

Why is John Bradburne important?

David Crystal

Two American poets point us towards the answer. First, Archibald MacLeish:

Anything can make us look; only art can make us see.

Next, Robert Penn Warren:

The poem is not a thing we see - it is, rather, a light by which we may see
- and what we see is life.

There has never been a poet like John Bradburne, who wrote more poems in the English language than any other poet living or dead. So what sort of life do his poems try to make us see?

In a phrase: eternal life. In 'Paradise Tossed Aside' he expresses the hope he has for his writing:

Man is a vandal and a beastly thing
Where'er his ears are deaf to Pan's sweet piping,
Yet he was set as viceroy to King
Eternal once: oh may this dunce's typing
Re-stir the springs of immortality
And may my wit befit eternity.

How does he stir the springs of immortality in us? And what is the 'sweet piping' that he wants us to hear? In over a thousand poems he places before us three major themes.

The nature of the Trinity

His insight into the nature of the Holy Trinity is profound, providing us with images that make this ultimate mystery amazingly accessible. The key is love. As he says in 'Logos':

The Thought, The Word, The Voice are Persons Three
Of Love in Love with Love for evermore.

'Thought, Word and Voice' is his favourite analogy, explored in hundreds of poems, but he is always on the look-out for others. Here is one, 'Heat, Light and Sound', written not long before his death, on Whitsunday 1979:

There is no light, other than that reflected,
Excepted it is engendered by blithe heat,
A fresh analogy is thus projected
For Father, Son and Holy Paraclete;
The Father, Love The Thought, I call His Heat,
The Son His Light diffuses it abroad,
Christ, who is Love Begotten and Our Lord,
Speaks to us now through Love The Paraclete;

The Thought and Word and Voice go hand in hand
And yet God has no hand but that of Christ,
We see His hand not in the Eucharist

But by our Faith His grasp we understand;

Assumed is our humanity to One
Whose face and form are warm as God The Son.

He is convinced that his primary task, as a poet, is to explicate the Trinity. Indeed, as he explains in 'A Ballade of a Logosophite', he has taken it on board as a personal responsibility:

The Thought, The Word, The Voice of One in Three
Are Father, Son and Holy Ghost of God,
They are The Persons of The Trinity
That Christ defined not thus as earth He trod;
Neither the Church has done till now nor odd
Is it to be esteemed that she, the Church,
Has given but to me her mutt the nod
Which indicates the answer to a search.

It's actually not that hard, he says in 'Roma, Italia, Il Mundo', and it's a critical message for a modern secularist world:

I personally am intent on telling
To Rome, to Italy and to the World
That, since true Faith is dwindling and not swelling,
The One in Three should freely be unfurled
As Dogma of predominance and hurled
Hard (by some bard or other) at the throngs
Of peoples too unsteeped for true songs.

But I must find a Maiden first to go
And see the Pope with Faith and Hope agog
And tell him that the Trinity is so
Simple to know as falling off a log:

This is his role, he says in 'Logos':

I am assured that it is up to me
To write this down as clown and troubadour.

So who has given him this assurance?

The centrality of Mary
Our Lady has. In several poems he affirms his total dependence on her inspiration.
This is how he recounts his first encounter with her as a Muse, in 'Ut Unum Sint':

I did not have the least idea what I should say,
Yet knew that all about wide living wonders were;
I loved the breath of Summer and its pleasant day,
As also Winter's sunset and the frosty air;
I'd seen the beauties of an Oriental clime,

The dwelling and the wisdom of a distant race;
I'd listened rapt to music's harmonies sublime,
And knew the fascination of a woman's grace:
But still I waited sad and dumb with aching heart,
Because it seemed that there was naught which I could do,
Except to gaze on loveliness - I had no art!
Then spake Our Blessèd Lady, and my life was new:
She said - 'My child, give me our hand, I'll guide your pen,
And we will write about the love God has for men.'

And ever after he sees himself as her amanuensis, writing down what she inspires, as he affirms in 'Assumption':

Thus talk I to myself, addressing thee
Whilst thou dictatest what I set to page.

His love for her knew no bounds, and many of his poems describe the intense nature of his relationship to Mary, fostered through visionary experience, and explicitly described as a marriage. Think of whoever or whatever you find most beautiful, he tells us in 'Oneing', and you will find all that beauty and much more in Mary:

Wherefore, a man who wills to set
His heart on Love alone
Should not despise and not forget
His Totem, but enthrone
The sum of that which most attracts
His being to its cataracts:
Love will for lust atone.

Upon that throne Our Lady Fair
May sit as Queen of grace,
Ask her to take
For heaven's sake
Such earthly form and face
As you consider is the height
Of human beauty in your sight.

