

BERTRAM BROOKER'S THEORY OF ART AS EVINCED IN HIS "THE SEVEN ARTS" COLUMNS AND EARLY ABSTRACTIONS

In the past, art and literary criticism were often hermeneutic exercises, presupposing the inherence of a "significant being" within their respective sign systems. The expectation of a "meaningfulness" is an incarnational notion, whose sacramental associations cannot be evaded. If art was understood as the "host" of a "real presence," perhaps it was because God had been metaphorically located in everything, from the bread and wine of Holy Communion to the raw materials of written discourse, *Logos* or the Word. Indeed, one persistent cabbalistic tenet that can be traced through Francis Bacon, Coleridge, Ruskin, Mallarmé, and many others asserts that the universe itself is a text, in which Yahweh's handwriting can be read. Painting and poetry may then be viewed as subsidiary dialects within the language of Nature, charged with the communication of its Maker's ineffable wisdom. If, in this era of "inter-subjectivity," "inter-textuality," and "absence," neither Jehovah nor the author nor any other isolatable entity is thought to "speak" by means of visual or verbal narration, this was not always the case. For Bertram Brooker, the artist's role was still primarily a vatic one, translating divine inspiration into a symbolic code that rendered God's celestial idiom intelligible on earth.

Painting and Poetry

Brooker's opening apologia for the title of his syndicated newspaper column (*The Seven Arts*) could easily be classified as an *ut pictura poesis* schema, absorbing it into the humanist tradition of criticism correlating painting and poetry.¹ By proposing a seven-term analogy instead of the more orthodox binary comparison, Brooker's argument obviously exceeds the boundaries of most "Sister Arts" deliberations; but this expansion seems, at first, to represent a quantitative rather than a qualitative distinction. For instance, his equation of descriptive "word pictures" in literature

with "local colour" in painting² has many precedents in the *ut pictura poesis* canon. John Dryden posited the same formal correspondence when he paralleled the painter's use of colour with the poet's use of tropes in his preface to the first English edition of a Dufresnoy poem celebrating the "Sister Arts" (*De arte graphica*, 1695).³ But the accompanying list of individuals operating in more than one artistic sphere, a feature that would recur frequently in subsequent columns, points to a doctrine of complete interchangeability among the arts that places Brooker outside of the *ut pictura poesis* continuum.⁴ The limited connection predicated by "Sister Arts" theories, which noted the specific structural or thematic similarities shared by two clearly differentiated media, is subverted by the very profundity of Brooker's identification of every art with every other art.⁵ The family resemblance of painting to poetry presumed by Dryden has become the far more intimate relation of the *Doppelgänger* to its double in *The Seven Arts* columns.

This is not to say that Brooker no longer recognized the formal disparities dividing the arts or the importance of mastering the appropriate stylistic techniques. He later censured Aldous Huxley, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce for their purported introduction of a "musical" patterning into literature (column of October 19, 1929). "The borrowing of methods [from another art] is a bad thing" for precisely the same reason that Kandinsky's collation of "certain colours" with "certain [musical] tones" was a "mistaken and stultifying endeavour." Such applications of an inter-art analogy are "too literal," since it is only in its "essence" that each art is the same as the rest. All are emanations of a single coadunating force, because it is God's animating spirit that initiates the creative process and imprints the whole of an artist's oeuvre. The true artist (whether he is a poet, a painter, or a musician, since this appellation is an interdisciplinary one) is subject to the intervention of a transcendent power whose purpose is not to be denied.⁶ Yet, although the artist is his usual example of the sensitive man able to receive this divine afflatus, no artist *qua* artist exists within Brooker's aesthetic system. An artist's integrated apprehension represents nothing more than the amplification of our normal human faculties of perception.⁷ Therefore, because the artist is not the possessor of an exclusive gift such as "genius," all men carry within themselves the potential for artistic invention. This explicit belief in the democratization of the poetic impulse partially discloses the impact of the writings of Walt Whitman upon Brooker's thought.⁸ Indeed, in emulation of Whitman, Coleridge, Blake,

Donne and all of the other poets that he included in the metaphysical or transcendental stream of art, his determination of the nature of the artist was consubstantial with a detailed explication of the nature of man and of mankind's dependence upon his Creator. In the end, Brooker's artistic credo can only be described as a philosophical stratification, simultaneously investigating problems of aesthetic, ethical, political, and religious concern.

One Equals All

After his entry into the more confessional mode of the later columns, Brooker virtually abandoned formal comparisons between the arts in favour of an examination of their common "essence."⁹ Less precise structural correlations (such as a mathematical organization inducing an approximately "musical" rhythm in painting) were superseded by an increasing concentration upon the absolute convergence of the arts, in terms of initiating inspiration and fundamental meaning. Brooker's tendency to discuss the various artistic disciplines as several aspects of a single power reveals his adherence to the Donnean formula of All [the multiplicity of the material world] equals One [the all-encompassing Whole that is God].¹⁰ It is impossible to say whether this Neo-platonic monism originated with the artist's careful reading of Donne, or whether it was due to the influence exerted by the writings of Dante, Blake, Coleridge, Whitman, Plato, and Lawren Harris upon his intellectual development. But it must be stressed, nevertheless, that the making of a "unitude" from a fragmented "multitude" was the central idea around which Brooker's mind and art continuously eddied throughout this period. The following passage, excerpted from a diary entry dated August 25, 1925, divulges something of the potency that this conventional All=One equation still held for him, since his exegesis of a private mystical illumination is phrased in Neo-platonic commonplaces.

