

**CHARLES BRASCH:  
A VISUAL POET**

**A STUDY OF NATURAL IMAGERY IN CHARLES BRASCH'S POETRY**

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
<u>ABSTRACT</u>	1
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	
- General Introduction	3
- Nature and scope of the study	6
<u>I. IMPRINTS</u>	
- Early writings	13
- Georgian and Romantic influences	18
- The effect of visual art	28
- Rilke and the interior landscape	40
<u>II. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE, DISPUTED GROUND</u>	
- A native poetry	52
- The silent land	63
- A symbolic landscape	70
- The European tradition	86
<u>III. THE ESTATE</u>	
- The hidden 'landscape of the heart'	105
- An increase in human content: 'The Estate'	120
- The linking of person and place: Other poems	138
- Brasch's personal estate	145
<u>IV. AMBULANDO, NOT FAR OFF</u>	
- Objectivity through an external focus	159
- The landscape of love: 'In Your Presence'	179
- Old imagery and a new style: <i>Not Far Off</i>	190
- A sense of continuity	195
<u>V. HOME GROUND</u>	
- A reticent poet	208
- The inspiration of visual art	219
- The return to 'Home Ground'	231
- The importance of the local: 'Last Poems'	241
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	252
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>	258
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	259

## ABSTRACT

In the field of post-war New Zealand literature, Charles Brasch is a prominent figure. Surprisingly little has been written on a man who edited the first successful literary periodical in this country, who was a generous patron and supporter of the arts, and who was a prolific writer in both prose and poetry. He is best known for his twenty-year-long editorship of *Landfall*; as a poet he has received less recognition than perhaps he deserves. In researching this study, I have discovered that the general impression of his poetry is of a verse which is rather narrow in scope; for it is the work of his first two volumes which has received most critical attention, and on the whole this is descriptive 'landscape poetry' which deals, superficially at least, with nationalist concerns. I feel, too, that in recent decades there has been a tendency to view the *Landfall* generation, European and male-dominated as it was, in a rather negative light - an inevitable reaction, perhaps, to the widely promoted reputation in the forties, fifties and early sixties, of these writers as the initiators of an established New Zealand culture. This, too, is a possible reason why Charles Brasch, even more European-orientated than most of his contemporaries, has been somewhat neglected in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is the aim of this study to place Brasch's writing back in a realistic perspective, regardless of literary vogue, and to present it neither as solely 'landscape' nor solely 'indigenous' poetry but rather as work of a universal and timeless relevance. It is largely due to Brasch's constant reference to the unchanging absolutes of nature that his poetry transcends any categorical boundaries of nationality or era; and it is the different ways in which this natural imagery is used throughout the course of Brasch's writing that are the main focus of this work.

There is a marked development in the way landscape is included throughout Brasch's six volumes, which constitute the main corpus of his poetical work: the specific concrete locations of the first three volumes give way to the symbolic imagery of the fourth and fifth, while in the sixth there is a partial return to the real. These shifts mirror the changes in the poet's preoccupations over several decades of writing, and, if only for this reason, I feel it is vital to view Brasch's work as a unified whole rather than to take a piecemeal approach. In order to outline this broad development, the divisions in this study are made according to volumes, in chronological order.

A focus on landscape is, for Brasch, not often an end in itself, but instead provides him with the means of objectively expressing his own intensely private world, thereby commenting on the central facts of all human experience. This study presents my opinion that such a use of landscape imagery not only results in work of a strikingly visual impact, but also creates poetry of a timeless depth and quality, making it as enduring as the natural world around which it is centred.