This, in a Word, is best to do
If you would be detached
From aught which might forbid to woo
High heaven's gate unlatched:
Marry Maria and remain
Beside her Jesus, joy to gain -
None could be better matched.

It is an intimacy open to anyone, he says in 'Esurientes implevit' ('he has filled the hungry'):

Marry or burn
And Mary is best

In breaking a fellow of fat;
Married to Mary is parried the rest
And (keep it not under your hat)
Yet there are many she'd marry if they
Only would ask her: she'd show, in THEIR way
Of thinking attractive, how far she surpasses
The beauty of others,
She smothers allasses!

And why should we get as close as we can to Our Lady? Because that is the way we can get closest to the Trinity:

Attune your heartstrings to The Trinity,
Let Yahweh's love bestrum you as His harp
And let no lesser love of he or she
Hinder God's hand, land you like cod or carp;
Love of Our Lady, though, is nothing less
Than tantamount to counting Yahweh All
Because they share one name and one address
And one intent of blending in their call;
Admire I AM with Miriam who bore
Our Lord in Bethlehem and brought Him up
To be the Shepherd Good whom we adore
Each time we graze by gazing at His Cup.
There is not anything excelling this
In any man's or woman's span of bliss.
('This above all')

His focus on Mary complements his focus on the Trinity:

He that is alone with The One
Whose name is Love must be
With Mary and her Son
And the blessed Trinity:
The son of Man and the Lord of light
And the Father great and Our Lady bright!
('Aubade')

In ' Une Ballade a la Mode ' he even invents a new word to show the closeness of her relationship to the Trinity: 'Quoternity'.

His expression is often vivid, intimate, and daring, and readily open to misinterpretation in an age which often confuses love and sex. But we avoid the difficulty, I think, if we see his language as falling within the metaphorical tradition of Biblical expressions of unity (such as the Church as the 'bride of Christ') or the medieval tradition of courtly love.

The metaphor of marriage is extended in many directions. A natural result of a marriage is children. So if Mary marries a poet, the outcome is inevitable:

Our children all are poems, far too many for a file,
My thrust is that of just a troubadour;

My action is in words because
There is no better fashion
Since Christ our Lord incarnate was
For sublimating passion.

No marriage ever produced so many children! There are over 5000 poems in this remarkable oeuvre.

The necessity of ecumenism

When (I do not say 'if') John Bradburne's cause is successful, what will he be a patron saint of? Lepers, of course. But ecumenism, maybe, also. His longest work, a manuscript poem of 10,184 lines, is called 'Ut Unum Sint' - 'that they may be one'. It reflects the diversity of his own spiritual background. Raised as an Anglican, he became a Catholic, frequently signed off his poems and letters as 'Jew', and in his travels had close encounters with Islam and Buddhism. Here are some extracts:

'That they all may be one' in God's glorious Son -
All the Christians so sadly divided, and come
To the King who is Shepherd: all flocks He will bring
To one fold, and they safely shall graze in the Spring
And the Heavenly Summer - all peoples He calls
From His turret, high up o'er Jerusalem's walls.

Judaism, I imagine he would say these days, is part of our spiritual DNA:

Now come we to a deeper truth:
True Catholics are Hebrews all
As much as David and Saint Paul,
And this has Eucharistic proof -

The Body and the Blood of Christ
Which are the Holy Eucharist
Were of the Virgin Mary born
At Bethlehem on Christmas Morn.

And therefore Christ's Humanity
Is wholly Hebrew; and when we
Receive in grace we truly be
United with The Trinity.

For Jesus Christ's Divinity
Is hypostatically one
With all that makes Him Mary's Son
And Hebrew fruit of Hebrew tree.

So Catholics whose hearts are true
Are oned with Christ Our Lord the Jew -
He who can say 'Christ lives, not I,'
Has Jewish Nationality.

But John Bradburne is a Jew who reads the Koran, is happy to pray in a mosque, and who ends one of his poems ('Saharah') with the Islamic affirmation 'Allah ek akbar' ('God is great').

I went into the Beira Mosque and sat
Awhile upon the floor-fulfilling mat
And then I prayed to Power, more divine
Than love of wine, Agapheh give for that.
(Even the quiet cloys on earth')

Koran I read in Tripoli
North Africa and thought
That much it had of poetry
If such a lack of sport:
Its acclamations all are great
Marching in starch to Heaven's Gate
Whom unabashed they celebrate,
By Mariam they're caught!
(The White Force Ballad')

And this is a Christian who repeatedly praises Buddhist mysticism and sprinkles his manuscript writing with the Hindu sacred syllable 'Om':

Where kindles Love's eternal light on everlasting hills
Hymn Father, Son and Holy Ghost around that flame which thrills
Whilst each to each in simple speech begins it with 'Shalom'
Whence it proceeds as Love it feeds, one syllable, in 'Om'.

