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### **Recommended Citation**

Ellis, P. A. (2009). Livres composés and Musicopoematographoscopes: Brennan as a New Beginning in French Influence on Australian Poetry. *Jostes: The Journal of South Texas English Studies*, 1(1), 1–10.

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***Livres composés and Musicopoematographoscopes:***

**Brennan as a New Beginning in French Influence on Australian Poetry**

*By Phillip A. Ellis*

The *livre composé* is one response to the challenge of the long poem that developed in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. It was also to prove important in the development of a new influence of French poetry upon Australian poetry, through the work of Christopher Brennan. Although Brennan, born in 1870, trained as a classicist, he early on took up poetry, writing and publishing a succession of poems and articles through his adult life. Despite failing to achieve his degree at the end of a scholarship in Germany and despite delays to his career as an academic at the University of Sydney, largely taken up with a position at the forerunner to the current State Library of New South Wales, Brennan became better known as a professor of comparative literature and as a bohemian than as a poet. After losing his position, as the result of an affair, a divorce, and the resultant scandal, Brennan was, from the late 1920s until his death from stomach cancer in 1932, reliant upon the charity of friends and admirers of his poetry and criticism; it took another thirty or so years for volumes of his collected verse and prose to appear, his major work, *Poems*, having been out of print for nearly half a century. Yet without Brennan's example, a number of later poets, who were to be influenced by him, would lack his model of the serious, Australian poet and of the *livre composé*. Further, we would lack Mallarmé's influence through Brennan's *livres composés*, and his *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope* (hereafter referred to as *Prose M*). What will result is an understanding of the first, full efflorescence of French influence upon Australian poetry, and this will help us understand that latter's development even further. After all, the reality is more complex and interesting than any more simplistic model allows for.

To understand the impact of the *livre composé* on Australian poetry, as a form of new beginning of the French influence upon it, it helps to understand how its first Australian practitioner, Christopher Brennan, saw it. His first formulation of its principles postdate the

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publication of his *XXI Poems* by two years. This is in “Newer French Poetry: I: Rolling the Stone from the Sepulchre”, originally published in *Bookfellow* in 1899; it was later reprinted in *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, and excerpted in *Christopher Brennan*, in 1984. According to Brennan, a *livre composé* is “the book of verse conceived and executed as a whole, a single concerted poem.” (*Prose* 289) For Brennan, the essence is that the book of verse be treated as a single poem, a single item, rather than a collection of poems or items; this is why, when speaking of *XXI Poems* and *Poems*, I refer to the individual poems as pieces, and to the book as ‘the’ poem.

Brennan continues: “A great human event ... viewed broadly enough to be almost abstract, hence a symbol, mythical, is developed through a series of poems, which thus are equivalent to a drama.” (*Prose* 289-290) That “broadly enough” needs to be emphasised in light of some critics’ attempts to read Brennan’s biography into his *livres composés*.<sup>[1]</sup> Brennan, here, is stating that the details of the event are not what matters, but the basics are, so that the minutia of an autobiographical narrative is absent. There is a difference in abstracting from one’s own life a general pattern of ‘infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood,’ and abstracting from that same life an individualised autobiography.

Much later, in his 1920 article on Baudelaire, Brennan writes that *Les Fleurs du Mal* is “the sublimation of a whole imaginative life and experience into a subtly ordered series of poems, where each piece has, of course, its individual value, and yet cannot be interpreted save in its relation to the whole.” (“Studies” 329) This ties into his earlier definition of the *livre composé* by emphasising that each piece’s meaning is integral to its position, its individual context within the *livre composé* of which it is a part. Although Brennan does not explicitly use ‘*livre composé*’ with this later statement, it is, rather, implied, just as the *livre composé* is a development out of Baudelaire’s response to the challenge of the long poem.

James McAuley has stated that “Personal experience is the vital core of Brennan’s work.”

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(Brennan 41) This is not supported by a statement made by Brennan himself, in the introduction to *From Blake to Arnold*. There, he states that “The tendency of all true poetry is to free from the manifold small disturbances of life the large, rhythmical states or ‘moods’ of the soul--the abiding figures whose union is the type, the ideal or perfect human figure, which it is not given to any one man to be.” (“[Poetry]” 17; Introduction xviii) Again, we see a statement that what is not essential to the poem is the poet’s autobiography. Rather, what he calls moods, a quality of poetry akin to emotion, but differing in ways from emotion itself (Brennan is, after all, dissatisfied with the definition of poetry as the “mere expression” of emotion; “[Poetry]” 12; Introduction xiii). Further, that “ideal or perfect human figure” is a further key against identifying the poet with the poem’s ‘I.’ (Brennan, elsewhere, argues this when he says “The I of my verses is not necessarily ME” and going on to add that “A poem is the expression of a mood / A mood need not be ... a record of real events;” “Chevaux-de-Frise” quoted in Wilkes “Interpreting” 421.)