## INTRODUCTION

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

*Someone else, I see,  
Will be having the last word about me,  
Friend, enemy or lover  
Or gimlet-eyed professor,  
Each will think he is true  
To the man he thinks he knew  
Or knows, he thinks, from the book.  
Each will say, Look!  
Here he is, to the life,  
On my hook or knife;  
And each, no doubt, having caught me  
Will deal with me plainly, shortly  
And as justly as he can  
With such a slippery no-man.*

*- Charles Brasch, from 'Man Missing'*

To begin a study on any aspect of any writer's work, it is perhaps inevitable for one to take as a starting-point biographical fact, to seek in real-life details some insight on the written word. Whether this is a desirable impulse is an arguable, and ultimately unresolvable, matter. There are always those, writers and readers alike, who strongly maintain that a work of literature is sufficient in itself and should be appreciated as such, undistorted by reference to the external world. To undertake any critical study beyond an initial superficial reading and interpretation forces one to negotiate the pitfalls inherent in this area; undoubtedly over-zealous use of biographical detail as a key to a writer's work can end in triviality and irrelevance.

Yet surely a knowledge of the personal impulses behind the creation, if intelligently and sensitively applied, can enrich an overall understanding of the work? And if the interpretation of biographical influence may be said to be purely subjective, is it any more so than the appreciation of literature in any other way? In undertaking this study on the work of Charles Brasch, to me the idea of attempting to totally divorce work of art from artist seemed both

unrealistic and unwise. Brasch belonged to a generation of New Zealand writers who were all, in some way, attempting to clarify for themselves a national identity. Yet Brasch's preoccupation with identity extended beyond this desire for an acceptance of himself as a New Zealander. After reading certain letters, his autobiography, and his poetry, one gains the impression that his entire life became a search for a 'centre' - for some constant interpretation of his very personality which would define himself once and for all in his own, and others', eyes.

Speaking to Ian Milner late in 1971, only two years before his death, Brasch admitted: 'I often have the feeling that I don't exist personally except in the poems I write . . .'<sup>1</sup>. As an intensely private person, however, Brasch wrote many poems which are vividly descriptive landscape pieces, and which focus on external detail to the exclusion of human content. Even his most subjective poems provide us with little direct revelation of the poet's identity, being carefully edited, concisely worded pieces often cryptic in their reticence. Thus, with Brasch, more than most perhaps, it seems to me the only way to achieve any depth of understanding of his work is to examine what details of his life he has made accessible to us, and to hope to arrive at an understanding of the man himself.

Upon reading *Indirections* for the first time, I became increasingly aware of the paradox of the man behind this work. Renowned (and, at times, criticized) for his meticulously careful approach as editor of *Landfall*, Brasch is no less methodical as autobiographer. *Indirections* is a comprehensive and detailed account of his life from his earliest memories of Dunedin to the death of his grandfather, Willi Fels, and the birth of *Landfall*. Yet in this personal account the public image of a highly intelligent, rather reserved man, widely-travelled and well-educated, is tempered by the impression of another, more private Brasch. Not surprisingly, in a genre of an inherently personal nature, the attempts to define his own 'unfixed fluctuating identity'<sup>2</sup>, and his yearning

for some 'inward conviction' in life<sup>3</sup>, are voiced more openly here than in his poetry, particularly his early verse where such feelings are rarely touched upon. The diffidence and feelings of inadequacy Brasch displays at times in *Indirections* seem oddly at variance with the authoritative tone he employs in some of his prose commentaries on favourite topics such as art, nature, or education; yet this knowledgeable assurance is an equally real facet of Brasch's personality. Significantly, it is the passages in *Indirections* describing vividly detailed landscapes, rather than those of an apparently more 'personal' nature, which convey the greatest passion and conviction in himself; it is the splendour of the natural world which fills him with the feeling that 'nothing could undo what I had seen and felt and become.'<sup>4</sup> Such autobiographical detail provides helpful additional information when reading what is at times frustratingly reticent poetry.

If, in this study, I have appeared to make frequent reference to Brasch's prose writings, then, it is because I believe that an understanding of the many sides of the man himself is vital for a full appreciation of his poetry. The difficulties of building up a comprehensive picture of Brasch are wryly acknowledged in his own 'Man Missing':

Analyse and prod me  
 As I will, as they will,  
 Nothing quite fits the bill.  
 And the man writing this now  
 Is gone as he makes his bow.<sup>5</sup>

Attempts to draw definitive conclusions about his poetry, too, may well result in generalizations, such is the complexity of his work and the diversity of his styles. Yet certain aspects can be traced as being present throughout Brasch's work, which, if focused on, give a cohesion and a continuity to his poetry; and I feel one of the most important of those aspects is his inclusion of nature imagery. For Charles Brasch, nature is at the heart of life, and this is reflected not only in his autobiography but also, as I see it, in the entire corpus

of his verse. The absolutes of the natural world, of sea, sky and rock, provide a stable centre for a world in which ‘nothing of this endures.’<sup>6</sup> In this study I have traced the use of such imagery throughout the six volumes of Brasch’s poetry, and have attempted to show how the function of landscape metaphor changes over five decades, mirroring the developments in the poet’s poetic and personal life.

#### NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In the first chapter of this study I have not concentrated on any one volume of Brasch’s poetry, but have instead taken a general approach in order to provide an overall perspective for the more detailed examination to follow. As with each chapter, I have divided this into four sections. The first touches on Brasch’s juvenilia, found in his school magazine *The Waitakian* and in university publications. Although naturally not of the merit of his later work, this poetry is nonetheless significant, for in it are contained the origins of Brasch’s landscape writing; as early as this, his predilection for natural forms as subject matter is apparent.

Next I examine the influences of two English schools of poetry on the development of his writing: the Romantics and the more minor movement of the Georgians. Although these poets were instrumental in forming the style of Brasch’s juvenilia, I feel that it was the natural subject matter which most attracted Brasch to their work, and their creed of the necessity to take natural objects as their exemplars was one which became a central theme of his poetry (and his prose writings) for the rest of his life.

My third section focuses on the ‘visual’ element in Brasch’s work, an aspect of his writing which I see to be one of the most important, and which is one of the greatest merits of his poetry (a theme to which I return in the fifth chapter). Here I have attempted to outline the dual nature of this element; for



not only is his word painting strikingly vivid in its portrayal of land and seascapes, but it is frequently inspired by the concrete and visual arts of sculpture and painting, thus emphasizing his belief that nature and art stem from the same source. With recourse to biographical detail, I also examine the probability that this appreciation of the visual senses stemmed from Brasch's childhood years and from extensive world-travel. The influence of the Chinese landscape painters, who were of particular importance in forming Brasch's views on the links between artistic and natural worlds, is discussed, again with reference to *Indirections*.

The final section of this first chapter comments on Brasch's admiration for the German poet Rilke, and draws parallels between the way both poets used landscape metaphor to externalize personal emotion. This becomes most evident in Brasch's last three volumes, and so poetic references are drawn from the entire corpus of his poetry.

Brasch's first two volumes, *The Land and the People* (1939) and *Disputed Ground* (1948) are centred on in Chapter II. I have not attempted to divide this discussion according to the separate volumes, for to my mind the poetry of these two decades is similar in its themes and imagery. Most of this poetry is work which vividly evokes a native landscape, whether in the form of straightforward word pictures or as visual surfaces with an undercurrent of symbolism.

My first three sections largely deal with the local element in Brasch's work. The first outlines the way he 'discovered' himself to be a New Zealander, the reflection of this in his work, and the way he belonged to a generation of writers to whom the creation of a national poetry was of paramount importance. Secondly, poems are focused on which deal with the difficulty of learning to love this new land, and which speak of intimacy gained only through patience and the passing of time. A third section deals with more specific elements of landscape in Brasch's work - those of the sea and the mountains -

and describes the symbolism with which they are invested. The poems which embrace these symbols are ones which successfully portray New Zealand scenes, but which simultaneously transcend their local origins and suggest universal truths: transience, alienation, mortality.

The universal vision, that 'double perspective'<sup>7</sup>, which Brasch steadfastly maintains, even while writing poetry which deals with the issue of nationality, becomes the subject of the fourth section. Here I have emphasized the fact that, although Brasch may be seen as one of the first poets to write naturally and convincingly of the New Zealand landscape, he is more than a merely 'regional' poet; I feel his work is diminished if read solely in this light. Brasch's acknowledgement of his, and his contemporaries', debt to European tradition is noted here, and is illustrated poetically by the works which are set in European landscapes.