Stronger today than anytime has come the feeling of *all* being *One*. What I mean is that although I have felt as *full of divine energy* before, and experienced a sort of *Oneness*, I have never before felt kinship with every dead and living thing [uniting all times and places]. The sense, in short, of the *whole being of God* working out his destiny, and *I a part*, not less nor more than the rest. [my emphasis]¹¹

That Brooker had begun to construct his aesthetic arguments to be a secular reflection of his theological preoccupations is apparent from the sheer proliferation of allusions to the One / All, Unitude / Multitude dichotomy evident in *The Seven Arts* columns. In one instance, he awarded a singer the status of an artist / maker as opposed to that of an imitator / interpreter because she had fused the multiple "functions of vocalizing, memory, and emotional interpretation" into the unity of "a perfect Whole" (column of March 9, 1929). Aligning himself with Leo Stein in the column of August 10, 1929, Brooker states that the art object should exhibit a similar unity in its formal configuration. Since "the artist must become one with his material, a unity is [necessarily] produced in his expression of that oneness." Thus, the Neo-platonic notion of "unity" operates as a structural device as well as a philosophical theme, conditioning the arrangement of the constituent parts within the matrix of the art object as a whole. Therefore, Brooker sometimes emphasized the technical means through which this structural unity could be realized, especially in his discussions of literature. For example, Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* was able to achieve "the unity of beautiful monotony" because "the incidents are pressed down and rendered unexciting in order to maintain the slow, even, precious flow of the narrative" (column of October 4, 1930).

The Influence of Craig

This conflation of the artist's spiritual apprehension of "oneness" with the "unified" organization of his material creations can be partially explained by Brooker's early acquaintance with the ideas of Gordon Craig.¹² Craig's stage productions and written publications promoted a theatrical genre that had been popularized by Wagnerian opera, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total art work." In order to obtain the synthesis of set and costume design, lighting, music, spoken word, acting and dance required by Craig's *Art of the Theatre*, one man ("the Master of the Drama") must control all of these activities. Craig's own authority was so pervasive that his actors were forced to replicate, without any deviation, the gestures, facial mimicry, and diction decided upon by their director / Master. Finally, the living actor was expelled from Craig's variant of the "total theatre," and replaced by a mechanical contrivance called the *Über marionette*, which the director himself manipulated.¹³ Rather than accuse Craig of megalomania, however, I would argue that the demand that a single authorial perspective regulate every facet of a production is something that is endemic

to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a genre. If the drive toward a "total art" is understood as an attempt to attain a semiotic completeness, interlacing several types of signs to reinforce their delivery of a single message, then one mind must originate all of the signs to avoid ambiguity. Because Craig believed that Symbolism was the essence of the theatre, just as it was "at the root of all art . . . and of all life,"¹⁴ it was imperative that these intrinsic symbols coalesce and become clear to the audience. This communicative process is made more difficult if the director has to rely upon collaborators: a stage designer's fainter understanding of the director's conception could result in an enfeebled symbolic representation being offered in the scenery, or his complete incomprehension could cause him to propose a rival set of symbols, contradicting the director's impelling notion. In Craig's opinion, it is unlikely that the variety of signs combined in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would be able to fuse into a cohesive symbol unless they were united by a single interpreting mind.¹⁵ The artist becomes the juncture linking several disciplines in Craig's system as in Brooker's, although the former's synchronic utilization of several media dictated a composite form, while the latter's diachronic practice of the individual arts retained the formal divisions between them.

Brooker's Abstractions

Consequently, it is largely the tension arising from this double philosophical vision, wavering between the One / Unitude and All / Multitude limits of the Neo-platonic paradox, that enlivens Brooker's abstract paintings of the period. For instance, in *Sounds Assembling* of 1928 (Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba), the separate lines scattered across the foreground suddenly consolidate in the centre of the composition, merging into one smoothly ascending column. Furthermore, the clusters of short white shafts exploding outward from a single point are a demonstration of the "unitude" of a common origin being fractured into a disjunctive, individuated "multitude." Even the circle motif, which ordinarily indicates the perfect self-containment of the unified One, has been made to signify the infinite accretion of parts that is the All through its multiplication. The circle's inherent movement toward closure is undermined further by the compositional arrangement, for the circumference of each of these shapes has been cut across by the framing edge of the painting. When coupled with the tendency of the outward thrusting shafts to break the picture plane, the rupturing of these circular enclaves diminishes the framing

edge's ability to circumscribe a zone of representation. The microcosm of the depicted space bleeds into the macrocosm of the viewer's space, implicating the external world in this Unitude / Multitude, One / All exchange.

Sounds Assembling summarizes Brooker's methods of translating the "ultimate unity of forms, rhythms and relationships" behind the apparent "multiplicity" of "natural phenomena" into paint, but the use of these artistic devices prevails in all of his work of the period.¹⁶ An extension of the artist's earlier practice of attaching musical names to his pieces, the inclusion of the word "sounds" in the title attributes a synaesthetic effect to his abstract canvasses (which is another way of abolishing distinctions between the arts, since one art appropriates the psychological response normally accorded to another).¹⁷ The confluence of a number of dispersed waves into a single, upward inclining column was more succinctly expressed in the *Green Movement* of 1927 than in *Sounds Assembling*, although the line in the former seems curiously inert and slack when contrasted with the wiry energy of the latter. *Allelujah*, *Energy is Eternal Delight*, and most of the *Elijah* series exhibit the second compositional format, based upon a profusion of lines radiating outward from a single point. Although the *Elijah* illustrations are figurative rather than abstractions, it is the pattern established by the linear overlay (signalling the presence of supra-natural forces) that invests many of these images with an element of vitality. The almost cinematic progress of the white striations, stepping by increments from the centre to the perimeter of one drawing, becomes emblematic of the breadth of Brooker's imaginative grasp. *Elijah* is a surrogate artist when he acts as the earthly receiver of the "still small voice" of God, since this message must be given a tangible form before it can be imparted to a wider audience. As was the case with *Elijah*, the artist's Divine source of inspiration "enlarges" his human perspective, enabling it to span the vast remove between heaven and earth.¹⁸