As a result, the basics of Brennan’s conception of the *livre composé* can be summarised as follows: the *livre composé* is a book of poems that, rather than being a collection, is a single poem of many pieces, the meanings of which are derived in large part from their context, and which abstracts the experience of a life while eschewing its minutiae. That is the theory, at least, but what of the practice? How does Brennan develop the *livre composé* in his own work?

In looking at the development of the *livre composé* in Australia by Brennan, it helps to determine which of his works can be so classified. There are four such works. There is his *XXI Poems* of 1897, followed in 1903 by *The Burden of Tyre*.<sup>[ii]</sup> Then there is his *Poems* of 1914, followed shortly thereafter by *A Chant of Doom* in 1918. Of these four, two are of the most interest for this paper, *XXI Poems* and *Poems*, given their relationships: both recycle the same basic poetic material, and the subtitle of the first, *Towards the Source*, is a section title of the second. In a sense, this “Towards the Source” is the key text for Brennan’s main *livre composé*, *Poems*.

According to Wilkes (“Art” 29), the “earliest form of [“Towards the Source”] is a manuscript volume now in ... Fisher Library.” This is that notebook described by Chisholm and Quinn in their notes to *Verse* as FL 1. It is, largely, a fair copy of the pieces, although with “Threnos” excised.<sup>[iii]</sup> It gives the basic forms of the poems in *XXI Poems*, regarding their organisation, and as texts, albeit with a number of changes, primarily relating to punctuation. It is the first extant draft of the collection, and it is possible to see Brennan work out final arrangement of the poem’s pieces.

Regarding that punctuation, Harry Chaplin notes that “The only certain thing about Brennan’s punctuation was its uncertainty, for it was always a nuisance to him.” (11) And, in a note upon the autograph manuscript of “Prose (Marine)” in his possession, Chaplin notes that “The manuscript demonstrates Brennan’s dislike for punctuation, and his dictum that it ‘is a curse’.” (27) It is not certain that such is the case.

Evidence suggests that Brennan struggled with punctuation as a necessarily important element of his poetry. Like many others, he found it requires much thought and more vacillation, as he sought to convey the exact niceties of meaning, sense and rhythm of his verse. It is not, that is, that he found it a nuisance; rather, that it was so integral to his work that he found it hard to be quick and facile in his judgements. This is a reading supported by Stephens (17) where he says “The work was done with true labour and faithful pain.”

The next step in the development of Brennan’s principal *livre composé* is his *XVIII Poems: Being the First Collection of Verse and Prose* of 1897. This appeared in an edition of eight multigraphed copies that immediately preceded *XXI Poems*. Yet it is more than just a predecessor to this poem; it is, rather, a separate work, with its own, simpler organisation of contents.<sup>[iv]</sup> Its contents are organised by their date of composition, and there is the lack of any sense of rhetorical or narrative thread that promotes in the disparate pieces any sense of a unity. Hence, it

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does not form a *livre composé*; *XVIII Poems* lacks the tightness of organisation, the focus and the context of *XXI Poems* and *Poems* with the first two of these three forming the main contrasts between it and *XXI Poems*. Wilkes notes this when he says that: “The vital difference between *XVIII Poems* and *XXI Poems* ... lies in the disposition of the poems. *XXI Poems* ... is not an assembly of poems in chronological order, but a single poem in three movements, with an envoi.” (“Art” 31)

*XVIII Poems* was followed shortly afterwards by *XXI Poems*; John Tranter notes that *XXI Poems* “had been published ... at the end of July 1897.” Unlike the earlier work, the contents are not organised chronologically by date of composition but are, rather, arranged into a sequence that conveys a narrative. It is in this sequence that we can discern the germ of the quest that later runs through *Poems*, in this case the desire to return to Eden, the Source of the subtitle of *XXI Poems*. It is also possible to see the underlying organisation of the poem into a more complex arrangement than what is found in *XVIII Poems*. The work consists of three groups of pieces, groups that are not explicitly demarcated by divisions as are found in the later *Poems*. The second of the three groups is, however, marked by Roman numerals, and this is the only real indication in this work that there are those separate groups.

Further, each of the pieces has a title, again unlike the later *Poems*.<sup>[v]</sup> This has lead some critics to read them as a collection of poems as opposed to a single poem in its own right, an understandable reaction. Further, each of the pieces adds to the overall reading of the poem by variations of mood, technique and language. The result is a single, large poem that contains within it variations and changes, and that demonstrates one response to the challenge of the long poem that takes into account the inevitable disunity that results, but which, in doing so, creates a unity of reference that allows the poet to create a more unified and longer work.

