Its setting was New Zealand which, in contrast to the chaos of his immediate surroundings, now became telescopically clear in his memory. Late in the humid summer of 1940, he wrote to Bennett about this project:

I've been writing more again lately, & am very grateful for the time; I have not had my medical examination yet. There's a longish piece about Waitaki, which I hope will be satisfactory when finally polished....<sup>56</sup>

'Waitaki Revisited', dedicated to James Bertram and evoking the windswept seascapes of their school days, was not published for another eight years; its gestation period was far longer than that of the other New Zealand poems he wrote early in the war, and in actual length, too, it exceeded its companion pieces. Much of the time between Brasch's registration and calling-up was spent on this project, which had no working title but was referred to as 'the lengthy piece' or 'my longish poem'. In August 1940, he wrote to Bennett, 'I hope [it] will be satisfactory when finally published'.<sup>57</sup> That summer his three poems were accepted by Lehmann, and consequently his hopes of publication were higher than usual. But the following months were so unsettling as to block him in his writing, and he did not return to 'Waitaki' until the following year.

Time after time, he was to leave this poem, and take it up again, and rewrite it. Throughout 1941 it continued to grow in length until it was more than twice that of the original. In October he wrote to Jack once more:

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 361-3.

At present I am working over a longish piece about Waitaki, parts of which please me. I hope to have it in a satisfactory state by about Christmas; it is not often now that I have the time & energy to write at all. Then I hope John Lehmann may take it, & I shall send it to Denis for the Caxton Press Book, which you must have seen - 3 issues have reached me. Perhaps I'll send you a typed copy - it is - or might be considered - ambitious; it's dedicated to James.<sup>58</sup>

In December 1941, he believed the poem had reached its final state, and he sent it to Crockett for approval. At this stage it still had no working title, but he felt it sufficiently advanced to comment, 'I should not want to change more than a word or two now'.<sup>59</sup> Already much revised, the typescript had further alterations to it, written in his small, neat hand. In an accompanying letter, he expressed the hope that the poem had 'at last reached a final state' but, even so, he had reservations about it:

This piece was first written 18 months ago, just before the raids on London started, & has been dragging on ever since, so it may be a bit overwritten.<sup>60</sup>

His doubts were justified. He had always preferred to work slowly, returning to a poem some months later with (he hoped) a new objectivity. The time it took him to complete this piece, however, was exceptional, and its uneven quality is the inevitable consequence of the fragmentary nature of wartime life.

The fact that it was published neither by Lehmann nor Glover is an indication that it was less successful than his New Zealand poetry of the previous year. Consisting of twenty stanzas in 1941, and twenty-three in 1948, it lacks the freshness and simplicity of a piece such as 'The Islands'. As with Joyce's young artist, natural surroundings are imbued with personal

significance, mirroring the poet's development. In attempting to convey this significance, the tone is close to the rapt mysteriousness of Brasch's juvenilia. Returning to the landscape of his boyhood, in the manner of the Romantics, he bestows on his origins a new and exaggerated symbolism:

And now, O every shape here, hollow and tree,  
Tells of a nameless encounter,  
Of joy or terror or shame; but will not yet,  
Not reveal yet the too-long-doubtful issue.  
Is it not to us then that our living belongs?<sup>61</sup>

The emotion may be genuine, but the expression is clumsily elaborate. The significance placed on everyday objects and scenes is so disproportionate as to be slightly comical:

To me in an ink-stained room in the autumn rareness  
Suddenly out of a faded picture the past  
Broke with its terrible asking.

The description of the school and its pupils has grandiose classical overtones which are wholly unconvincing:

Look, where cool and decisive the sunlit players  
Scatter the bowling for sixes;  
The olive-limbed appraise their bodies by the pool;  
And then the open bearing of the white buildings....

As the poet's eyes move to the future, a sense of tragedy is bestowed on the god-like figures of these schoolboys. The portentous tone darkens, the imagery increases in lushness, and symbolism is stretched to its limits - and beyond.

The conclusion of the 1941 version displays the Romantic influence at its most full-blown, bringing to mind earlier work which, by this stage, Brasch claimed to have outgrown. Although it affirms the enduring quality of the land, a common theme in his poetry, the use of mystical language distorts rather than sharpens the vision:

Yet still from dissolution to dissolution  
Inexhaustibly rising,

He fronts in fate and beauty the echoes and  
Mirages of the air, his unseen passage  
Swept by a vast wind and the wintry perpetual  
Flashing of violent stars.

Where the natural world is used symbolically in this poem, its inclusion adds to an impression which is hackneyed rather than innovative. Phrases such as 'the landscape/ Of youth' and 'this realm of the young' echo a tired, clichéd literary tradition. Yet, where physical detail has been picked out and used for added colour alone, the clarity of Brasch's earlier landscape poems is regained. Wind sighs 'warm in the needles', its 'northern breath still fragrant with eucalyptus'. The Waimakariri river is 'hoarse'; macrocarpa trees are 'taciturn' and 'salt-stung'.<sup>62</sup> The plangent vision, the vividness, which Lehmann had detected appears once again in these phrases, and to a certain extent redeems the work. The descriptions of actual landscape, the concrete details of cliff and rock and sea, are as vivid here as in 'The Silent Land', as haunting as in 'The Islands'. The opening of 'Waitaki' unfolds from the title, creating an evocative scene of pale colour and muted sound:

Absolute above these drifting fields  
 Reigns the sky; wind is warm in the needles,  
 Its northern breath still fragrant with eucalyptus....

Once again there is the implication of unease: the result of a people too recently arrived in a land of a long and secret history. Waves clutch the shingle with a 'hollow grinding', and gulls wing their way through 'morning pallor'. Where changes are made, they strengthen the indigenous feel of the piece. The 'white lacing of foam' becomes 'white foam-fronds', for example, conjuring up the simultaneous image of the New Zealand fern.

Although 'Waitaki' was generally disappointing seen in the wider context of Brasch's New Zealand poetry, it at least represented an innovation in his work. 'For the first time', he wrote to Bennett, 'I've used several NZ names, which I've long wished to do'.<sup>63</sup> These names, mostly of great South Island rivers, appear in the third and fourth stanzas of each version and their usage is indeed striking, the Maori syllables tumbling off the tongue just as the rivers roll over stony beds:

And the northward-setting current that scours the coast,  
 Leaving those colder seas by Ruapuke  
 To wash in darkness with the waters of the six lakes  
 The roots of Polynesia,

Mingling the sallow Taieri with the Shag  
 And sucking from mouth to mouth the glacial torrents,  
 Rangitata, Rakaia, and the lawless, the hoarse  
 Unappeasable Waimakariri.

By taking such risks, Brasch began to have a sense of his own development as a New Zealand writer. As the war ground on, year after tedious year, his thoughts turned more and

more frequently towards his home country. He recognized that his 'longing for New Zealand was in reality a longing for the peace and security [he] might hope to find there',<sup>64</sup> but this did not deter him from making vague inquiries about possible employment: editing, publishing, teaching. He longed, too, for autonomy. His job at the Foreign Office had saved him from the army, and from possible recruitment to a munitions factory, but, from the day he started work at Bletchley, he had felt 'shades of the prison house'.<sup>65</sup> His duties there were very often tedious and, after an eight-hour day in the office, he scarcely had the energy to walk or read, let alone work on his poetry.

In December 1941, despite having little time to himself, he joined the Home Guard, spurred on by the active conscience which had earlier caused him to renounce pacifism. In an administrative job such as his, he felt, it was all too easy to shut one's eyes to the horror of war, and easier still when living out of London. 'Although I know I'm of more use here than I would be in the army', he explained to John four nights before his first patrol, 'my life flows in too easy a backwater'.<sup>66</sup> His dramatic preconceptions of life in the Home Guards were worthy of Crockett:

At least I shall wear the common, vile, sanctified livery, the badge of shame & folly & brotherhood, though I shall not be living the common life. I shall be, for a few hours now & then, one of your terrible Soldiers, with the red-mouthed rifles; one of the indistinguishable; dehumanized boredom, & pain, & blood, & mere dust.<sup>67</sup>

By the following summer, as it became increasingly apparent that there would be no near end to the war, enlistment with the Home Guard became compulsory. For Brasch, with his

office job, patrols were necessarily in the evenings or at weekends. By this stage, he participated even more unwillingly than he had at first, seizing any excuse not to attend:

Tonight [he confessed to John] I managed to escape a Home Guard parade by going to a meeting here about fire-watching; I have very little conscience about the HG, and anyway feel it is not our job, because we should have to go on working in case of an invasion.<sup>68</sup>

His office was now situated just off Park Lane, and Home Guard practice was held in the nearby Green Park. Despite the stifling heat of the summer evenings, exercises were taken in full kit: thick khaki jackets, heavy boots and helmets, gas masks, rifles, and bayonets. One of Brasch's fears of the army was the necessity to conform; he hated wearing the uniform of the Home Guard, feeling not only that it stripped him of identity but also that it threatened his sensibilities. He wrote of this to John, knowing that his complaints would fall on sympathetic ears:

I've seldom felt so foolish as on street fighting manoeuvres in the city, which seemed to me completely unreal; & coming back I ran into a cousin who just didn't recognize me in uniform - not surprisingly, since battle dress, though comfortable, makes one quite shapeless. But we've got to endure this sort of thing, I suppose, & somehow try to rise above it, with the millions of other people who rise above much worse things. I keep remembering that if this had been France, or any other European country, I should have been deported to Poland (if alive); and you probably would not have fared much better.<sup>69</sup>

Despite his philosophical words, he was finding the grind of daily living more and more dispiriting.\* Not only did the Home Guard continually encroach on his spare time but he was also engaged in fire-watching for the office in Berkeley Square, a task which entailed nights of inspection rounds, filling buckets, and checking pumps. All this he thought 'a tedious affair', like a 'recurring fragment of a hateful dream'.<sup>70</sup>

Throughout April and May, his situation was worsened by the fact that he was living in a room in Hampstead which afforded no privacy. Cramped for space, he could not have friends to stay, and was forced to eat out every night because of a lack of cooking facilities. It was with great relief that, after a week's respite in Cornwall with the Crocketts in June, he moved back into the same complex in Lawn Road where he had previously lived. His return was not because he particularly liked the place - it had little charm or atmosphere - but because he knew it would at least provide him with some space of his own.

#### IV

'I shall be most thankful to be private again', Brasch wrote to Crockett after signing the lease for No. 23 Lawn Road, '& to be able to be quiet for reading & writing when I have the time'.<sup>71</sup> He had one more upheaval ahead - a move within the block of flats, to the recently refurbished No. 15 - but after this, he hoped, he would feel settled enough to begin work on his poetry once more.

---

\* Over twenty years later, he wrote of such meaningless routine in a poem entitled 'Daily': 'To lie down to get up to do what must be done' (*NFO* from *CP*, pp. 141-2).