The linear clarity and three-dimensional solidity of Brooker's paintings of spiritual transcendence awards them a determinacy that is at odds with the vagueness and transparency often associated with ethereality in art. In canvasses such as *Allelujah* or *Sounds Assembling*, with their hard edges, smoothly tubular forms and icy colour, all substance seems to have been transmuted into crystalline or metallic matter.¹⁹ Because his vision of man's spiritual nature accords everything a greater definition and weight than many depictions of terrestrial reality (i.e., the optical blurring repro-

duced by the Impressionists or the atmospheric haze of aerial perspective), Brooker's abstractions manage to invert our normal perceptions. The spiritual world becomes more corporeal to the viewer than his faulty apprehension of his physical surroundings. Although the pictorial space is deep rather than shallow in Brooker's abstractions, whether it is suggested through an inward receding vortex (*Creation*) or through an outward projecting scaffolding of forms (*Allelujah*) or through gradations in colour hue or tonality, none of this boundless area appears to be unknowable. The duplication and re-duplication of the circle motif in *Sounds Assembling*, *Energy is Eternal Delight*, *Allelujah*, and *Ascending Forms* reinforces the sensation of infinity intimated by the depth of the pictorial space. If we are locked into a Neo-platonic circuit (sharing something of our Maker's essence), then the artist / observer's ability to perceive even the most remote objects in this wide expanse with remarkable perspicuity is of great consequence. Many of Brooker's paintings must then be examined as images seen through God's eyes, from whom no things are hidden, since they are based upon an absolute point of view. This is not abstract expressionism but a kind of abstract theology, since God's experience has displaced that of the artist.

Plotinus and Passage

Yet Brooker never leads the observer to believe that the passage between material and the celestial spheres was an easy one, nor does he imply that this transcendent state can ordinarily be sustained. While Brooker considered it a given that all art must aspire heavenward, very often vestiges of "human" emotion prevented it from remaining on this elevated plane. Here is his own recounting of this phenomenon, embedded in one of his idiosyncratic discussions of music (column of May 4, 1929).

In Brahms, in Beethoven, in Wagner, and in the work of scores of other composers, there is *at the lowest limit a strain of human sentimentality*, and *at the highest a tremendous pulsing beat of human aspiration* . . . Bach seems to inhabit a region toward which all aspiration soars and *from this region he leans down like a compassionate angel* . . . [In Bach alone] we must not look for the *obvious vertical trend of most great music* . . . In Brahms and Beethoven [immense outpourings of sound] seem to build *up* in the air around us and remain in our memories as *high altitudes* of experience [my emphasis].

In this quotation Brooker's cosmology closely resembles the ladder-like, medieval chain of being which located God and his angels at its apex while mankind inhabited a rung below. The vertical orientation, underscored by Brooker himself in the above excerpt, clearly connotes direction and motion (up / down, ascending / descending). It was Plotinus who first introduced this hierarchical construct, positioning an undifferentiated One at the top from which all life and virtue diffused downward into the world through a fixed succession of stages. The vertical organization of Plotinus's theoretical framework must be read, inevitably, as a calibrated scale of geographical extension or "distance" from the formative ideal. Brooker's urge to paint verb-"movement" (capable of propelling him toward heaven) rather than noun-"objects" (that can only ground him in the nominative context of earth) was rooted in a determination to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal by means of this upward / ascending passage.²⁰ Because the confinement of the material world (binding mimesis) has been exchanged for the release of geometric representation (the flight of abstraction), he was able to successfully convey self-transcendence and apocalyptic rebirth in the early paintings.²¹ Yet, although they are images of hope and redemption, Brooker's abstractions are not without poignancy. They almost invariably address the twin *topoi* of transition (*Green Movement*, *The Way*, *Sounds Assembling*, *Ascending Forms*, *Evolution*, *Striving*) and of the beginning quest (*Creation*, *Endless Dawn*, *Dawn of Man*) rather than those of rest and completion. Full possession of the "serenity" of the supernal realm remains a latent prospect, demanding continuing effort (with the possible exception of *Resolution*). If the plane inhabited by Bach's music is already more than "human," Brooker's paintings promise a similar "resolution that will lift you out of the world," but not without further "human" exertion and "evolution" (column of May 4, 1929).

Painting and Poetry Revisited

Bertram Brooker was the first artist in Canada to paint wholly abstract compositions.²² His up-to-the-minute knowledge of the visual arts is apparent in some of his oldest extant drawings, c. 1913, which record a number of pivotal figures in the history of modern literature, painting, and sculpture.²³ However, the fact that the literary and artistic movements alluded to in these drawings are not quite coeval is very significant. Several of the illustrated pieces, i.e. Brancusi's *Mlle. Pogany* and Matisse's

sculpted *Jeanette III*, were less than two years old at that time, and the degree of their formal abstraction was of equal topicality. By contrast, the writers noted in this series were not nearly so avant-garde; most were nineteenth-century Symbolists rather than members of the nascent wave of literary Expressionists and poetic Imagists then maturing in Europe. Brooker's omission of any mention of these two movements could be understood in 1913, however. A full-blown Expressionist aesthetic had only emerged in Germany around 1910, and although Ezra Pound had begun to use the term Imagism in 1912, it wasn't widely publicized until 1914.²⁴ Yet, the much later *Seven Arts* columns evince this same split, as Brooker continued to champion the latest abstract paintings while promulgating a well-worn Symbolist creed in literature. A number of column entries do reveal a precocious awareness of Expressionist drama, along with the other current trends in fiction that had divested the written word of much of its metaphysical resonance. But Brooker's aversion to psychological exhibitionism and to overt physicality caused him to prefer the visionary rapture of William Blake to the moody expressionism of Eugene O'Neill or the sensuous skepticism of Aldous Huxley. His quarrel with modern literature was fundamentally due to its unacceptable content, since formal structure was rarely considered except as the carrier of appropriate or inappropriate connotations.²⁵