When bidden to consider what is best in Hindustan
The Himalayan foothills in a marvellous pavan
Process along the memory and hold the mindful gaze,
And thence proceeds the lama through the woodsmoke to the maze.

Wise sadhus chant by glowing fires of charcoal in the eve
As point by point an argosy of stars appears to weave
With whirls of wonder round this orb and silences gyrate
Whilst Venus pirouettes in green, to bars Inviolate.
(Om')

I have never read anyone who taps so deeply into so many religious traditions. His conclusion (in 'Ut Unum Sint') is therefore unsurprising:

Hindoos and Buddhists, Anglicans,
And many quaint Americans
And legion others, if they seek
Sincerely, are the Saviour's sheep.

'Tis men of Faith whom God doth choose -
And pray remember that the Jews
Of old were His own faithful race:

We are adopted by His grace.

The world needs a signpost pointing clearly towards the possibility of religious unity. John Bradburne provides it in a unique way. Whereas there are many examples of people from different spiritual traditions displaying a willingness to come together, he shows how it is possible to integrate these traditions into a single personality, a single vision. In a world full of Christian/Jewish/Islamic/Hindu suspicions and tensions, he is a much-needed symbol of hope.

The Bradburne vision

John Bradburne's vision is one in which Catholic Christianity is seen as special because of the unique role of the Blessed Sacrament, which (as he affirms in 'Ut Unum Sint') adds an extra dimension to everything else we do:

A thankful heart, a contrite heart,
A heart aflame for love of Christ
Is far above all human art
Without the Holy Eucharist.

But in the furnace of His Love
The Host can lift our hearts above
And make them melt for love of Him
Who sits above the Cherubim.

It is also a vision in which the Bible holds a central place. He would like to learn the Bible off by heart, he says in 'Caro factum est', but thinks this would be difficult! In any case, as a poet he finds it better to nibble away at its truths, bit by bit, until eventually one arrives at the whole:

Sirs, I should read the Bible through
And then decide what's best to do
And if you cannot quite be sure
Read it again: a golden cure
For lassitude and idleness
Is getting it by heart I guess
But I would find that far too hard,
Not near enough to art of bard
Who'd rather take a little bit
And whittle it away with wit
Until each little bit he took
Become One Word who'll claim the Book.

It is a vision, moreover, in which prayer plays a critical role. Indeed, many of his poems *are* prayers, as 'Sumer is i cumen in' illustrates:

Among the fading blooms on pleasure's lawn;
No more to slumber, heedless of Thy chime
That keeps unfailing watch from dawn till dawn;
No more the quest for this world's fairest views
Which can but fill the eye with fresh desire;

No more the crowding vanities and news
Which keep from souls the Holy Spirit's fire;
No more the wanderer way, the wide unrest,
And weary search for joys that pass and cease;
No more, Good Lord, to turn from Thy behest,
For now we know Thy Will to be our peace:
To Thee we tread the path which Jesus trod,
So rest our hearts in His - Thy Heart, dear God.

And it is, of course - as readers of this Newsletter need no reminding - a vision which becomes a reality only through a life of service to others. 'Why is John Bradburne important?' The lepers of Mtemwa would have had no difficulty answering the question, though it would have been in very different terms from those used above: because he provided them, as much as he could, with their daily needs in the form of food, medicine, and loving care:

I'll stay to watch and pray and try
To bring about undoubted ill's decrease
By standing sentinel in Christ and by
Issuing rations where the rations cease.
(*'A Ballade of Non-Despondency'*)

He himself saw an intimate connection between the two worlds of daily survival and eternal life:

Mootamewa is God's darling; those who come
And go or stay may thus work out salvation.
(*'Mtemwa'*)

One hour with burnt-out lepers when the wind
Of mood and mode is blowing quite contrary
May change from mellow fast a fellow's mind
And make him think naught good but God and Mary!
(*'In June he changes his tune'*)

And it is this continual relating of the realities of this world to those of the next which is the unwavering focus of his writing.

I said at the beginning that the role of a poet is to make us see. That was John Bradburne's wish as well.

God, I care not what clod forgot my face
Nor who remembered ever my address,
So long a song is poured upon the race
In strains like rains upon a wilderness
That those who say not No will say me Yes!
What use to be abstruse to a degree
Beyond both critics and the common press
If, reading me but once, saith dunce: "I see".
(*'A balladey-minded Epilogue'*)

That is what his poems are for: they are, in their 5000 different ways, beacons illuminating the nature of truth.

Note

Full versions of all the poems used in this essay can be found at the website: www.johnbradburnepoems.com/. A new collection, *John Bradburne on Love*, is now available from ...