In fact, it was to be many months before he had the time or the energy to work steadily or well. In July, he wrote gloomily to Bennett:

Sometimes I feel that private life has almost ceased; it is only when I hear or read about conditions on the continent, even in unoccupied France, that I remember in what relative luxury and freedom we live here. And yet I cant help feeling miserable now & then that I have no longer any spare time or energy to write or to settle down to steady reading - indeed I seem to have given up reading except in scraps - and that I never think.<sup>72</sup>

Firewatching, at least, had given him a certain amount of free time. The Foreign Office and the Home Guard patrols crowded his waking hours with activity: at the office, translation and writing for a minimum of eight hours a day; in the evenings, practices for street-fighting and house searches. Even his nights were dogged with duty for, as a member of the Home Guard company, he was expected to get up for every air-raid warning.

Although almost constantly occupied, he could not help feeling a desolation which persistently penetrated the surface of daily routine. He tried to express this to John:

My life is absurdly full - busy, I mean, because it is terribly empty too; for weeks I've been in a kind of dull despairing stupor - but it is too deadly to write about, only fit for the limbo of forgotten things.<sup>73</sup>

Part of the emptiness was due to the fact that there was little time to spend with friends. He missed the easy companionship of Fred. During his long working hours he was surrounded by people with whom he had little in common, to the extent that he became more and more introverted to preserve his own space. Other friends had scattered: the Crocketts were in

Cornwall, Jack in America, James missing in Hong Kong, Leonie still in Oxford. Leaves from the office became precious opportunities to catch up with friends and relations, and every couple of months careful plans were made in advance, hampered by a restricted transport system. Several visits were paid to John and Anne, which were lively and restorative; weekend trips were taken to Oxford, to see the Zuntzes, Charles and Joy Elton, and, later in the war, Jack (who had returned to his fellowship at Queen's). One leave, in September of 1941, was spent at Bettina Hamilton's, a close New Zealand friend who had had to move her household to Kent. 'No work', Brasch vowed in a letter to John before leaving for Kent: 'no letter writing (one of the curses of my life), no newspaper reading'.<sup>74</sup>

Although seeing friends was comforting and reassuring, being a guest necessitated certain duties - and he was punctilious in fulfilling these. He walked and talked and ate with his hosts, and as a consequence had little time to write. Fitting in around an unfamiliar routine was distracting in itself. At the Hamiltons', there were three boisterous children to contend with and, although Bettina's mothering skills were admirable, the atmosphere was not easy for a fastidious bachelor. Life with the Crocketts was similarly disruptive, for both John and Anne were strong-willed and tempestuous, and noisy arguments abounded. The only time left for writing during these visits was early in the morning before the rest of the household surfaced. In the chilly dark hours before sunrise, Brasch would sit up in bed and update his journal; but since his entries were both lengthy and regular, this snatched time was not sufficient to also work on his poems.

And so from 1941 onwards, realizing that he would be trapped in the treadmill of wartime work for some time, he deliberately kept leaves clear to be spent on his poetry. When John, Anne, and Bettina moved up to the farm above Georgia, on Castle-an-Dinas, they issued an invitation to him to visit their new home. Ever-polite, he sent some China tea as an offering to their 'new house-hold deity',<sup>75</sup> but turned down the invitation:

I should like to see your new home; I remember well the view from the Castle. Perhaps I could visit you in the spring, if you could have me; but I feel that my leaves ought to be spent alone - at least my next one has got to be - so that I can concentrate on writing....<sup>76</sup>

His determination was gradually rewarded. By December 1942, he was sufficiently back in practice to write from impulse instead of sheer dogged perseverance. Despite his usual reservations about the quality of his work, his relief that inspiration had not deserted him was immense. He wrote to Crockett from London:

I spent my leave quietly here, and after 2 or 3 days of peacefulness found verses beginning to bubble out of me again unexpectedly - it was indeed a great surprise. Most of them are plain bad, but there is one that may become something with a little work & care.<sup>77</sup>

The war, he came to realize, had not killed off his talent. His first reaction had been bewilderment; the surface of life in wartime England was 'so vast, amorphous, and without identity, that it prevented all approach'.<sup>78</sup> Now he began to think it possible to reverse the relationship which had been crushing the creative life out of him: rather than let the war master him, he would strive to extract something worthwhile from it. He knew the only way to begin, now that external order had disintegrated, was from his own centre; he had 'little more than his own experience to guide him'.<sup>79</sup> Had he but realized it, this had always been the way he had interpreted the world: now and later, politics were to take second place to the personal.\*

And so, in order to make war his subject, he narrowed his focus to the detail around him,

---

\* During weapon-training, for example, he had known that he could not use his bayonet to kill, would rather be killed himself: 'I always forgot that it was not a personal matter at all' (*Ind. MSS*, p. 554).

recognizing that it spoke of the pity of war as poignantly as any larger perspective. His poem 'Soldier in Reverie' expresses the double-edged nature of this recognition. The soldier in the poem represents thousands of men like him, but in the poem he attempts (and momentarily succeeds in) a feat which Brasch himself hoped to achieve. For one glorious moment, he sees the fractured world 'single and whole':

All its fragments are held together in his eyes  
Through one long moment without regret or desire;  
All its lives have meaning ....<sup>80</sup>

This, of course, was what Brasch saw to be the poet's ultimate aim: the extraction or creation of sense from meaningless violence. His soldier sees purpose in 'blind proliferation', and 'perceives in its wildernesses the waters of kindness'. As such, 'Soldier' becomes both cathartic and comforting. Its ending, however, is bleak, and is a direct expression of the fears voiced in earlier letters: fear of losing one's identity by fighting for a common cause, fear of submerging artistic integrity in baseness:

But in that very instant the world unwitting  
Shatters the singleness he alone had given it,  
Recalling him to his forgotten place  
Among its multitudes whose role is anonymity,  
Plunging his word of life in its incoherence.

Although the ultimate vision of war is one of 'incoherence', the piece demonstrates how far he had progressed in mastering a subject he had once thought impossible. The poetic voice here is bold, and its lines clean. Although dealing with large issues, 'Soldier' does not lose its

clarity, nor is its flow interrupted, from its opening to its conclusion.

Finding that the techniques perfected in his New Zealand poems were equally successful applied to other subjects, Brasch once again grounded his observations in the physical and actual, in writing 'Wartime Snow, London'. Here, however, the focus is natural rather than human. The drifting fall of snow becomes a metaphor for redemption; it exorcises the memory of evil, and transforms 'the sorry/ Memorials of our living'.<sup>81</sup> Using personification, one of his favourite devices, he highlights both the power of the elements and the folly of man:

Dead grains of light incarnate  
Shaken from the dark  
Despairing of the sky,  
You spread your silence over  
The waiting roofs and streets....

The occasional elaborate phrase such as 'blest power' or 'client heavens' recalls the Romantic clichés of Brasch's juvenilia. But his extended metaphor is largely successful in conveying the horror of war and its effect on mankind:

Characters written large  
Across the torn world's face  
In shameless reproduction  
Of the defiled and tortured  
Landscape of the heart....

Like 'Soldier', the poem concludes strongly, although this time not with a warning but with a supplication:

Wash with your innocence  
Our dulled, accustomed sight,  
And upon memory stamp  
Your white exemplar of  
Earth's paradisaal day.

The 'timeless twilight' that Brasch wrote of - the sullen grey face of war - became a familiar enough scene for most Londoners. Slowly, he came to realize how it had blunted his senses; he too had grown to see with a 'dulled, accustomed sight':

I felt I had lost touch with the visible world; when I saw a street stall of bright butter-yellow daffodils ... I was halted, but I looked at them as a stranger.<sup>82</sup>

To write about this frightening indifference was one way to exorcise it. Just as the 'visible world' had given him access to New Zealand as a poetic subject, so too did it offer him a way to deal with the overwhelming topic of war.

The poem 'September 1939'\* provides further evidence of clarity achieved through a grounding in the constants of landscape. Its initial focus is autumn, which becomes a metaphor through which to explore the theme of destruction:

Again the season of harvests and of wars,  
When death stands readiest to receive  
The offering earth, abundance of the womb.<sup>83</sup>

---

\* See Appendix, pp. 363-4.

The more specific focus of 'Poland, October' (which deals with the same phase of the war) has been borrowed from this central image: that of nature sacrificing human life.

'September' remained unpublished: it speaks with less clarity than its published counterpart, and its relevance to contemporary issues is less obvious.\* But the metaphor on which it revolves is compelling and original:

O altar earth,  
 Sanctified for the smoking and the reek;  
 O prepared hearts,  
 Cleansed by tears and by the searching hour,  
 The silence and the leave-taking:  
 Death has affirmed: you are acceptable.

The method of conveying the human condition through images of the natural world became one of Brasch's hallmarks. His skill grew so that he could achieve this with the slightest of touches. The theme of autumn reaping centred on in 'September 1939' is revisited in 'Harvest is Over', a poem of only six lines which was written some thirty years later. The shaved head of a prisoner is portrayed in the single image of a stubble field, and this field becomes a symbol for the human estate. The havoc of war is implied in the rough reaping of the crop; the green glimpsed through pale straw speaks of hope for new life; and the paradox of human nature, both kind and cruel, is encapsulated in the last three lines:

Skin of the world harsh  
 Against the loving hand:  
 Hard here our life's gleaning.<sup>84</sup>

---

\* Perhaps Brasch also perceived a debt to Auden's '1 September 1939'.

The mastery of such imagery was a legacy of the war years for Brasch. His poetry both imposed order on the chaotic horror of the war and protected him from it. In June 1944, when the invasion of France began, he was able to remain a little 'detached' from it all, because he was 'nearly always thinking of poetry'.<sup>85</sup> Although the war had at first threatened his ability to write, by the end of six hard years this ability had been recovered and worked upon until it was stronger than before. Following the last German attack on London, he knew that the war was nearing an end. 'I was bursting to get away to some quiet place', he recalled, 'and think and write - try to write - the poems with the shadow of which my head was full. I lived for that'.<sup>86</sup> He had travelled a long way since the relatively carefree days of 1938. He had matured not only personally, but as a poet.

---

<sup>1</sup> CB to JC, 16 September [1940].

<sup>2</sup> CB to JC, 13 October [1940].

<sup>3</sup> CB to JAWB, 31 July [1940].

<sup>4</sup> CB to JC, 16 November [1940].

<sup>5</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 493.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind.*, p. 361.

<sup>7</sup> *FNW*, 'About the Contributors', p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 494.

<sup>9</sup> *Ind.*, p. 355.

<sup>10</sup> *Ind.*, p. 356.

<sup>11</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 509.

<sup>12</sup> *Ind.*, p. 367.

<sup>13</sup> CB to JAWB, 12 November [1940].

<sup>14</sup> CB to JAWB, 18 January [1941].

<sup>15</sup> CB to JC, 13 October [1940].

<sup>16</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 532.

<sup>17</sup> 'Hauntings', *HG in CP*, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> CB to JC, 16 January [1941].

<sup>19</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 535.

<sup>20</sup> *Ind.*, p. 368.

<sup>21</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 533.