Non-representational art requires the viewer's complicity for the generation of meaning, since the lack of referential elements purges it of traditional associations. Because Brooker conceived of abstract works as a mirror, reflecting back to the beholder the preoccupations of his inner spirit, it is not surprising that he detected his own obsession with man's relationship to God while gazing upon this self-animated screen (column of February 16, 1929). Furthermore, his abstraction / religious mysticism equivalence would have been corroborated by the theories of Kandinsky, as advanced in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.²⁶ Like Wilhelm Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy*, Brooker believed that non-representational works based upon geometric principles provided an antidote to the corruption of the material world, although he did not reject deep space as being overly mimetic. Abstract art could transport the viewer to a region from which "human frailty and superstition" have been excised, or rather, in which they have existed (column of July 27, 1929).

The artist made a major attempt to rehabilitate more recent literature upon only one occasion, by developing an interesting thesis dealing with

the "experiential abstraction" of the reader (column of February 16, 1929). In his opinion, the content of many modern stories did not become apparent until their final conclusions. If the writer's intention could not be deduced from the constituent parts and would not cohere until the ending, then the reader engaged in the process of reading experienced the individual passages in a text as "abstractions," freed from the insistent meaning usually imposed by a more active authorial presence. However, unless they have been crumbled into disconnected phonemes in the manner of Hugo Ball and of the Café Voltaire, words always retain some residue of referentiality, regardless of whether their signification is equivocal or clear. Since meaning is more explicitly encoded into language than is possible with the less literal medium of painting, the microstructure of a Hemingway novel is far less a neutral "receptacle" into which the reader may pour his own interpretation, than is the more subjective configuration of an "abstract" painting.²⁷ Brooker could not ignore the range of possible meanings identifiable from an author's choice of words and syntax as easily as he could Picasso's strictly formal reasons for assembling certain lines and shapes in a composition.²⁸ Hence, he supported only those literary movements whose objectives coincided with his own, and it so happened that these constraints dictated retrogressive Romantic-Symbolist credo with Metaphysical overtones.²⁹

Because post-Symbolist poetry was largely comprised of iconic explorations of the writer's surroundings, or of polemical investigations into the human condition, or of the text scrutinizing itself as discourse, most contemporary verse obviously contravened the Metaphysical aesthetic propounded by Brooker in *The Seven Arts*. What he found most appalling about the literary output of Scott Fitzgerald's "Lost Generation" was its extreme consciousness of sensory data and of the physiological functioning of the body. Of course, a concentration upon bodily sensation was perhaps an unavoidable consequence of the agnostic author's dismissal of God, for man's vivification must now be explained as synapses firing across adjacent nerve endings. Brooker responded to the "descent into the body" (exemplified by such novels as Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*) with nausea, eventually concluding that this kind of fiction "is not art" (column of April 20, 1929). True art should pass analogically upward toward Divine transcendence, rather than travelling horizontally along the restricted spectrum of human existence. Hence, a violent attack upon Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* was grounded in his resentment of the

play's sense of constriction. The analysis characteristic of O'Neill's drama reduced its symbolic suggestiveness, just as the play's confinement to an earthly plane precluded its opening outward into infinity.

Strange Interlude does not create a sense of great volume or space either. . . . The characters do not tower into types. Rather they dwindle to the proportions of rats or rabbits on a dissecting table. The method is analytical and it is only synthesis that creates a great space peopled with giant figures like Lear and Lucifer, Oedipus and Faust, Agamemnon and Myshkin.³⁰

The Move from Abstraction

Given his admitted fear that "the dry, unsentimental, realistic type of writing indulged in by Ford Madox Ford, Ernest Hemingway, Morley Callaghan, et al." might drive out liberating "imagination" altogether (column of December 14, 1929), Brooker's metamorphosis into a "realist" painter might seem rather unexpected. But his mistrust of painters who "jump over experience" and arrive at an insincere form of stylization prompted him to move backwards through art history, recapitulating a naturalistic apprenticeship before his return to the more abstract approach of Cubism (column of May 31, 1930).³² Yet, because the later nude studies generally portrayed multiple figures converging upon one another, echoing shapes found in the surrounding terrain, the One / All, Unitude / Multitude complex survived Brooker's withdrawal into representationalism. Regardless of whether the predominant forms were curvilinear, as in the 1931 *Figures in Landscape*, or angular, as in the 1937 *Three Figures*, their marked repetition ensured an integration of figure and ground that continues to suggest a Neo-platonic plenum. Moreover, his female torsos display the "swelling quality" that so impressed him in the graphics of William Blake, a fullness that he ascribed to Divine afflatus.³³ If an art object is valued mainly as the repository of this spiritual essence, which can imbue the most naturalistic landscape or the most mathematical abstraction, then endless permutations of style become possible.

Roald Nasgaard's appraisal of Lawren Harris' non-representational works of the late thirties is also an apt description of Brooker's abstractions of the previous decade.

[Harris] did not submit space to a similar critical rethinking, or finally consider it in relation to the purely formal proper-

ties of painting in a Modernist sense. As a consequence, his so-called abstract paintings are compromised by an uneasy coexistence of abstract forms, which have something of the force of independent symbols, and representational space.³⁴

Yet, perhaps it is Nasgaard, rather than Brooker or Harris, who is demonstrating a "curious naiveté" on this issue. If the artist does not consider his creations to be autonomous objects detached from a greater context, then there is no real reason why he should allow himself to be solely governed by the "formal properties" of painting. Brooker's abstract exercises were emblems of liminality, conducting the sensitive observer through to a transcendent plane that lies "beyond" them. Hence, the "incongruous" representational space, which constructs a capacious "place" that the viewer may psychologically enter, is perhaps more correct in a figurative sense. Only in the reductive parlance of Modernism is the verb "to paint" intransitive; our attention remains fixed upon the formal attributes of the signifier, which no longer operates as the point of departure for a broader significance extrinsic to itself.