The Australian critical reception to *XXI Poems* was prompt, but “largely dismissive:” “five reviews appeared within a month,” according to Tranter. Yet it proved to be a new beginning in

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terms of the French influence upon Australian poetry, especially when we consider the next item that was to appear by Brennan, an item which, further, was only published in 1981. Brennan followed *XXI Poems* with *Prose M*, publication of which only occurred in the over-sized, facsimile edition in 1981. It was occasioned by a number of factors, each of which added to yet another example of the new influence of French poetry upon Australian verse. The most immediate of these factors was the publication of Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés" in the May 1897 *Cosmopolis*. The next factor was the reception of *XXI Poems*, both critically, and in terms of sales; this critical reception will be discussed shortly, but in terms of sales to the public *XXI Poems* was a failure. In addition, a third factor was the debate that Brennan had been conducting through his correspondence with Dowell O'Reilly. O'Reilly, in Clark's words (Introduction 4), felt that "an Australian poet should write for his public: his poetry should be commercially successful, recognisably Australian, and intelligible to Australian readers." The result was, as Brennan put it, "an exposition in English of the new Mallarméan poetical-musical form." (quoted by Clark Introduction 5)

One item of interest is that *Prose M* incorporates elements of the critical reception to his *XXI Poems* in its closing pages, along with excerpts from O'Reilly's remarks. The reviews themselves are of interest. One point that must be made about them is that their immediacy is important. This helped affect Brennan's attitude to the public, as expressed in *Prose M*, and this attitude, in turn, affects the alleged difficulty of his *Poems*.

The first two reviews are both unsigned, and they appear in both *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The review in *The Daily Telegraph* is brief, but longer than the review in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This latter review is only a narrow paragraph. Interestingly, Brennan misquotes this review in *Prose M*; where the review has "The trick of singularity will be forgiven if we get a genuine poetic utterance; but only then," (4) Brennan has "the trick of insincerity may be pardoned when we get singularity." (*Musicopoematographosopes* [27]). Both of these reviews are negative and obtuse, as well as brief.

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A. G. Stephens' unsigned review in *The Bulletin* is more positive in tone, yet it, too, fails to engage with the poem's fundamental aspects. Judging from Brennan's quotation from it, he probably saw it as misguided and negative: again, Brennan misquotes the review. Where that has "the afflatus-years slip away so quickly!" [the Red Page] Brennan has "How quickly the afflatus years slip by!" (*Musicopoematographosopes* [27]) Then there is the review in *Hermes*, again unsigned, but possibly by J. Le Gay Brereton. This is, in turn, uniformly positive, and it is insightful into the poem's nature and quality. It also mentions, but does not cite, the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald* reviews. J. S. Henerie's review, in *Freeman's Journal*, is likewise positive. It is quite possible that it may be significant that Henerie, like Brennan, was once a student at Riverview, hence the cordiality with which it is received. The review itself addresses Brennan's work at some length, and it is insightful and adulatory, rather than critical.

There are two other reviews, both non-Australian, which are not excerpted in the back of *Prose M*. The first of these two is Henri Davray's piece in the October 1897 *Mercure de France*; Robin Marsden has speculated that Davray's review encouraged Mallarmé to defend Brennan against him. This is a reading also taken by Clark (*Biography* 112). The second is an unsigned review in *The Saturday Review*, that appeared early in January 1898. Both of these reviews are negative, as noted by Axel Clark (*Biography* 112-114).

That *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope* was occasioned in part by Brennan's response his own critical reception is supported by the inclusion of those excerpts of those five Australian reviews. Further, that the two *Musicopoematographosopes* are in part responses to Mallarmé, in part to his own critical reception, it is best to consider Tranter, and Clark (Introduction 3-5).

Unlike *XXI Poems*, and the later *Poems*, *Prose M* is not, of course, an example of the *Livre composé*. It is, however, something different: Axel Clark says that "Un coup de dés" "might be



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seen today as a concrete poem.” (Introduction 3) I would go further, and claim for it as among the earliest examples of free verse in Australian poetry, pre-dating the modernist experiments of Kenneth Slessor by a number of decades. Yet, as a result of its belated publication, it has had little to no influence until recently.

It could be possible to conclude here, with Brennan’s *Prose M*, but I want to make a few remarks about his principle publication, the *Poems* of 1914. *XXI Poems* may appear, to some, to be wholly derived from Brennan’s life, to the point of being read as primarily autobiographical. It discusses, seemingly, the courtship of his future wife prior to her arrival in Sydney, in the December of 1897. Yet *Poems* itself resists such an easy identification with Brennan’s biography. McAuley notes that Brennan “did not try to develop a poetry that would be a direct avowal of personal experience.... The method he chose was the more usual one, by which personal experience is used by the poet, but only when generalised, or translated into other terms, or even transmuted by symbolist methods.” (“Erotic” 8) And it is also clear that the central section of *Poems*, “The Forest of Night” is based on other texts and myths, and that, further, there is no clear correspondence between the vagabond-figure of “The Wanderer” and Brennan of period of composition.