- <sup>22</sup> MS in the possession of Bettina Headley; poem remains unpublished.
- <sup>23</sup> CB to JAWB, 18 January [1941].
- <sup>24</sup> CB to JC, 1 March [1941].
- <sup>25</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 538.
- <sup>26</sup> CB to JC, 2 April [1941].
- <sup>27</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>28</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>29</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>30</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1941].
- <sup>31</sup> 'Discord for Louis MacNeice', *NFO* in *CP*, pp. 163-4.
- <sup>32</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>33</sup> CB to JC, 1 March [1941].
- <sup>34</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 527.
- <sup>35</sup> CB to JC, 16 January [1941].
- <sup>36</sup> CB to JC, 1 March [1941].
- <sup>37</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 539.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 539.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ind.*, p. 370.
- <sup>40</sup> CB to JC, 2 April [1941].
- <sup>41</sup> CB to JC, 21 April [1941].
- <sup>42</sup> Included in letter from CB to JC, 21 April [1941], Crockett MS Papers 3944, 4.
- <sup>43</sup> 'Tryst by Water', *DG* in *CP*, p. 38.
- <sup>44</sup> CB to JC, 21 April [1941].
- <sup>45</sup> 'New Zealand, Man and Nature', *Geographical Magazine*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (March 1941), pp. 332-42.
- <sup>46</sup> CB to JC, 21 April [1941].
- <sup>47</sup> CB to JC, 21 April [1941].
- <sup>48</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1941].
- <sup>49</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-5.
- <sup>50</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1941].
- <sup>51</sup> *Ind.*, p. 379.
- <sup>52</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 November 1943.
- <sup>53</sup> 'To C. H. Roberts', *DG* from *CP*, p. 15.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ind.*, p. 375.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 551.
- <sup>56</sup> CB to JAWB, 21 August [1940].
- <sup>57</sup> CB to JAWB, 21 August [1940].
- <sup>58</sup> CB to JAWB, 12 October 1941.
- <sup>59</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>60</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>61</sup> 'Waitaki Revisited', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 32-5.
- <sup>62</sup> 'Waitaki Revisited', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 32-5.
- <sup>63</sup> CB to JAWB, 21 August [1940].
- <sup>64</sup> *Ind.*, p. 562.
- <sup>65</sup> CB to JC, 19 July [1941].
- <sup>66</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>67</sup> CB to JC, 13 December [1941].
- <sup>68</sup> CB to JC, 10 September [1942].
- <sup>69</sup> CB to JC, 30 August [1942].
- <sup>70</sup> CB to JC, 10 September [1942].
- <sup>71</sup> CB to JC, 12 June [1942].
- <sup>72</sup> CB to JAWB, 23 July 1942.
- <sup>73</sup> CB to JC, 24 August [1941].
- <sup>74</sup> CB to JC, 24 August [1941].
- <sup>75</sup> CB to JC, 7 October [1941].
- <sup>76</sup> CB to JC, 22 October [1941].
- <sup>77</sup> CB to JC, 10 December [1942].
- <sup>78</sup> *Ind.*, p. 367.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ind.*, p. 368.
- <sup>80</sup> 'Soldier in Reverie', *DG* in *CP*, p. 29.
- <sup>81</sup> 'Wartime Snow, London', *DG* in *CP*, pp. 27-9.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 586.

<sup>83</sup> 'September 1939', Crockett MS Papers 3944, 14.

<sup>84</sup> 'Harvest is Over', *NFO* in *CP*, p. 139.

<sup>85</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 558.

<sup>86</sup> *Ind. MSS*, p. 699.

## **Chapter Eight**

*A Bare Stage, a Troupe of Players:1944-5*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### A BARE STAGE, A TROUPE OF PLAYERS: 1944-5

While the white flakes became a symbol of redemption in 'Wartime Snow, London', in reality they added to the hardships of life in the capital. 'One winter', Brasch recalled, 'snow lay in London for about six weeks, packed and frozen hard on many footpaths and churned into slush on the roadways'.<sup>1</sup> The external discomfort suffered in these bleak, cold weeks finally brought him to a decision that any amount of internal philosophizing had failed to do. He knew, with a new conviction, that his place was no longer in England:

Tramping often in grey gloom over that wet frozen snow round the Outer Circle of Regent's Park, I felt a great longing for light, clear air, the bright sun - felt it would be unendurable to go on living in the subterranean half-light of England. About the same time I began to know in my bones that unless I returned to New Zealand soon I would stop writing poetry. 'One has to choose in the end,' Ursula Bethell wrote to me. 'And to give oneself to the given, without wandering glances! When one commits oneself, then one starts.'<sup>2</sup>

When Brasch had met her in New Zealand in 1938, Bethell had been one of only a few well-established poets. Since then she had become something of a mentor for him.\* It was with dismay that, in the middle of 1944, he heard of her terminal illness; and her death the

---

\* Despite her telling him, some months into their acquaintance, that she did not like his poems, and advising him to give up poetry and become a 'patron'.

following January shook him badly. Now that his 'main support' was no longer there, his resolution to return home after the war was further undermined:

Her loss would be irreparable.... New Zealand would lose, for me, its spiritual and intellectual centre; I should be more deeply afraid of going home.<sup>3</sup>

Yet he stuck to his plan of booking his passage as soon as practicable.

Although the war had inspired him, it had also deadened his emotions. Soon after starting at the Foreign Office, he had written despairingly to Jack:

I fear sometimes, & perhaps it is most to be feared in a safe job like this, that I am losing the capacity to think and feel. So much thought and feeling have been demanded of us in the last few years that my capacity for both seems to be blunted, numbed. At certain moments, of course, feeling sweeps over like a torrent; but that is not the true sensibility; nor is what one gives to the Times, to the weeklies, to one's ordinary work, the real & valuable thought. I would like to believe this only a form of hibernation or, alternatively, that thought and feeling will flood the spirit again, though no longer by the old worn-down exhausted channels.<sup>4</sup>

The spiritual unhealthiness of his constricted lifestyle, he thought, would soon take an irrevocable toll on his poetry. This, more than any other reason, reconciled him to returning to New Zealand. Britain was exhausted, physically and emotionally, by the war. At home, it might be possible to regain a fresh approach to living.

Colin's absence from the office since the middle of 1943 had made work far less enjoyable; the physical environment, too, was uninspiring. 'One can only see the sky by putting one's head out of the window', Brasch grumbled to Jack: 'prisonlike and I hate it,

feeling more & more rebellious'.<sup>5</sup> Although some of his closest friends were in England, he felt that he was drifting away from them, was becoming increasingly introspective. His sense of isolation was emphasized by a conviction that he had lost touch with the visible world. 'When I saw a ... fine sky or tree', he wrote, 'I ... looked at them as a stranger'.<sup>6</sup> For a writer who best expressed the metaphysical through the details of the tangible world, this was a frightening development.

Throughout 1944 and 1945, his certainty grew: a return to New Zealand was the only way to retrieve his poetic identity. He was now scarcely writing at all, but his lack of productivity was only partially due to the debilitating effect of the routine he was trapped in. Not only did he lack inspiration but he was continually pressed for time: a predicament made more acute by a new project which he had become heavily involved in. He had begun to write drama.

## I

Not surprisingly, it was Crockett who had persuaded him to attempt a play. Towards the end of 1943, John and Anne had formed a small group called the Mask Theatre, which performed both to civilians and the services in London. This was shortly disbanded, and they became increasingly involved with a travelling company called the Adelphi Players. It was not long before Crockett approached Brasch on behalf of the Adelphi and asked him to write a script:

the subject-matter was to be the story of Job. Brasch readily, if cautiously, agreed, but the undertaking was to prove arduous in the extreme and severely tested the friendship between the two men.

It was primarily the difference in their creative visions which led to the failure of the project. Brasch, diffident enough about his ability in poetry, was even more dubious about this new undertaking, for he had never thought in terms of the stage. In what he derided as his 'Shelleyan days', he had written conversations,<sup>7</sup> and during his stint at teaching he had written a short, lighthearted play as part of the annual 'Abbey Aberrations'. But the Adelphi Players were a group of experienced actors, providing much-needed entertainment all over wartime England. The topic of Job, moreover, was one which merited skilful treatment. 'I was shocked at my presumption in attempting [such] a subject', he wrote in retrospect.<sup>8</sup>

He felt an affinity with the subject matter, however: in the problems of Job, he saw his own plight. And so he began by seeing the story in purely personal terms, focusing on Job's relationship with God. Crockett, on the other hand, interpreted the theme in primarily social terms. With such opposing aims, the play was doomed from the start. Crockett, who typically had fewer misgivings at the start, also came to look back ruefully on his reasons for commissioning the play:

[I believed] that poets had, as ever, so much to give the theatre - and vice versa - and arrogantly, thought I could help [Charles], a meditative man, to think in terms of theatre.<sup>9</sup>

Brasch began to write in the summer of 1943. He made slow progress, however, and by November had completed only one scene. John remained enthusiastic, and asked him to tour with them for a week through the snow-streaked hills of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Although he had been in England for over ten years, this was his first experience of the North, and he

found its stark beauty memorable and compelling. There was no time to write about it, however. The purpose of the week, as he told Bennett, was to 'learn something of the stage at close quarters'.<sup>10</sup>

Once back in a bitterly cold London, juggling his writing with exacting office commitments was no easier than before. He decided to put aside his next few leaves for the play. In February 1944, he travelled to Gloucestershire with his current draft under his arm. He and Crockett stayed at Taena, a farm near Tintern Abbey belonging to a friend George Insson, and they worked steadily on 'Job'. By now, the Players had been shown the first scene, which they deemed unsuitable for the stage. This had come as no surprise to Brasch; as he did with his poems, he already felt he had 'outgrown' his writing of the previous year.

He continued to cut, experiment, and rewrite, visiting Taena again in May. By this time, he longed to return to his first love of poetry. 'I have been teeming with ideas for poems', he wrote to John:

perhaps only the spring going to my head, but it's exciting and encouraging, even tho' I haven't written anything. I felt I was only just discovering my vein, & acquiring thereby a kind of independence I have never known before. But it still has to be proved....<sup>11</sup>

His sense of duty kept him focused on the play.

As with his war work, his commitment to the Players was total. At the end of the year, he bought an entire set of small gouaches, painted by a friend of John's called Rowland Hilder, and picturing the company at work. The thirty-five pounds he paid supported the splinter company of the Adelphi Players through an exceptionally cold and bleak winter. But, although channelling all his spare time and energy into this project, he frequently expressed doubts about it. Posting the improved first scene to John, which he thought was now 'better

as verse' though no better dramatically, he wrote: 'I've no illusions that you need fear to shatter'.<sup>12</sup> Looking again at the second scene written three months earlier, he said, his 'heart sank'.<sup>13</sup>

Late in the spring of 1944, he had completed a draft of the entire tripartite script. He sent it to John with vast misgivings:

I feel that I have missed completely the greatness of Job; it was indeed an impertinence for me to tackle it, and especially in the conditions in which I have had to work. Probably I am not capable of any large scale work, and even in peaceful conditions I might not be able to write a good play - I have got so used to living and working fragmentarily, by moments, that it may be my mind will only work that way. I don't know. So you will have to look out for every kind of fault, apart from dramatic weakness - inconsistencies of story, character, general lack of grasp, inventiveness, imagination.<sup>14</sup>

His worries about dramatic weaknesses were justified. 'Charles's script', John later admitted, 'would have been [...] very difficult to bring to theatrical life'.<sup>15</sup> The final typescript - pored over at Taena and sent to a typist several times - read stiltedly. Dialogue was wooden, and very often the chorus spoke in one-liners which allowed the action to progress but were unconvincing and abrupt.\* With few stage directions and no scenery (as set down in the foreword), the script became the primary focus. All too often, it was static and lifeless:

VOICE OFF: Job! Where is Job?