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Editor's note

Due to reasons of copyright, illustrations of works cited in the article are not available. The reader may, however, consult Dennis Reid, *Bertram Brooker* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979) as a general reference.

Notes

¹ The *Ut Pictura Poesis* epithet was originally derived from Horace and translates as follows: "As is painting, so is poetry." An article published by Rensselaer LEE in the *Art Bulletin*, 22 (1940), pp. 197-269, is still the most comprehensive treatment of this theme, although the author has restricted his investigation to the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. Since Jean HAGSTRUM's analysis of the concept in *The Sister Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) begins with classical antiquity and ends with the British pre-Romantic poet Thomas Gray, his treatment is necessarily much more summary. Roy PARK's "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Nineteenth Century Aftermath," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 28 (1969-70), pp. 156-64, provides a useful supplement to the aforementioned titles.

² BROOKER's *The Seven Arts* was syndicated in five Southam newspapers. The first column appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* on Saturday, October 20, 1928, although it was not published in the *Ottawa Citizen* until Monday, October 22, 1928. I read the column in the *Ottawa Citizen*, which was subsequently featured in the Saturday edition.

³ Rhetorical argument is applied only after the organizing plot has been constructed, just as pigmentation is added to an underlying linear design. See pages 173 through 209 of HAGSTRUM's *The Sister Arts* for a discussion of John Dryden's place in the *Ut Pictura Poesis* tradition. Dryden's analogy refers back to a comparison made by Aristotle in chapter six of the *Poetics*. Just as plot is more essential than character to tragedy, so linear design is more essential than colour to painting [ed. Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1001].

⁴ Leonardo and Goethe are cited as historical instances of those possessing interdisciplinary abilities, while Lawren Harris (painter and poet) and Marius Barbeau (ethnologist and novelist) are among the Canadian examples listed in the opening column. Even Einstein would eventually be assimilated into this company (column of October 29, 1929), as Brooker speculates that the scientist's passion for music "might have had something to do with the development of his mathematical theories." The artist had already revealed his belief that music was primarily based upon mathematical patterns (column of October 22, 1928). Brooker's own versatility was well-known, having been at various times an editor, critic, novelist, poet, dramatist, painter, and so on.

⁵ In *The Seven Arts* column of January 15, 1929, Brooker obligingly describes for the reader his first attempt at making sculpture. As with everything else, he found the production of sculpture to be "easy," if a trifle too slow for his own taste. He was convinced that the measure of creative energy allocated to any artist could be transferred instantaneously to any medium. For it was the central, impelling spirit which initiated the art-making process and gave life to the finished object that was given pre-eminence in Brooker's system, not the formal means that made it visually carnate.

⁶ "The creative energy, which Blake more than many others recognized as divine, cannot be stifled once it has been fully descended into a man's soul. It is not a force that man can tamper with. He can only serve it, well or ill" (column of June 15, 1928).

⁷ "The artist is not a precious person . . . He does not seek something different from what the mass experiences, he simply seeks more of it – a more intense absorption of it" (column of December 8, 1928).

⁸ Brooker had a 1909 edition of WHITMAN's *Leaves of Grass* in his library at the time of his death, and the poet was mentioned in *The Seven Arts* columns upon numerous occasions. One telling estimate appeared in the column of July 6, 1929: "I place William Blake, for example, among the very greatest poets. But men like Bliss Carmen and Walt Whitman, who drew their inspiration from the things and happenings of everyday, which they shared in common with their hearers, were happier and consequently were able to add something to the world's happiness instead of to its harrowing . . . The exultation of the spirit that comes from the contemplation of supremely natural things is more attuned to the mass of mankind and is thus more penetrable to the simplest hearts . . ."

⁹ He stated in the column of June 15, 1929 that "all the arts are recognized as channels of creative energy, which, at the source, is the same kind of energy, whether it be utilized or moulded to form by the poet, the sculptor, the writer, or the musician." However, Brooker's depiction of the artist as the instrument of a transcendent power does not amount to a simple determinism. Even if the creative process was instigated by an external force, the artist was free to shape this initial infusion in whatever way he pleased. Given Brooker's doctrine of transferability (i.e., the same energy could manifest itself as literature, music or the visual arts) it follows that the artist tapping into this source would often be an equally multivalent writer / musician / painter. Therefore, the choice of a medium alone would be a manifold one. But no matter how subtle its formal configuration or how profound its encoded meaning, if an object has not been imbued with this spiritual life then it is not a work of art in Brooker's system.

¹⁰ John Donne was the only early poet specifically named in Brooker's 1930 article juxtaposing E.E. Cummings verse against selected seventeenth-century examples, although the discussion often broadened into a consideration of the Metaphysical school as a whole. [Republished in *Sounds Assembling: The Poetry of Bertram Brooker* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), pp. 68-71.] Donne's mode of

univocation (i.e., logically proving that different things are the same through the use of language) is constructed upon a two-equals-one or a one-equals-all equation. For my own understanding of Donne's poetry, I am indebted to Professor Heather (Ross) Asals of York University.

¹¹ Bertram Brooker's diary is currently in the possession of his son, Victor.