There have been attempts to place elements of the pieces into Brennan’s life, as if *Poems* was early confessional poetry, or a means of reading Brennan’s own views upon his own life. Yet, in regards numbers 32, 34 and 38 of *Poems*, Noel Macainsh (234) notes that: “Despite what details biographers might bring to identify the real-life object of these ... declarations, the fact remains that the poet does not specify an individual person.” Wilkes, further, adds that *Poems* “stands as a record of Brennan’s intellectual and emotional history, ... yet there is no poem in which the experience described can be certainly identified as his.” (“Interpreting” 422) This is a step away from the earlier, simplistic readings of some of Brennan’s pieces in *XXI Poems* by University authorities as being immoral, and it is a firmer step away from the simplistic reading of the poems as being autobiographical. And it is the supreme example of the early Australian *livre*

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*composé* to end this essay with, the supreme example of the newer French influences upon Australian poetry.

*XXI Poems* is an end-product in its own right: it is not, as most treat it, merely an intermediate stage between *XVIII Poems* and *Poems*. As Wilkes puts it, “It was meant to be complete in itself, not the preliminary to some further stage.” (Poetry 85) Yet it also forms the basis for the first movement of *Poems*. It is, as a result, both complete in itself, as a text and preparatory to the next. One of the major ways that *XXI Poems* and *Poems* connect is through “Towards the Source”, the former’s subtitle, the latter’s sequence title. In addition, Brennan uses the same poetic material over three collections, with this resulting in three separate works that re-use or recycle the same basic core pieces, from older contexts to new ones. It is not, rather, the evolving conception of a single work, *Poems*.

This is a crucial distinction. While the pieces form facets of both *XXI Poems* and *Poems*, their meanings change as a result. Further, the meanings of any given piece are not fixed, to one appearance or set of meanings. Wilkes, further, points out that “The effect of [‘Towards the Source’] is to be sought not only in the individual poem, but also in the connection from one poem and another, and in the pattern relating them all.” (“Art” 28) Thus it is that we cannot fully understand *Poems* without understanding *XVIII Poems* or *XXI Poems*, and we likewise can’t understand the history of the *livre composé* in Australia without more fully understanding its initial development in the works of Christopher Brennan.

Whereas there had been French influence on Australian poetry prior to Brennan, it reaches its first full efflorescence in him. Mallarmé provided one model that Brennan followed in his verse and later life, albeit with temperamental and intellectual differences that ended with him as more of the monologist of legend, and with the short temper that is evidenced in his responses to antithetical views. It does not need him to imitate Mallarmé precisely, of course, but, rather, to be furnished with one role model, one possible example that he adapts to differing circumstances.

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One of these circumstances is through the poetry that he wrote in and from the late nineteenth century. Both through his conception of the *livre composé*, and the creation of his *Prose M*, Brennan demonstrates that there was, at that time, a new influence of French poetry upon Australian poetry, one that, through Brennan's example, was to affect the development and expression of a number of later Australian poets. This is not the place to enumerate them, neither all of them, nor the most significant of them, but it is time to note that, had it not been for Brennan's importance as a mediator of French poetry, Australian poetry would be all the more poorer as a result.

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[\[i\]](#) We can see an example of this in McAuley’s 1968 reading of *Poems*, particularly page 14 where he reads lines 44 through 58 of #68 xi as referring to Brennan’s taking of his wife’s virginity. Clark leans along a similar interpretation, when he notes that “a particular passage in ‘Lilith’ may represent a disguised account of what precisely happened to give him” the feeling that “his marriage was in some basic sense a failure.” (119; Clark goes on to cite and discuss McAuley’s views, 119-120). Brennan, as it happens, makes note, in his “Chevaux-de-Frise”, that “It is impertinent to enquire into the private life of the versifex.” (quoted in Wilkes “Interpreting” 422) See also Barnes’s discussion in her 2006 book (121-126) as noted in Lynch’s review of the same (137).

[\[ii\]](#) There is some disagreement over the publication date of *The Burden of Tyre*. Conventionally, it is considered to have only first been published in the 1953 edition by Harry Chaplin. However, I hold that it was first published as an early example of *samizdat* publishing in 1903, when it was first circled amongst Brennan’s friends in a holograph edition, thence again in 1906 as a typescript, before it appeared in the 1953 edition derived from one of those manuscripts. The other manuscript furnished the edition that appeared in *Verse*.

[\[iii\]](#) It had been thought that “Threnos” had been lost until rediscovered by Robin Marsden, and published by her, in “Two Unpublished Poems of C. J. Brennan”.

[\[iv\]](#) It helps to compare the schedules in Wilkes “Art” pages 30-31 and 31 respectively.

[\[v\]](#) The pieces were to retain their individual titles until as late as 1905.