O[LD] M[AN]: He is looking for Job.

VOICE OFF: (receding) Job! Job! Job!

Y[OUNG] M[AN]: Why should they want Job?

---

\* The classical Greek device of a chorus had been revived by Eliot.

OM: Some urgent news? A death?

YM & Y[OUNG] W[OMAN]: Death?

O[LD] W[OMAN]: But not his - if he were  
Dead they would not be seeking him.  
He must be safe.

YW: What do you mean? Who? Job?  
Why should anything happen to Job?

OW: I have said, he must be safe  
Nothing could happen to him,  
Nothing; and yet he is man,  
Man like us.<sup>16</sup>

By now Crockett had serious reservations about the play's potential success. '[Charles] was not fitted by his whole nature and culture', he realized, 'to be a dramatic poet'.<sup>17</sup> But he was hardly in a state to assess the situation clearly, for internal rifts among the Players had led to the formation of two Adelphi companies, and there was confusion over which should be offered the script. He urged his friend to continue writing through May, suggesting optimistically that they could collaborate on turning the script into a dance drama.

Throughout May and June, Brasch spent long hot evenings in his small Lawn Road living-room, slaving over the revisions suggested by Crockett and Richard Ward.\* On the last weekend in May, he spent his Friday evening working on an adapted version of the first two scenes, now in 'DD' or 'Dance Drama' form. Finishing in the quiet blackout hours after midnight, he slept briefly and then wrote exhaustedly but exultantly to John:

---

\* Ward was an actor who had rejoined the Adelphi in 1943 and had caused much of the strife within the group.

[I finished] sooner than I expected, thanks to the mercy of a heavy cold which drove me home one day this week and kept me home the next, so that I had some extra time for writing.<sup>18</sup>

On the Sunday night, tired but triumphant, he finished the alterations to the third scene. He posted the manuscript to John first thing on Monday morning, along with a letter full of both anxious asides and authorial assertions:

The final chorus is not satisfactory as it stands, but I was trying to get something down, so don't think of it as final. Tutti are not my strong point - is it emphatic enough? I hope you'll think the alterations an improvement; does the meaning come out more clearly? AP2 [Adelphi Players, second company] may of course suggest what alterations they like; but if they turn it down flat now, after all this heat & gesticulation, I shall - I warn you - feel a little sour!<sup>19</sup>

The manuscript was returned promptly, as requested, so that it could be taken to the typist, but there was no accompanying note. Puzzled and annoyed, Brasch wrote an uncharacteristically terse postcard to Crockett asking for an explanation:

That no note from you came with the play I interpret to mean that AP2 said no & that you couldn't bear to tell me.... It is hardly unexpected. But please let me know for certain.<sup>20</sup>

Two days later, he received a blunt letter from Richard Ward confirming his suspicions: Adelphi Two had vetoed the play. He was both hurt and annoyed that John had not had the courage to tell him, and wrote to say so:

You got my postcard, I suppose? My guess was right then; as soon as I saw Richard's writing I knew what it meant. You had almost persuaded me that AP2 might - or would - take the play, but I don't think I really believed it. I shall of course still send it to AP1, tho' it is quite clear that they won't do it either; I am afraid Richard is right in saying that it is not conceived in terms of the theatre. However, I don't regret the effort - indeed I am grateful to you for spurring me on to make it. Better that than just slouching thru' these terrible years & writing them off as so much life wasted.<sup>21</sup>

A large part of his despair was due to the fact that his creative work had failed him once more. The excitement of writing the play had buoyed him up, and insulated him to some extent against external events: the invasion of France, for example, merited only a single mention in a correspondence concentrated largely on the private strife of the Adelphi Players. Now his brief confidence left him, and life seemed once more pointless and unutterably dreary. He unburdened himself to Crockett:

Charles Reed [sic: Handley-Read, an artist friend of John's] has been having another exhibition of his boys' paintings; I read about it just in time to go on the last day... I was filled with envy of him - & of everyone else - who is doing positive and creative work instead of the negative, sterile, parasitic drudgery on which my days are spent. Perhaps that is what one pays for accepting the war - tho' of course everyone "pays" whether they accept it or not. I am in painful revolt against it all at the moment, feeling it less & less supportable....<sup>22</sup>

Guiltily, wanting to soften the blow, Crockett replied that the rejection might be reconsidered. Despite his bitterness, Brasch seized upon this straw of hope, had the play retyped, and sent it off once more to John and Richard. 'You do not seem to realize how cruel you were in not letting me know', he wrote bluntly to John.<sup>23</sup>

Over the next few weeks he met with Richard, who had many criticisms of the play, and waited to hear from Adelphi One. By this time, his anger towards John had died down, and he was able to explain more consideredly his reasons for feeling so betrayed:

My reproach that you left me without word of the decision about Job comes to this: the text came back without a word from you on a Friday; on the Monday I heard from Richard, who said 'John will have explained why etc'; & it was not till the Thursday that I heard from you - & then rather briefly. Remember I had been working on it for a month without one evening off (except for H. G. duty), lashed to a frenzy by your almost daily letters towards the end - & then, when I send the play, silence. But forget it. I don't bear you any grudge. Only it was best to say - wasn't it? - that for some days I was annoyed. But that's the past & is all over now. I am still prepared to work on the play. I want it to be as good as possible, for your sake as well as my own, because I would like to have something worthy to offer you.<sup>24</sup>

The contrite encouragement from Crockett, the detailed criticisms from Ward, and the endorsement of James Courage, whose opinion he greatly valued in such matters, spurred him on after his temporary halt. Loath to give up on the play, he remained preoccupied with it throughout July. One of the main faults of 'The Chosen' (which was the unanimously chosen title) was that there seemed no natural place for dancing in the script, but he was still hopeful that his work might have promise as a straight dramatic enterprise. This, he knew, would involve more major rewriting, as the script had been heavily adapted with the dance-drama production in mind.

He was unable to concentrate on this for long, however, for during the summer of 1944 London was being frequently attacked by Hitler's 'V.1's', or flying bombs. Writing to Bennett in the middle of July, he described the mundane nature of his activities:

My life is a round of work that becomes more & more irksome,  
& then more work - my play or someone's book\* or letter  
writing. Precious little else.<sup>25</sup>

Of his own sporadic inspiration, he could make nothing: the frequent interruptions of air raids, and the necessity of keeping his office work up-to-date, made any sustained concentration impossible. Frustratingly, he had bursts of desire to write which were stymied by his own tiredness and tension. From a London of scarred buildings and crumbling brick, he wrote to Crockett:

For a few days I was able to think of writing poetry again, but that's gone now. I read nothing except in buses; then Holderlin.<sup>26</sup>

Although he had not heard back from Adelphi One, he remained committed to the extensive rewriting which Ward had implied was necessary for an acceptance of the play. A much-needed leave was coming up in August and he planned to spend this at Taena working on revisions. He envied Crockett's ability to juggle day-to-day living and creative work, something which he himself found impossible:

How I envy your painting - I'd lead a double life too if need be, if I could - at present I lead only a single existence. Till a week ago I was working most nights on Alfredo's book, & should have been doing so all this week, but he has not given me any more. I hoped to finish it - there's a good deal more yet - before my holiday, so as to be free for the play afterwards; though I shant be able to work on this while these raids are going on - too unsettling.<sup>27</sup>

---

\* The book referred to was another of Alfredo Cianchi's great schemes, which both he and Brasch believed would 'make more noise than all the bombs when it [came] out' (CB to JC, 1 July 1944).

Despite his hard work, Adelphi One also decided the venture was not feasible. Winter crept closer, its grey chill mirroring his disappointment. Trying to refocus his energies on the Foreign Office, he was rewarded in December by promotion to the head of his own small section. 'I've decided I could not go back to work on Job', he wrote to Crockett in the week before Christmas: 'it is dead meat now'.<sup>28</sup>

Yet he could not bear to jettison over a year's hard slog. In January 1945, in response to further queries from John, he admitted: 'No, I will not say I have abandoned Job for good; but I'd need some stirring up to work on it again'.<sup>29</sup> Deciding to salvage at least some of the abandoned work, he excised some of the verse passages and sent them to Lehmann.

The verse sections of the play had been written in a style which was becoming characteristic. Slight, graceful, with a distant air, they evoked sea and wind and land - and were noticeably out of place within the context of the play. Diffidently, Brasch expressed the hope to Crockett that, with these, there was something to be gained from his many hours of labour:

In the unlikely event that parts of Job were rewritten & you wished to play it, it would not matter, I suppose, that the songs had appeared in print separately (of course Lehmann may well turn them down). They'd simply be called Songs from a play.<sup>30</sup>

The songs were no more successful in printed form. Failing as dramatic choruses, for they neither furthered the action nor carried symbolic weight, they were not sufficiently striking to make an impact on Lehmann. Nonetheless, they bore witness to the themes Brasch had already made his own: the essential truths to be found in nature, man's fear of the unknown, the absolute power of the sea:

Sea-bell and mountain bell  
Sound, compelling the ear,  
But who, who shall tell  
In the great gloom of the air  
Which is the true and which the false bell?

Light from the land is gone,  
And light from the sea;  
We can only wait for the unknown  
Voice that moves like a sigh  
In darkness when the great wind is gone.<sup>31</sup>

Such imagery echoed throughout 'The Chosen', not only in chorus form but in the shorter speeches of individual characters. In the concluding pages of the script, for example, the Old Man speaks of being repelled by earth and dethroned by time, and the Young Woman makes the rejoinder:

Again, again the waters break  
From earth, and lovelier for man's sake  
In reconciliation leaf and fruit awake.<sup>32</sup>

The impact of such lines is more on the eye than the ear: Crockett's tentative and Ward's blunt rejections of *The Chosen* were certainly not unwise. But the months of work Brasch had spent on this imperfect first play were not wasted. Even before giving up on it, he had conceived the germ of another idea which might bring his words to the stage. '[Job], we have to recognize', he wrote sensibly to John in July 1944,

is only secondarily & by adaptation a dance drama. If you & I could work out a proper dance drama in full collaboration, that would be more to the point & more what RW [Richard Ward] quite rightly wants.<sup>33</sup>

And so in 1945, despite an increasing work-load at the Foreign Office and a growing uneasiness about a certain return to New Zealand, he attempted yet another project for John's theatre company. This time, his efforts were to meet with far greater success.

## II

At first, the thought of taking on another new project was daunting. The Job debacle had left Brasch tired and dispirited, and increasingly desperate to escape the pressures of his London life. He was thoroughly disillusioned with his work at the Foreign Office but, as he was still liable for work under the National Services Act, he wished to be kept on there until the war ended. His one desire, he wrote to Bennett, was

to return to private life, to cease living on news & newspapers,  
& to attempt to do [his] own work and not other people's.<sup>34</sup>

There were, of course, a few pleasant events which leavened the otherwise flat daily routine throughout 1944: an evening at the opera with Helen Kapp, the secretary at Lawn Road; lunches with Colin (who was equally overworked); Tim Thompson's wedding, at which he was best man. But long office hours precluded much socializing. Even Christmas Day was spent at the office, a cake sent by Jack providing the only festive touch in a fairly dispiriting day.