¹² A 1911 edition of CRAIG's *On the Art of the Theatre* was in Brooker's library at the time of his death. Two essays explicating Craig's work and commenting at length upon its intrinsic spirituality (one of which is inscribed with a 1912 date) are in the archives of the Winnipeg library. Craig's name recurs frequently in *The Seven Arts* columns of 1928 through 1930, but the review of an exhibition of the director's drawings on display at a local department store is especially important in this context. Among other things, it reveals that Brooker purchased *On the Art of the Theatre* in 1912 (column of May 25, 1929). I am grateful to Professor Joyce Zemans of York University for providing me with copies of Brooker's essays on Craig, along with other valuable archival materials in her possession.

¹³ Since Brooker owned a copy of *On the Art of the Theatre*, my understanding of Craig's theories was derived mainly from this text. [Edward Gordon CRAIG, *On the Art of the Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1911).] For an examination of the *Über marionette* issue, see Marina MAY-MONE SINISCALCHI's "E.G. Craig: The Drama for Marionette's," *Theatre Research International*, 5, no. 2 (1980), pp. 122-37. Brooker touches upon Craig's use of marionettes as a more "controllable medium to work with" in the column of June 22, 1929. He continued: "Results obtained with actors must always be very inexact . . . It is this very inexactness that has dampened my ardor for the theatre in the last few years."

¹⁴ E.G. CRAIG, *On the Art of the Theatre*, pp. 293-94.

¹⁵ Herman Voaden, who was to stage two of Bertram Brooker's plays in the mid-1930's, propounded a similar theory in a letter to *The Globe*: "In Europe, the greatest achievements in the theatre have been made by artist-directors like Pitoeff, who represent Craig's idea of the master-director, or through the close cooperation of artists and directors like Reinhardt and Stern, Jessner and Pirchan in Berlin, and Weichert and Sievert in Frankfurt." ["Government Owned Theatres?," *The Globe*, November 30, 1929.]

Voaden's own "Symphonic Expressionism" was reminiscent of Craig's "Total Theatre," both in the degree of his integration of all the arts and in its intense spirituality. Here is his description of the production of his first play, *Rocks*, which was already a full-blown example of "Symphonic Theatre": "But the dominant note is not one of pathos, since the girl, in recalling Blake's visions, is herself spiritually transformed . . . In production this central theme, essentially emotional as it developed, has governed the whole technique . . . Fluid light, body rhythms, lyrical speech, the drum beat and the musical themes, together with the formal setting, have been considered supplementary elements, none of which is emphasized so as to subordinate the others." ["Canadian Plays and Experimental Stagecraft," *The Globe*, April 23, 1932.]

The reduction of the primacy of the spoken word, with an attendant valorization of music and of the visual components that contribute to the stage "picture," removes this conception of the theatre from the category of "literature." Despite Brooker and Voaden's assertions to the contrary, few "artist-directors" of any age were capable of orchestrating dramas so rich in auditory and chromatic stimuli alone. As Anton Wagner has written, "Voaden's dramas of the 1930's received generally favourable critical response but were unable to initiate a national theatre art movement because of the very complexity of their production style." [*Canada's Lost Plays: The Developing Mosaic, Vol. III* (Toronto: Canadian Theatre Review Publications, 1980), p. 19.]

¹⁶ The quotations referring to Brooker's philosophy were excerpted from his essay "When We Wake," which was written for the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Brooker may well have been following a precedent set by Kandinsky in this regard, since the column of October 19, 1929 discloses his familiarity with the theories put forth in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Many passages in this text parallel painting and music, and the concluding chapter classifies painted compositions utilizing terminology borrowed from the "Sister Art." Of course, Kandinsky would have been exposed to a long established *Ut Musica Poesis* tradition during his stay in Germany. For instance, Johann Herder defined poetry as the "music of the soul. A sequence of

thoughts, pictures, words and tones is the essence of its expression; in this does it resemble music . . . Ode and idyll, fable and the speech of passion, are a melody of thoughts . . ." Quoted by Meyer ABRAMS in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 93.

¹⁸ For a protracted discussion of the artist's "enlargement" of the normal range of human experience, see *The Seven Arts* column of December 8, 1928. Since it is only an "intensification" of the feeling possessed by the "masses" that makes a man an artist, Brooker here rejects the "art for art's sake" stance that separated art from life.

¹⁹ Claude BRAGDON also believed that four-dimensional figures taken from non-Euclidean geometry would allow the rational mind to grasp an underlying "mystical" intuition, calling them a "projection on the plane of materiality of the metaphysical self or soul." Rather than re-asserting the primacy of the biological model of the cosmos that had dominated the nineteenth century, Bragdon stated in an essay entitled "The World Order" that the organization of the universe "is based upon the formation of the crystal," which represented "nature's first creative act." By structuring his paintings geometrically, the artist participates in this original, impelling "*anima mundi*" recapitulating a primordial process within his own smaller creations. "The World Order" was published as part of a collection of short pieces under the heading of *Architecture and Democracy* in 1918 [(New York: Alfred A. Knopf)] and it is quite possible that Brooker's extraordinarily concrete representations of his mystical insights were influenced by this prolific writer. Brooker's brief history of mathematical abstraction in art (contained in the column of July 27, 1929) reproduced the chronology outlined by Bragdon in "The World Order" exactly: primitive man's penchant for non-representational, geometricizing ornament was supplanted by naturalism's "pantheistic deification" of the material world, with a recent reversion to non-figurative, mathematical constructs in an attempt to reflect a more sophisticated cognizance of higher states of consciousness.

²⁰ An address entitled "Painting Verbs" was included in *Sounds Assembling: Poetry of Bertram Brooker*, pp. 35-37.