As the bitterly cold months dragged into yet another year of war, Brasch found it hard to keep faith in his dream of returning home to write. The death of Ursula Bethell had sapped his confidence; the short dark days weighed heavily on him. For many months, he had had neither the energy nor the time to work on his poetry. But a letter from Glover, who was spending his leave in Christchurch at the Caxton Press, brought hope. Denis was working on Curnow's anthology, in which 'The Silent Land' was to be published, and he was keen to print another book of Brasch's own poetry.

Inspired by such faith in him, by March 1945 Brasch was able to inform Bennett that he had 'begun writing again a little - little enough but more than since 1940'.<sup>35</sup> Another book remained a long-term goal, could only be attempted once he was liberated from war work and settled back in New Zealand. A concentrated effort on his poetry was impossible at this stage:

It's a constant struggle trying to lead a double life; every time I go out at night it means something going west - something I might have written or the leisure which is an essential preparation for it. Of course it isn't all loss - far from it; and I can't live a hermit; but it makes every decision seem so momentous.<sup>36</sup>

Gradually, the bleak winter days grew longer, and gun-metal skies gave way to blue. The prospect of escaping this mundane existence lifted his spirits. Spring came to London, touching the plane trees to vivid green and filling the parks with cherry blossom. 'I've never known a spring like it', he wrote to Crockett:

The war - the real war - began, you may remember, with that faultless summer of 1940; so it is ending in Europe in the same way. But war seems far away....<sup>37</sup>

Although the end of the war was imminent, his work load did not appear to lighten: in fact, it necessitated a postponement of his spring leave. This, much to his regret, meant that he had to turn down the invitation of a visit to Scotland with Crockett and his new company, the Compass Players.

This group had been formed the previous October and had spent a difficult winter playing to audiences in the North of England. Because they were a non-profit-making company, it was essential to form a governing committee to avoid the imposition of an entertainment tax. Following the trip to Scotland, Crockett wrote once more to Brasch: would he consider being a member of the committee? Brasch readily agreed, despite the tension which had developed with the Adelphi the previous year. He had been sorry to miss the chance of touring with the new company, and welcomed this more formal link with them.

In June he was able to take his long overdue 'spring' leave, and at last managed to get to Scotland. Meeting up with the de Beers, he spent a week on Raasay, an island in the inner Hebrides between Skye and the mainland of Ross. Here, his thoughts turned naturally to New Zealand, for the rugged outline of the hills and the leaping spray against the rocks were more like his home country than anywhere else he knew. The strain of recent months was banished by energetic walks and icy-cold early morning swims. In the long evenings, Esmond worked on his editing of Evelyn's diaries, while the others made use of the spacious library of Raasay House. It was a forgotten luxury for Brasch to bury himself in books:

On rainy mornings I sat trying to learn how to read again for hours at a time; it was not easy by day, but easier at night, and in that immensely long daylight one could see to read inside without a light until half-past eleven. Well after midnight I saw plainly from my bed the houses by the water at the foot of Glamaig, across the sound.<sup>38</sup>

The week was a welcome reprieve from office routine; but once on the boat heading for the mainland, the uncertainties of the future returned to destroy his peace of mind:

The rough wind, the smells and slight motion of the steamer, roused in me the sickness and fears of parting, decision, new beginnings, and seemed to cut me off from the beauty of the day and of the world.<sup>39</sup>

As Germany had surrendered in May, he realized his release from the Foreign Office was imminent, but no specific date had been proposed, nor was it clear when a passage to New Zealand would become available. He had hoped for a reasonable period of time between finishing work and leaving England but, as he had written to Bennett before leaving London, it was impossible to predict the course of the next few months:

For myself I am making no plans. Ideally I would like several months between leaving the FO & going to NZ; to be able to write some of the pieces that have been forming in my mind for too long already, to try & recollect myself after these lost years, & to see a little more of England.<sup>40</sup>

His expectations materialized, although not exactly as he had foreseen. Arriving in Edinburgh to spend a couple of days with friends of Esmond's, he found a letter waiting there from Crockett. Enclosed was a copy of a sketch for a mime play, that joint project proposed much earlier in the midst of the Job fiasco. For the next two days, despite the fact that Dunedin had been modelled on Edinburgh, Brasch thought less of home than he had for some months. There was so much to take in culturally and historically, and his mind was

increasingly preoccupied with Crockett's suggestion which, after his recuperative break, seemed more and more appealing.

A couple of weeks after returning to London, he wrote to John confirming his interest in this project:

Have you thought any more about a mime? I would dearly love to write something for you before I leave; recently I've been too distracted to think about a play, at least on my own; but given a kind of commission I believe I could set to work & turn out something.<sup>41</sup>

Any such 'commission' was to be, of course, unpaid. Despite the wasted expenditure of time and energy the previous year, he had forgiven those involved and was prepared once more to undertake a labour of love.

Receiving an affirmative by mail, he began work almost immediately. By the end of July he had completed the first section. The opening scene, as with 'Job', made use of a chorus, which introduced the main theme of the drama: the eternal cycle of life:

**Chorus:** Turning on the timeless wheel of the heavens,  
Systems and suns and eras and generations,  
Are born through momentary light into unanswering darkness,  
Borne into time and out of time....<sup>42</sup>

This chorus acted both as audience and commentator for the main action of the play: the journey of a young shepherd with 'life burn[ing] in his eager glance',<sup>43</sup> who leaves the secure circle of family life to pursue a dream.

In retelling the story of the prodigal son, and thus tackling a subject so essentially a part of established mythology, Brasch felt as tentative as he had with Job. After sending a draft of the first scenes to John, he became convinced that it was 'so poor - so commonplace' that he nearly gave up altogether;<sup>44</sup> it took all John's persuasive powers for him to continue. This he did, and wrote the next scene, a revel where the shepherd is enticed by pleasure-seekers and left full of self-loathing. A 'political' scene followed, which caused considerable indecision and much hard work.

Crockett's input into this project was not only to direct the dancers and mime artists, but also to suggest the general implication of each scene. This meant Brasch struggling once again to interpret his friend's ideas while remaining true to his own (far less radical) beliefs. To achieve this in verse which also satisfied his own creative conscience was not easy. At the end of July he wrote anxiously to John:

if I understand your conception right you want the scene to expose politics, political parties as such, as hollow shows of no substance; and while in a sense I sympathise with this as a feeling, a ruction, it seems to me that government by political parties offering real alternatives (as they can & should, & have done in our history) is, crude though it be, the only tolerable method, permitting change without violence and continuity without stagnation. I should therefore be reluctant to attempt to "expose" politics in this way; but perhaps what you intend to tilt against is the notion of politics & parties as ends in themselves, ways to salvation, & I think I shall have to rewrite the speech I wrote this morning to take that line.<sup>45</sup>

The scene in question, in which the shepherd opposes two politicians offering false dreams to a crowd, was written and rewritten throughout the month of August. Several hot blue days in the middle of the month were spent at Taena, with less time spent walking on the moors than poring over the play with John and Anne.

The day before he returned to London, war came to its official end. He was almost oblivious to this as he worried away at the draft of his play. Richard Ward had agreed to produce the mime once it was completed and, after the critical reception of 'The Chosen', this added an extra pressure to the undertaking. By the end of summer, the political scene had been entirely rewritten, but Brasch himself was still far from happy with it. 'Imagination deserts me', he complained to John, 'when I try to turn it into something at once so abstract and so literal'.<sup>46</sup>

Even in the final version, the transitions between the two aspects failed to ride smoothly. The politicians speak in a colloquial tone which prevents them from being anything more than types; the chorus alternates between similar plain speaking and poetic - almost prophetic - imagery, so that sections of the scene sit oddly with each other. 'Folks, folks, don't talk that way', the First Politician begins:

Anyone listening to you might think that you all felt that everything was hopeless. So it is, of course, and always has been. If you're determined to do nothing about it. But you can do something to improve your lot if you're determined enough. All that talk about haggard faces and lost kids and barren houses and all the rest of it is just so much defeatism....<sup>47</sup>

The chorus' answer to this harangue is slightly more successful, revealing, by contrast, the superficiality of the politician's speech:

Ours? the world? O colour of hope,  
Fair rainbow in the weeping sky!  
Is it for us your arch is bent  
Above the heavy waters of earth  
And rivers flushed with fallen life?  
Dare we turn and look to see  
A sun hanging in heaven, set  
To shine for man? for us? for us?<sup>48</sup>

Such rich, often biblical, imagery is sustained throughout the scene, and adds beauty and colour to an otherwise banal episode. Yet the poetic tone seems incongruous for an ill-educated rabble which, later in the scene, turns on the shepherd with harsh words and stones.

Significantly, the chorus' speech is most effective where imagery is drawn from the natural world:

**Woman:** How can we turn from the least glow that warms  
The winter twilight of our monotony?

**Second Woman:** That leaps like spring from hill to hill,  
touching the frozen woods to life?<sup>49</sup>

Phrases such as 'the salt breath of the sea-borne hours' echo the earlier poetry of *The Land and the People*. Other natural images link the scene successfully to the opening, where the cyclic theme is first introduced:

**Second Woman:** Is it for us, this sense of rising  
Step by step out of the weighted past  
Into new cycles of possibility,  
Where dawn breaks as though on a strange land  
Over the sorrowing ageless face we meet in  
every moment's mirror?<sup>50</sup>

By now, Brasch had a knowledge of his strengths which lent such passages conviction and grace, but there remained an overall inconsistency in characterization and tone which forced him to rewrite the political scene yet again. Being finally released from the Foreign Office, his time was reasonably free and, through the first week of September, every morning and nearly every evening was spent on the play. It was an emotionally disruptive few days.

Mrs Bertram had just cabled with the information that James was definitely safe; Jack Bennett was expected back from America any day, and Colin had organized a holiday in Wales the following week. Even so, Brasch's sight remained fixed on his project. From Wales, he went straight to Taena for ten uninterrupted days of work. Bennett, returned to England for the first time in years, visited for two of these days, but it was primarily a working holiday, and every morning was devoted to the play.

The days grew shorter, the trees turned, and the departure date for New Zealand crept closer. Returning to Lawn Road, Brasch doggedly worked on at the troublesome scene. Letters flew back and forth, much as they had in the final stages of 'Job': Crockett's offered encouragement and practical suggestions, Brasch's contained progress reports. 'Since I returned from Taena', he wrote on 11 October,

I've been really slaving at the political scene of the mime, some days nearly giving up in despair, only that I felt you hovering like an image of Conscience in the background. But now I've got something down; it is still too close for me to look at it coldly, but I hope at any rate it will serve as a body to be racked into shape, because I don't think that now, with so little time before me, I could face rewriting the scene entirely once again.<sup>51</sup>

On Crockett's advice, one revision at least minimized the problem of an inconsistent voice. Originally, the shepherd had prompted the crowd to speak out against the hypocrisy of the politicians but, in the final version, he expresses himself by mime alone. This was undoubtedly an improvement, but Brasch remained dissatisfied, and the scene continued to prey on his mind.