²¹ The same preoccupation with the metaphor of passage, particularly with the journey of the soul en route to a transcendent goal, was a key feature of the popularized fourth-dimensional and theosophical musings that swept North American intellectual circles during the 1920's. In her pioneering work tracing the diffusion of hyperspace ideas among the international avant-garde, Linda Henderson points out that in North America, fourth-dimensional thinking tended to be inextricably linked with religious mysticism [*The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 164-237]. Brooker's writings disclose his familiarity with both the evolutionary paradigm offered by theosophy and the claims of expanded human perception typical of hyperspace philosophy. Indeed, the artist's library contained a 1931 edition of P.D. OUSPENSKY's *A New Model of the Universe* at the time of his death, a book that incorporated several essays dealing explicitly with the fourth dimension; Ouspensky had already appropriated the term "cosmic consciousness" from R.M. Bucke in his earlier *Tertium Organum*, in order "to describe the visionary flashes experienced by artists and mystics, which are meant to be cultivated as a first step toward full comprehension of the fourth dimension" [HENDERSON, *The Fourth Dimension* . . . , p. 252]. Since Lawren Harris reviewed both *The Tertium Organum* and Dr. BUCKE's *Cosmic Consciousness* in the February 1924 issue of *Canadian Bookman*, Brooker would have been introduced to Ouspensky's ideas well before 1931. Harris' own published speculations on the nature of art were permeated with theosophical concepts, received not only from such written sources as the aforementioned texts, but more directly through his friendships with such Canadian exponents as Fred Housser. His "Revelation of Art in Canada" argued that painting was a vehicle informed by a transcendent spirituality, and that "we Canadians being closest to the source, seem destined to produce an art . . . more spacious, . . . of a certain conviction of eternal values" [*Canadian Theosophist*, 7 No. 5 (15 July 1926), pp. 85-88]. According to Dennis Reid, this particular article of Harris' was discovered among Brooker's papers after his death [*Bertram BROOKER* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979), p. 10]. Since he became personally acquainted with both Lawren Harris and Fred Housser after his arrival in Toronto in 1921, there is no doubt that Brooker was deeply influenced by their variant of religious mysticism.

²² Brooker's abstract phase was of short duration, since it began in the late 1920's and was spent by the early 1930's. Inverting the more orthodox course of a modern painter's development, Brooker began his career making abstractions, retreating to a more naturalistic rendering of the object, only to end up working with a simplified version of Cubism. His early knowledge of Kandinsky's seminal abstractions (column of October 19, 1929) might have been one reason that he first adopted this mode of painting, although his love of music would have been another crucial factor. Joyce ZEMANS has already discussed the importance of music to Brooker in her "The Art and Weltanschauung of Bertram Brooker" [*Artscanada*, 30 (Feb./March 1973), pp. 65-68]. It is sufficient for me to add that Brooker considered music to be the most "abstract" of all the arts (column of March 9, 1929).

²³ These examples are obviously renderings prepared for newspaper or magazine reproduction, probably to be used as the title-head for a column or article. All three were drawn onto identical pieces of 8½" x 11" white bond paper, except that one bears the watermark "Neepawa Press Bond Paper." Since Brooker and his brother managed a movie theatre in Neepawa, Manitoba from 1912 until 1914, they would presumably date from this period. Moreover, because the "Cult of Ugliness" mainly illustrates objects exhibited in the infamous Armoury Show of 1913, it must have been produced subsequent to that event. [See Milton W. BROWN's *The Story of the Armoury Show* (Greenwich, Conn.: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) for a complete catalogue of those pieces that were initially displayed in New York as well as those that travelled as part of a smaller exhibition to Chicago and Boston. Of the sculpture mentioned in my text, Brancusi's *Mlle. Pogany* was included in the Armoury Show but Matisse's *Jeannette III* was not.] Although it resembles a type of 1913 commercial illustration designed to ridicule the Armoury Show, I do not believe that the pejorative title attached to this drawing represents Brooker's own assessment of the European avant-garde. I have used this series primarily as a repository of names, attempting to map out the limits of Brooker's early knowledge by following their co-ordinates. While it is possible that his nineteenth-century pantheon of writers was a concession to popular taste, as was his imputation of "ugliness" to modern painting, I do not think that this was the case. Aside from Masfield and Shaw, most of the poets and playwrights cited in these drawings were quite obscure and would have been virtually unknown to the public at large. Hence, I would argue that they do indicate to the artist's own literary preferences to some extent, a conclusion that should be confirmed by my reading of *The Seven Arts* columns.

²⁴ See the essays entitled "Vorticism: Expressionism English Style" and "Expressionism in the American Theatre" in Ulrich WEISSTEIN's *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1973).

²⁵ In the column of June 1, 1929, Brooker relates with approval that Ernest Raymond, "who is something of a mystic," is "very curious and appreciative of more modern movements in art—except . . . in literature . . . where he confesses himself to be a confirmed traditionalist . . . He visited Lawren Harris' studio and, unlike most people, preferred the least representational of Harris' paintings." Here, Brooker has detected his own prejudices and predispositions within Raymond. These are the equation of abstract painting with religious mysticism and the dismissal of modern literature, due to its repudiation of the metaphysical.

²⁶ See notes 17 and 22.

²⁷ E.H. GOMBRICH's essay "Expression and Communication," in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1963), examines the inherent difficulties that arise from an artist's attempt to devise an objective correlative for "subjective emotion in the visual arts."

²⁸ Brooker does use Hemingway as an example of the new "empty" art in his column of February 16, 1929. But later that year, in the column of November 30, Hemingway's subject matter is deemed to be totally "objectionable." He states, "I do not recommend that readers of this letter buy Hemingway's novel, because they might have the experience that a friend of mine—a literary critic in Toronto—has just gone through. He thinks that it is the vilest book that he has ever read, and if allowed to by his publisher, will say so in print. I confess that I did not find it anything like as nauseating as Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*." Surely Brooker and his reviewer friend are reacting to their perception of the "vile" and "nauseating" contents of these books, as opposed to projecting the "vile" and "nauseating" elements of their personalities onto some neutral receptacle. Even if we concede this point and concur with Brooker's thesis that words can be voided of any circumstantial sense until a deferred

meaning is allowed to emerge, one major difficulty remains. Can the abstraction characteristic of a first, heuristic examination of a modern novel be sustained through subsequent re-readings? At least as far back as AUGUSTINE's *Confessions* (A book found in Brooker's library at the time of his death), sensitive readers have been aware of the influence being exerted upon their current experience of a text by the memory of previous readings. Once the author's concluding message has been made to coalesce within the reader's mind, he will probably never be able to experience the work as pure "abstraction" again.