Meanwhile, he ploughed on with the subsequent scenes. After the repetitive circling of the politicians' speech, it was a relief to turn to action: to an episode where the shepherd encounters two men, X and Y, counting money. Y is left ruined by the combined forces of X

and the newcomer; a mysterious 'warlike figure' teaches the shepherd sword-skills, and encourages him to kill X. The short scene became one of the more effective dramatically, and its ending was striking. The stage directions were unusually lengthy and specific, indicating an important theme to be conveyed primarily through dance and mime:

*For a moment the shepherd triumphs; then he realizes what he has done: he who wished only to help men has killed a man. He mourns, in final degradation. Meanwhile the warlike figure advances and threatens him in turn. He flees.<sup>52</sup>*

Effecting a hasty exit for the shepherd, Brasch made the most of the chorus' role by allowing them to comment on this scene. With faces covered or averted, the group pronounces the downfall of man. The poetry is rich and resonant, calling on the icons of the natural world to speak for the lesser human sphere:

No more. No more.  
 Close your eyes and let your heart be stone,  
 And your hands fall like stone  
 With the fallen wind,  
 And let there be stillness in all the sounding cells of the brain,  
 For there should be nothing now to trouble the antennae of  
     sense  
 In this great emptiness where motion comes to rest,  
 Discharged before its time,  
 Where the sea is no longer contracted to the moon  
 And the relaxed air cannot deliver light  
 Nor fill the anxious pores of the breathing world.<sup>53</sup>

The theme was one which was seminal in Brasch's more recent poetry. When man becomes estranged from nature, he warns, truth is obscured and charity lost. Two characters tell of the shepherd's transgression in images more characteristic of his poems:

**Man and Woman:** Far, far now from the innocent eye,  
 From the inviolate shore and the sound of waves,  
 Abandoned by the wind  
 And set apart from the creatures  
 That look neither back nor forward....<sup>54</sup>

The revisions made to this scene, too, were extensive; like the political one, it consists more of speech than action. Its characters speak in verse rather than prose, but their soliloquies are lengthy; they give detailed reasons for their rejection of a stranger, such as poverty, snobbery, fear, or religious seclusion. The final joyous speech of the chorus is overwrought but contains some effective imagery:

Open, open, open windows and doors!  
 Let the gates of the city be flung wide and in the tallest towers  
 Let the bells ringing rock the air and fling up flocks of doves  
 In shining showers....  
 And gather out of gardens flowers to dazzle solemn stone,  
 To stain the squares with echoing light under the tide of bells;  
 And let your laughter leap above the blaze of hyperbolic fountains,  
 Mocking morning's fire with joy....<sup>55</sup>

Images of the 'planetary tides' and the 'timeless wheel' once more refer to the opening sequence. The message of hope was particularly relevant to a nation who had struggled through many long years of war:

For the human image is restored and man raised up again  
With all his powers as at first. See now  
How earth is filled with light,  
A warmer light than the sun's by day, and persisting  
Through darkness of night and winter  
And through the fevers of air and the soul's darkness -  
Fog doubt eclipse earthquake panic war;\*  
Light original and archetypal,  
Prime element and native air of being....<sup>56</sup>

### III

By the end of October, only the final scene remained to be written. Journeying once more to Taena, Brasch spent a few days there working with the company. The actors, who rehearsed in the old drawing-room of 'The Warren', offered suggestions which he jotted down in preparation for further revision. As the actor and company manager Maurice Daniels realized, these were ideal working conditions:

our own rehearsal spaces and working facilities, being able to work whenever we wanted to (no Equity restrictions), in constant and immediate consultation about how productions were developing, no distractions from the outside world, and plenty of fresh air on tap.<sup>57</sup>

Although (inevitably) Brasch was doubtful about the merit of his script, the Players were enthusiastic, even Paula Rice who never hesitated to voice her opinions on theatrical

---

\* Such an absence of punctuation became a frequent stylistic device in Brasch's poetry.

interpretation. She and Anne set to work choreographing the mime and dances, while Brasch returned to London to rewrite the troublesome political scene yet again, and compose the final one. His poetic ability now held him in good stead, as did his knowledge of literature. In the conclusion of the play, the shepherd reaches a point of self-knowledge and returns home to accept his father's way of life. Brasch's writing in this scene has the simplicity of an age-old fable, with Biblically rich and memorable language:

I have come to the end of doubt  
And to the beginning of the knowledge of self;  
I have described a circle around the earth  
And reached my starting place....<sup>58</sup>

By expounding such truths, he was following in the footsteps of a long tradition of poets and visionaries. The shepherd's speech on the brotherhood of man acknowledges the wisdom of Donne, and concludes with another truism briefly but skilfully phrased:

Man is not one life to be saved or lost,  
Nor a mere corpse for power to practise on,  
Man is the great host of men, whom power  
May regiment by number, but as persons  
Cannot acknowledge and therefore must destroy.  
Power will not serve; it masters all who use it,  
Making them slaves or tyrants. But to be man  
Is to draw breath in danger but in freedom  
By the perpetual discovery of life.<sup>59</sup>

The play ends as it begins: with images of timeless and universal cycles. 'Quietly, quietly', whispers one woman, 'The wheel turns'. As the shepherd returns home, the audience are told of the kindling of new stars, of silence, of darkness. The chorus' final song pays homage to the natural world; is a supplication to the earth to receive us and to

calm our wild pulses  
In the seasons of [its] growth, and by the sight  
Of [its] immortal mirrors refine our purpose.<sup>60</sup>

The final metaphors are simple but striking:

Look, the clouds wreath into snowy glories  
Of welcome and the sea-horses of grass  
Arch their swift backs and kiss our feet in foam.<sup>61</sup>

And the last lines neatly wrap up the play with a Shakespearean nod to the audience:

But we have watched long enough; let us descend  
From the tall towers of vision and turn home,  
We also, for where one went, others may go.<sup>62</sup>

The ease with which the play draws to a close belies the process of its creation: at the time of writing, in early November, Brasch was feeling decidedly pressured. The date of his sailing was still not definite, but he expected its confirmation at any time. Meanwhile, he had to sort his possessions, tie up administrative formalities, and spend time with friends to say his farewells. With this last purpose in mind he travelled to Oxford to stay a week with Colin. But he carried the full draft of the play with him on the train, and spent as much time on it as possible, working in a room at St John's which Colin had organized. His letters to Crockett

became short, to the point, and at times terse: John's habit of procrastination was at odds to his own organized nature. 'I know you don't get much time', he wrote in a letter accompanying the much reworked political scene,

but I haven't much either, & I find more & more things that have to be done at the last moment, so that it will be increasingly difficult to sit & work at this peacefully.<sup>63</sup>

Returning to London, he received notification from New Zealand House that his sailing was to be on 10 December - just over three weeks away. He remained unhappy with parts of the play's opening;\* his perfectionist nature dictated that revisions continue until the last possible moment. It was not until the first day in December that, for the last time, he caught the train to Gloucestershire, with a 'final' typescript under his arm. Even now, he told Crockett, he couldn't 'guarantee not to go fiddling with it later and sending ... emendations'.<sup>64</sup>

Three chilly days were spent at The Warren. Huddled by the big log fire, he watched the Players rehearse their current project: a programme of drama to be presented to schools throughout England. They then read together the manuscript of their next undertaking - his own play, called by common consensus *The Quest*. Without exception, the company liked it; even Richard Ward gave his approval. Part of its success, Brasch felt, was due to its dramatically accessible style. He had simply 'adopted a convenient current manner that the Players were familiar with, through Richard Ward's plays and, of course, Eliot's'.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly, there were echoes of Eliot throughout the script, one speech in particular being noticeably influenced by 'Burnt Norton':

---

\* At this stage, the opening still included speeches by the shepherd's parents; these were eventually cut, leaving the characters to be portrayed by mime alone.

Touch and take fire and never tire  
In whirling dance,  
Till we attain the ultimate, exquisite  
Summit of sense,  
Where earth dissolves beneath our feet  
And the heart is filled  
With incandescence of delight,  
Perfected, stilled.<sup>66</sup>

The fact that Crockett's input had been substantial further contributed to his feelings of dissociation: 'The mime was anyway a collaboration between John and me, it was his conception in the first place and he showed me how to give it dramatic credibility'.<sup>67</sup> His earlier attempt at drama had made him think deeply about the nature of commissioned art. He had been taken aback, and slightly disapproving, by Ward's business-like attitude to the venture:

He talked about writing plays as though it was like making a pair of shoes, as a job to be done; there is of course something of this about it, and I am sure it can be fruitful for the playwright [sic] - or painter or composer - to produce a work that is commissioned and wanted. But this aspect of the making can be overstressed; the arts are something more than the crafts.<sup>68</sup>

At this time, his belief that 'inspiration' lay at the heart of any true work of art was less formulated in his mind than later in life. Nonetheless, instinct told him that a play written for a specified purpose, adhering to a current literary trend, would never be a part of him: 'As verse, as a work, I could not think of it as mine'.<sup>69</sup>

*The Quest's* short gestation period had intensified this feeling. Any poem with which he was satisfied had been pored over, put away, returned to, often over a matter of years rather than months. This substantial play of over forty pages had been conceived, born, and reared

in under twenty-four weeks. Thus, he was unemotional about not being present for the first full performance, which took place in April, four months after he sailed, in a Herefordshire church hall. But the ever-dramatic Crockett lamented his absence, surmising: 'He must have felt rather like a father who has never seen the child his lover bore'.<sup>70</sup>

If Brasch had doubted the ability of his 'child' to move audiences, his doubt was misplaced. Accompanied by the stirring music of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, and featuring costumes designed by Crockett, the production was a decided success. A lack of scenery placed emphasis on both dance and text. Throughout England and Wales audiences were enthusiastic, so much so that some (according to two New Zealand actors who later joined the Players) 'almost involuntarily came down to the stage after performances'.<sup>71</sup> This was a new phenomenon: an unsubsidized company performing plays by an unestablished author. It was, as the foreword of the script said, 'an experiment in combining the drama of words and the drama of movement'. Unlike 'Job', this experiment was voted hugely successful.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 586.

<sup>2</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 586.

<sup>3</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 697.

<sup>4</sup> CB to JAWB, 11 August [1941].

<sup>5</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 November 1943.

<sup>6</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 586.

<sup>7</sup> *Ind.* MSS, p. 690.

<sup>8</sup> *Ind.*, p. 394.

<sup>9</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> CB to JAWB, 7 November 1943.

<sup>11</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd, Friday' [spring, 1944].

<sup>12</sup> CB to JC, 25 April 1944.

<sup>13</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd. Wednesday evening' [late spring, 1944].

<sup>14</sup> CB to JC, 'Lawn Rd. Wednesday evening' [late spring, 1944].

<sup>15</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-8.

<sup>16</sup> Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-20.

<sup>17</sup> JC to Mr Trane, 26 July 1984. Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-20.

<sup>18</sup> CB to JC, 27 May [1944].

<sup>19</sup> CB to JC, 27 May [1944].

<sup>20</sup> CB to JC, 3 June [1944].

- 21 CB to JC, 6 June [1944].
- 22 CB to JC, 6 June [1944].
- 23 CB to JC, 15 June [1944].
- 24 CB to JC, 1 July 1944.
- 25 CB to JAWB, 16 July 1944.
- 26 CB to JC, 1 July 1944.
- 27 CB to JC, 21 July [1944].
- 28 CB to JC, 18 December 1944.
- 29 CB to JC, 2 January 1945.
- 30 CB to JC, 2 January 1945.
- 31 'Chorus from Job III', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-14.
- 32 'The Chosen', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-20, p. 68.
- 33 CB to JC, 21 July [1944].
- 34 CB to JAWB, 31 August 1944.
- 35 CB to JAWB, 1 March 1945.
- 36 CB to JAWB, 11 May 1945.
- 37 CB to JC, 18 April 1945.
- 38 *Ind. MSS*, p. 710.
- 39 *Ind.*, p. 401.
- 40 CB to JAWB, 11 May 1945.
- 41 CB to JC, 14 June [1945].
- 42 *The Quest* [hereafter referred to as *TQ*] (London, 1946), p. 5.
- 43 *TQ*, p. 8.
- 44 CB to JC, 29 July [1945].
- 45 CB to JC, 29 July [1945].
- 46 CB to JC, 26 August [1945].
- 47 *TQ*, p. 23.
- 48 *TQ*, p. 23.
- 49 *TQ*, p. 25.
- 50 *TQ*, pp. 25-6.
- 51 CB to JC, 11 October 1945.
- 52 *TQ*, p. 35.
- 53 *TQ*, pp. 35-6.
- 54 *TQ*, p. 36.
- 55 *TQ*, p. 41.
- 56 *TQ*, p. 41.
- 57 *Plays without Theatres*, ed. Pamela Dellar (Highgate, Beverley, 1989), p. 53.
- 58 *TQ*, p. 42.
- 59 *TQ*, p. 42.
- 60 *TQ*, p. 45.
- 61 *TQ*, p. 44.
- 62 *TQ*, p. 45.
- 63 CB to JC, 8 November 1945.
- 64 CB to JC, 17 November 1945.
- 65 *Ind.*, p. 403.
- 66 *TQ*, pp. 17-18.
- 67 *Ind.*, p. 403.
- 68 CB to JC, 21 July [1944].
- 69 *Ind.*, p. 403.
- 70 JC to Mr Trane, 26 July 1984.
- 71 Collin Hansen and Raymond Parkes, 'The Young Visitors who Stayed', from *Plays without Theatres*, p. 111.

## **Epilogue**

## EPILOGUE

The months of work on *The Quest*, and the journeys to Taena, had left Brasch with little time to ruminate on his imminent departure. His visit to New Zealand House in June to put his name down for a passage had been made with trepidation, and the news that a berth later in the year was a certainty filled him with nervous, rather than joyful, anticipation. 'It is rather shattering news, because I had not expected it', he wrote to John once back at Lawn Road, 'but since I can go, I must'.<sup>1</sup> The decision itself, however, proved to be the biggest hurdle. From this time on, his life became fuller than ever. There were so many friends to see before he left, and so much time was taken up with office work and the play, that he barely had time to examine his feelings.

Although he disclaimed any close emotional tie to his play, the text of *The Quest* revealed more about his current state of mind than he realized; the symbolic journey of the shepherd from ignorance to self-discovery could well have been read as an allegory for his own life. The central concept of the drama had been suggested by Crockett, but the detail with which it was fleshed out bears the hallmarks of Brasch's own vision. The scene in which the shepherd leaves his father could be an altercation between Hyam and Charles, as a judgemental parent condemns his son for pursuing his dreams instead of the family business:

**Man:**

But can you not see, boy?  
It is only common sense:  
Here is the farm,  
Here are the fields  
Your father has laboured for:  
Yours, all yours!

**Woman:**

Would you throw away  
His lifetime's work?

**Man:**

Give up all this -  
And for what? for what?  
Words! dreams! mere folly!<sup>2</sup>

Equally telling are the constant attempts to justify the shepherd's following of these dreams. In just such a way had Brasch justified his own return to England in 1931, when he had hoped to prove himself a poet. 'Acknowledge your heart's truth!' the shepherd is advised by various members of the chorus: 'Believe in yourself, boy! Follow the right, boy!'<sup>3</sup>

Implicit in the play is a wisdom not possessed by Brasch ten or more years earlier. The plight of the parents is portrayed with as much honesty as that of the boy: husband and wife represent all those who, 'left in the silent house', suffer once a child has gone. Hyam had been left twice, first in Dunedin when Charles broke away from the family business, and secondly in Hawaii, as the world teetered on the brink of war. Like the shepherd, Brasch had felt the allure of distant places so strongly that to follow their call had become a need:

Look: his familiar fields dissolve,  
Farthest hills are horizons -  
Are thresholds,  
Portals of invitation  
To worlds that dwarf the suddenly narrowed earth  
And breathless wait his coming.<sup>4</sup>

Oxford, London, Italy, Egypt: all had represented 'portals' to a life culturally and creatively enriched. The long years spent away from his home country had, paradoxically, both enlarged

and 'narrowed' his earth. Now, as he prepared to leave England, he knew that it was not possible to wrest an identity from external circumstances alone: 'Man's hope is in himself, and in no other'.<sup>5</sup> The real-life son, like the character he had created, was returning home, not only out of filial duty, but because he saw his destiny to lie in his 'starting place'.

While writing *The Quest*, he unconsciously revealed the impact of the many landscapes he had come to know over the past two decades. Early in the play, he had described the chorus narrowing its gaze from 'the larger strategy of time' to a single prospect;<sup>6</sup> in the same way, his own circumstances had acquainted him with specific cities or regions: Oxfordshire, London, Venice, the Nile valley. Characters in his play look eastward, over the gulf of Jordan to the dim peace of an olive grove: look west, to where 'through the close Atlantic cloud/ A host of ranges lift their heads from England'. The most evocative image, however, is of the south:

In the empty Pacific, on that double island  
Below the world, where the sun is caught among the mountains  
And in the dusky gold of corn that sways  
And murmurs under leaping poplar spires.<sup>7</sup>

The green shores of this 'double island', their setting of turquoise sea, had captured Brasch's heart in spite of himself. His feelings during the first grey days of December were mixed, as in June when, requesting a passage, he had been 'torn between relief & grief'.<sup>8</sup> Not once in the six months, however, did he consider deviating from his decision. The worst wrench, he felt, would be facing life without his friends. 'To leave you, Colin & one or two others', he wrote to John, 'will be almost unendurable'.<sup>9</sup> One of those he was most reluctant to leave was Jack, newly returned from New York, and in a vulnerable state after splitting up

with Edith, who had remained in America. But as the approximate date of sailing drew inexorably closer, so too did his certainty grow: it was in New Zealand that his future as a writer lay.

The date of departure - 10 December - was confirmed only five days prior to leaving. Mary and Dora bustled around him like two stout mother-hens, shopping for the voyage and packing his possessions. On the night of the ninth, he sat alone in a dingy hotel room in Liverpool, staving off his usual 'going-away fever' by writing to Jack. 'I shall tell you what I can of NZ', he promised:

I go in some trepidation, committing myself to the waters. If I fail this time, it's a final failure. I've tried to prepare myself in mind, & am certainly somewhat stronger than in 1938; I carry England with me, as I have carried NZ while here, but I am not, I think, emotionally entangled as I was then.<sup>10</sup>

Now, as at the start of the war, he felt himself to be a product of two countries; as an artist, he believed he was obligated to remain in one or the other. (He had strongly disapproved of what he perceived to be Auden's defection to America in the late 1930s.) 'I know I am so rooted in both England and New Zealand', he had written to John from New York in 1939, '& I suspect that any other country, even Italy, even Egypt, much as I love them, would come to seem a place of exile after a few years'.<sup>11</sup> His New Zealand childhood had resulted in an instinctive response to the country's shapes and colours; but his most formative years, emotionally and creatively, had been spent in England. Because of this split in loyalties, wherever he might be, he was always to feel, ever so slightly, the outsider.

Once aboard the *Themistocles*, however, such complications became - albeit temporarily - unimportant. In the early afternoon of a cold and misty December day, a tender ferried him and his fellow passengers out to deeper waters where their ship awaited. As the huge liner set

off, gliding past the quays and sheds lining the Mersey, the early dark closed in. Any last view of England was obscured except for, some time later, two lighthouses piercing the night. Now that Britain was behind them, Brasch felt curiously light-hearted; the next month and a half held no claims on him, required no decisions to be made or obligations to be fulfilled. For a brief time he could exist in the limbo of ship life, enjoying the freedom of being anonymous, suspended between the two countries which would never fully release him.

From warmer climes, having crossed the Bay of Biscay, he wrote to Mary and Dora, thanking them for their help and describing the sense of release that living fully in the present allowed:

I forgot my regrets & doubts, & all the partings, as soon as I stepped on the tender, & have been completely absorbed by each moment ever since.<sup>12</sup>

Ahead lay Durban, and then a solid twenty-eight-day haul to Wellington. The 'double island' which was his destination also held his destiny. Shrouded by distance and time, it lay mute; it promised nothing, but neither was it threatening. As he leaned on the railing of the deck, watching the white wake of the boat, the words of an earlier poem which he had called, simply, 'Landfall' echoed in his head:

For there must be one among the  
Swaying islands that waits for him  
Unknowing, that offers anchorage,  
Hearthstone, altar. Can it be  
Here, or does it lie farther?<sup>13</sup>

The slow phrases offered some security in this precarious timeless space, and now seemed to him to hold more than a universal significance. His journey had spanned two decades, had led him across oceans and land, had been one of lengthy self-discovery. It was time to prepare for his own personal landfall.

---

<sup>1</sup> CB to JC, 14 June [1945].

<sup>2</sup> *TQ*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> *TQ*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *TQ*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *TQ*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *TQ*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *TQ*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> CB to JC, 14 June [1945].

<sup>9</sup> CB to JC, 14 June [1945].

<sup>10</sup> CB to JAWB, 9 December 1945.

<sup>11</sup> CB to JC, 10-23 July 1939.

<sup>12</sup> CB to M. and D. de Beer, 13 December [1945].

<sup>13</sup> 'Landfall', Crockett MS Papers 2638, 1-14.

## **Appendix**

### ***Selected Unpublished Poems***

## **Select Bibliography**

# Select Bibliography

## 1. Primary Sources

### A. Letters and Manuscripts:

Bennett, Edmund. Private collection, Steventon, Oxfordshire.

Bennett, Jack. MS Papers 2377-08 to 12, Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Bertram, James. MS Papers 93-133-01 to 93-133-07, Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Bethell, Ursula. MS Papers 38, Correspondence Box 1, University of Canterbury Library, Christchurch.

Brasch, Charles. MS Papers 996/2, 996/4, 996/7, 996/16, 996/17, 996/34; MS 1240, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

\_\_\_\_\_. MS Papers 2148, fols. 1-6, Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Chivers, Hazel. Private collection, New Malden, Surrey.

Cox, David. Private collection, Kidlington, Oxfordshire.

Cox, Geoffrey. Private collection, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Crockett, John. MS Papers 2638-1-20; MSS 3944-14, Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Davin, Dan. Private collection lent by Winnie Davin, Oxford.

De Beer, Dora. MS Papers 81/90, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

De Beer, Esmond. MSS Eng. C3114/1, fols. 21, 79-83; MSS Eng. C3114/2, fols. 83-114; MSS Eng. C3115, C3116, C3117; MSS Eng. C3120, fols. 67-87, 100-119, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Forsyth, Emily. Private collection, Wellington.