²⁹ Jan Rosenblatt's "Symbolism and Modern Poetry," in Harry S. GARVIN's *Literature, Arts and Religion* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1982), provides a direct comparison of these two movements. For a brief but lucid account of the differences between Symbolism and Expressionism in Literature, see pages 300 and 301 in *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon*.

³⁰ Bertram BROOKER, "Idolaters of Brevity," *The Sewanee Review*, 39 (1931), pp. 266-267.

³¹ Augustus BRIDLE's "Brooker's Nude was Crated by Decision of the Majority" (*Toronto Star*, March 14, 1931) and Guy S. CUNLIFFE's "Nude Painting Sent to Cellar as Artist's Exhibition Opens Creating First Rate Mystery" (*Toronto Mail and Empire*, March 7, 1931) are typical responses to Brooker's work during this period.

³² Brooker made a similar statement in a letter dated January 10, 1932 to LeMoine FitzGerald: "After this apprenticeship to naturalistic painting has been served a little more fully I shall perhaps go back to more abstract things with a greater command of mediums and do something quite different," quoted by Dennis Reid in *Bertram Brooker*, p. 18. It is Reid's contention that Brooker's friendship with FitzGerald, which began in 1929, "was the single most powerful reason for the . . . shift in Brooker's art" away from abstraction (p. 14). There is no doubt that his landscapes of the thirties were "profoundly influenced by FitzGerald's," but this recognition does not solve the main problem. Why was Brooker more receptive to the ideas made available to him through his correspondence and sporadic meetings with this Winnipeg artist, than he was to Lawren Harris' concomitant movement toward abstraction? I suspect that FitzGerald acted as a catalytic agent in the transformation of Brooker's art, speeding up an already ongoing process of re-evaluation. The notion of the formal "apprenticeship" fits easily into the "quest" schema outlined by his abstract corpus, representing the "trial" or "test" that must be undergone before the attainment of the sacred goal. Even though Brooker now felt that a period of "naturalism" would be necessary in order to perfect his "command" of the language of painting, what these paintings were meant to express had not altered appreciably.

³³ L.L. FitzGerald and Bertram Brooker: *Their Drawings* (Winnipeg: Art Gallery of Winnipeg, 1975), p. 1.

³⁴ Roald NASGAARD, *The Mystic North* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), p. 108.

LES THÉORIES ARTISTIQUES DE BERTRAM BROOKER TELLES QU'EN TÉMOIGNENT SES CHRONIQUES "THE SEVEN ARTS" ET SES PREMIÈRES PEINTURES ABSTRAITES

Premier peintre canadien à exposer des oeuvres purement abstraites, Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) est néanmoins motivé dans cette expérimentation artistique par un mysticisme religieux très orthodoxe. Dès la première parution de sa série de chroniques sur l'art: *The Seven Arts* (publiée le 22 octobre 1928), Brooker se rattache à la tradition humaniste des comparaisons *ut pictura poesis* en soulignant que des ressemblances formelles spécifiques existent entre la peinture et la poésie. Toutefois, l'importance de son identification à l'interaction des arts le situe en dehors du continuum du *ut pictura poesis*, car il postule une convergence absolue en ce qui concerne l'origine de l'inspiration et sa signification fondamentale. Par sa conviction que c'est l'esprit divin qui initie le processus créateur et imprègne l'objet achevé du souffle de vie, la conception qu'a Brooker du rôle de l'artiste se situe dans un contexte fondamentalement prophétique. Il n'est donc pas étonnant que ses tableaux, tout comme ses positions sur l'esthétisme, reflètent ses préoccupations théologiques d'alors.

La doctrine essentiellement néo-platonique voulant que le Tout (la multiplicité du monde actuel) soit l'égal de l'Un (la somme de l'intelligence universelle qui est Dieu) peut être perçue dans toute l'oeuvre écrite de Brooker durant cette période. Bien plus, cette équation lui sert à la fois de structure formelle et de thème philosophique, façonnant ainsi l'organisation picturale des compositions non-figuratives de l'artiste. Son tableau *Sounds Assembling* représente la somme de ses méthodes pour traduire en langage pictural "l'unité ultime des formes, rythmes et rapports" derrière l'apparente "multiplicité" des "phénomènes naturels" (c.-à-d. plusieurs vagues dispersées se regroupent dans un mouvement ascendant en une seule colonne, des groupes de traits plus courts rayonnent d'un point commun, etc.). Les idées sur la quatrième dimension et sur la théosophie qui étaient prônées dans les milieux intellectuels nord-américains lors des années 1920 ont sûrement influencé Brooker dans ses abstractions géométriques, perçues en "correlation objective" avec le passage de l'âme vers un but transcendant.

L'appui donné par Brooker, dans ses chroniques hebdomadaires, aux mouvements d'art moderne européens les plus avancés n'est pas étranger à sa conviction qu'il existait un lien étroit entre la peinture non-figurative et la spiritualité (conviction renforcée par une étude antérieure des théories de Kandinsky). Cependant, comme Brooker allie à ses divergences critiques et artistiques des convictions religieuses très conventionnelles, il dénoncera, par le biais des mêmes publications, la littérature d'avant-garde pour son scepticisme et sa sensualité.

Traduction: Monique Nadeau-Saumier