Goodwin, Robert. Private collection, Nr. Burford, Oxfordshire.

Headley, Bettina. Private collection, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire.

- Milner, Ian. MS Papers 164; MS Papers 4567-16 to 17, Turnbull Library, Wellington.  
\_\_\_\_\_. Private collection in the possession of Vincent O'Sullivan, University of Victoria, Wellington.
- Mitchell, Charles. Private collection, Littlemore, Oxfordshire.
- Page, Evelyn and Fred. Private collection lent by Anna Wilson, Christchurch.
- Riach, Alan. Private collection, Hamilton, New Zealand.
- Roberts, Colin. MSS Eng. Lett. C782, fols. 114-22, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- Roberts, Patrick. '[Personal Memories of] Colin Roberts'. January, 1996.
- St John's College Essay Society Minutes, 1927-30, Oxford.
- St John's College Register, 1919-1975. Compiled by Anthony and Valentine Sillery for private circulation, Oxford, 1978.
- Scott, Margaret. MS Papers 91-148, Turnbull Library, Wellington.
- Scovell, Joy. Private collection, Oxford.
- Smith, Moya. Manuscript material for unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Summers, Rosemary and Hal. Private collection, Tunbridge Wells, Kent.
- Thompson, Tim. Private collection (including correspondence from Brasch to Esmond, Mary and Dora de Beer), Christchurch.
- Weir, J. E. MS Papers 37, Boxes 9, 22, University of Canterbury Library, Christchurch.
- Weston, Reg. Private collection, Nr. Rochester, Kent.

**B. Interviews conducted:**

- Chivers, Hazel. 20 July 1994, Oxford.
- Cox, David. 5 July 1994, Oxford.
- Crockett, Anne. 30 June 1993, Penzance, Cornwall.
- Davin, Winnie. 17 May 1993, Oxford.
- Garland, Peggy. 11 May 1994, Eynsham, Oxfordshire.
- Gee, Maurice. 25 November 1991, Wellington.

Headley, Bettina. 4 December 1993, London.

King, Michael. 15 February 1994, Wellington.

Mitchell, Charles and Jean. 25 May 1993; 13 July 1993, Littlemore, Oxfordshire.

Paul, Janet. 18 November 1993, Wellington.

Prior, Elespie. 24 May 1995, Wellington.

Roberts, Patrick. 13 July 1993, Littlemore, Oxfordshire; 20 October 1993, Oxford.

Scott, Margaret. 26 November 1991, Wellington.

Scovell, Joy. 23 June 1993; 23 September 1993, Oxford.

Thomson, John M. 15 November 1991, Wellington.

Thompson, Tim. 24 July 1995, Christchurch.

Wilson, Anna. 14 June 1995, Christchurch.

### **C. Printed work by Brasch:**

*Collected Poems*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984.

*Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947*. Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980.

*Present Company: Reflections on the Arts*. Auckland: Blackwood & Janet Paul, 1966.

*The Quest: Words for a Mime Play*. London: The Compass Players, 1946.

*The Universal Dance: A Selection from the Critical Writings of Charles Brasch*, ed. J. L. Weston. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981.

## 2. Secondary Sources

### A. European Material:

Allott, Kenneth, ed., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse 1918-60*. Middlesex: 1962.

Auden, W. H., *Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1930; 2nd edn., 1933.

\_\_\_\_\_ and MacNeice, Louis, *Letters from Iceland*. London: Faber and Faber, 1937.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Isherwood, Christopher, *Journey to a War*. London: Faber and Faber, 1939; rev. 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-57*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-39*, ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Juvenilia: Poems 1922-28*, ed. Katherine Bucknell. London: Faber, 1994.

Birch, Clive, *The Missendens in Camera*. Buckingham: Quotes Ltd., 1986.

Brooke, Rupert, *The Collected Poems*, intro. Gavin Ewart. London: MacMillan, 1987.

Callan, Edward, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*. Oxford and New York: 1983.

Cunningham, Valentine, *British Writers of the Thirties*. Oxford: 1988.

David, Hugh, *Stephen Spender*. London: Heinemann, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_, 'David and Goliath Struggle', in *The Times*, 10 October 1992, p. 23.

Davin, Dan, 'Louis MacNiece', in *Closing Times*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Day Lewis, C., *A Hope for Poetry*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1934; 2nd edn. 1935.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Collected Poems 1929-33*. London: Hogarth, 1935.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Buried Day*. London: Chatto, 1960.

Dellar, Pamela, ed., *Plays Without Theatres: Recollections of the Compass Players Travelling Theatre 1944-1952*. Beverley: Highgate, 1989.

Dodds, E. R., *Missing Persons: An Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

Drabble, Margaret, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th edn.). Oxford: 1985.

Eliot, T. S., *Collected Poems 1909-62*. London: Faber, 1974.

Fussell, Paul, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. Oxford, 1980.

Grigson, Geoffrey, ed. and intro., *The Arts Today*. London: Bodley Head, 1935.

- Grigson, Geoffrey, *The Crest on the Silver: An Autobiography*. London: Cresset Press, 1950.
- Hewison, Robert, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *The Complete Poems with Selected Prose*, intro. Robert Van de Weyer. London: HarperCollins, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Poetry*, ed. and intro. Catherine Phillips. Oxford and New York: 1996.
- Hynes, Samuel, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*. London: Bodley Head, 1976.
- Karpf, Anne, 'Better for Verse, Richer for Poems', in *The Guardian*, 7 May 1994, p. 28.
- Kerr, Douglas, 'Disorientations: Auden and Isherwood's China'. Seminar given at Christ Church, Oxford, 4 May 1994.
- Lehmann, John, *New Writing in Europe*. Middlesex: Penguin (for Pelican), 1940.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed., *Poems from New Writing 1936-1946*. London: Penguin, 1946.
- MacNeice, Louis, *Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*. Oxford, 1938.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, ed. E. R. Dodds. London: Faber, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Poems*. London: Faber, 1988.
- Martin, Robert Bernard, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*. London: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Maxwell, D. E. S., *Poets of the Thirties*. London: Routledge, 1969.
- Mitchell, Donald, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936*. London: Faber, 1981.
- Ovenden, Keith, *A Fighting Withdrawal: The Life of Dan Davin, Writer, Soldier, Publisher*. Oxford: 1996.
- Powell, Dilys, *The Villa Ariadne*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Selected Poems*, ed. and transl. J. B. Leishman. London: Hogarth Press, 1941.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Letters to a Young Poet*, transl. Reginald Snell. Edinburgh: University Press, 1945.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Letters 1902-1926*, transl. R. F. C. Hull. London: Macmillan, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Rodin*, transl. Jessie Lemont and Hans Trausil. London: Gray Walls Press, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and transl. Stephen Mitchell; intro. Robert Hass. London: Picador, 1987.
- Rogers, Timothy, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1977.
- Ross, Robert H., *The Georgian Revolt: Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal*. U. S. A.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.

Russell, Donald, and Geoffrey Lewis, Obituaries for Colin Roberts, in *St. John's College Notes* 1990, pp. 51-6.

St John's College Essay Society Notes, 1927-30.

St John's College Register 1919-1975. Compiled by Anthony and Valentine Sillery, Oxford, for private circulation, 1978.

Scovell, E. J., *Selected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1991.

Spencer, Bernard, *Collected Poems*, ed. and intro. Roger Bowen. Oxford: 1981.

Spender, Stephen, *Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1933.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs*. London: Cape, 1935.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Collected Poems 1928-1985*. London: Faber, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Journals 1939-1983*. London: Faber, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_, *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender*. London: Faber, 1991.

Stallworthy, Jon, *Louis MacNeice*. London: Faber, 1995.

Tolley, A. T., *The Poetry of the Thirties*. London: Gollancz, 1975.

Williams, Charles, *Poetry at Present*. Oxford: 1930.

Wilson, Edmund, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*. London: W. H. Allen, 1952.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Thirties*, ed. and intro. Leon Edel. London: Macmillan, 1980.

Yeats, W. B., *Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares. London: Macmillan, 1962.

## B. New Zealand Material:

Adcock, Fleur, ed., *The Oxford Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Anderson, David, 'For Charles Brasch', in the *New Zealand Listener*, 30 July 1973, p. 64.

Andrews, Isobel, review of *The Quest*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 24 April 1947, p. 30.

Barwell, J. G., 'A Reply to Mr Brasch', in *The Phoenix* 1 (1932), pp. 41-3.

Bertram, James, *Charles Brasch*. Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Capes of China Slide Away: A Memoir of Peace and War 1910-1980*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993.

Bertram, James, 'Joining in the Universal Dance of Art - Charles Brasch and German Lyric', in *Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, ed. Hans Dieter Heinz. No. 189, Stuttgart University Press, 1987, pp. 17-23.

Broughton, W. S., review of *Not Far Off*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 1 August 1969, pp. 52-68.

Curnow, Allen, ed., *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*. Christchurch: Caxton, 1945.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, ed. Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987.

Evans, Patrick, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland: Penguin, 1990.

Geraets, John, "'Landfall" Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey'. Thesis: Ph. D., English. Auckland: University of Auckland, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_, "'An Interior Landscape" - Charles Brasch's *Indirections* and *The Universal Dance*', in *Islands* NS 1 (1984), pp. 71-83.

Gifkins, Michael, ed., *A Room of Their Own: A Celebration of the Katherine Mansfield Fellowship*. Auckland: David Ling, 1993.

Glover, D. and Ian Milner, eds., *New Poems*. Christchurch: Caxton Club Press, 1934.

Hall, David, review of *Disputed Ground*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 10 September 1948, p. 19.

Jensen, Kai, *Whole Men*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996.

King, Michael, *Frank Sargeson: A Life*. Auckland: Penguin, 1995.

McCormick, E. H., *New Zealand Literature: A Survey*. Oxford: 1959.

Meikle, Phoebe, *Accidental Life*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994.

Milner, Ian, 'Conversation with Charles Brasch', in *Landfall* 25 (1971), pp. 344-372.

\_\_\_\_\_, review of *Collected Poems*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 13 April 1985, pp. 30-31.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Intersecting Lines: The Memoirs of Ian Milner*, ed. V. O'Sullivan. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1993.

*New Zealand Listener*, 28 July 1939, p. 37. Review of *The Land and the People*, anon.

Oliver, W. H., review of *Indirections*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 9 August 1980, p. 76.

O'Sullivan, Vincent, "'Brief Permitted Morning": Notes on the Poetry of Charles Brasch', in *Landfall* 23 (1969), pp. 338-353.

Page, Frederick, review of *Indirections*, in the *New Zealand Listener*, 9 August 1980, pp. 76-7.

Reid, J. C., *Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical History*. Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1946.

Stead, C. K., 'Charles Brasch', in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*, ed. Rosalie Murphy. Chicago: St James, 1970, pp. 127-8.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The New Poetic*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964.

Sturm, Terry, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Witheyford, Hubert, review of *Disputed Ground*, in *Landfall* 2 (1948), pp. 335-6.

### **C. Journals referred to frequently:**

*Folios of New Writing* (Spring 1940 - Spring 1941).

*Landfall* (1947-1971).

*New Writing*, NS (Autumn 1938 - Christmas 1939).

*The Oxford Outlook*, i-xii (1926-1932).

*Oxford Poetry* (1923-1932).