My third chapter deals mainly with the poetry of *The Estate* (1957), Brasch's third volume, but begins by looking back to the first two volumes; I feel this is necessary to outline the gradual development of a more subjective use of nature imagery. In both *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, Brasch's writing has been of a noticeably reserved quality and his visual focus has served as a barrier which has largely obscured the poet's personal identity.

The following section indicates the increase in human content marked by *The Estate*, with a focus on the lengthy title poem. Although this piece sees Brasch moving towards the inclusion of directly personal detail, it also demonstrates the need in his poetry for some external reference; passages which deal solely with abstract thought are much less accessible than those in which exterior landscape expresses and objectifies the 'landscape of the heart.'<sup>8</sup> In 'The Estate', then, landscape settings are included far less for straight descriptive purposes than for their symbolic value, and Brasch's scope of vision now widens to include, not only the vast landscapes of mountains and sea, but also domestic ones.

The tendency to link person and place, a technique noticeable as early as *The Land and the People* and continued in 'The Estate', is brought to culmination in the shorter poems of this volume, which are dealt with in the second half of Chapter III. Just as human figures are more clearly identified here, so, too, are the landscapes made recognizable by title or textual detail. In the final section I have highlighted Brasch's new feeling of establishment in New Zealand, which was due to a combination of his personal ties in this country and an old familiarity with his physical surroundings. The majority of the poems in *The Estate* indicate the sense of stability which Brasch found by 'claiming' his own territory; for the settings of these poems he chose landscapes which had some personal significance.

Despite the fact that the styles and themes throughout Brasch's fourth and fifth volumes are of great diversity, I have chosen to group *Ambulando* (1964) and *Not Far Off* (1969) together, in the fourth chapter of this study. Both volumes, it seems to me, display a new preoccupation with the human element which draws Brasch's attention away from a direct focus on the natural world; yet both, too, nonetheless retain the signature of the earlier landscape poet.

In the first section of this chapter I note the way that Brasch now uses landscape metaphor, if at all, in a general and symbolic way rather than including specific local detail. Nature imagery remains an important feature here, but is no longer used for masking emotion as it was in the earlier poetry. Instead, it facilitates the expression of this emotion, enabling Brasch to objectify and thus accept old age and his own mortality, themes which clearly preoccupy him in this more mature poetry.

A similar objectivity through attention to the natural world is achieved when Brasch turns to the theme of love. The song-cycle '*In Your Presence*', which focuses on an emotional and sexual relationship of the poet's, is the subject of my second section, in which I highlight images of natural forms and

the elements (in particular the ocean) which symbolize the paradoxical nature of love.

*Not Far Off* is more difficult to summarize than *Ambulando*, for it is a still larger collection of verse, displaying an even wider range of styles. The poems I have selected for discussion in the third section, however, are ones which I feel prove that nature remains at the centre of Brasch's world, thus providing a continuity between volumes which is not perhaps immediately apparent on a first reading. This is borne out by the fourth section of this chapter, in which the landscape sketches of *Not Far Off* are dealt with. These are pieces of a vividly descriptive nature, set in various locations and implying universal themes, which are reminiscent of Brasch's earlier work.

In my fifth and final chapter, I focus on Brasch's last volume *Home Ground* (published posthumously in 1974). Initially I have aimed to show that Brasch has, in some respects, come full-circle; for this volume, like his first two, is both strongly 'local' in atmosphere and contains many examples of detailed word-painting. There is, too, the same slightly remote quality to some of these poems, due to emotion being distanced by a focus on visual images; and the same clarity and direction displayed in his earlier poetry, are achieved through use of an external focus.

A second section, too, draws parallels between *Home Ground* and earlier work. Once again there is evidence of the important influence of visual art on Brasch's writing, and I discuss two major poems which display this, both based around the work of New Zealand landscape painters.

The masterpiece 'Home Ground' is dealt with in the third section. This poem shows most clearly Brasch's return to the local for subject matter, and now he writes not only about the familiar land and seascapes of Dunedin but also of the cityscape. Although in a sense his vision has narrowed here, at the same time this is one of his most universally relevant poems, for within the

authentic details of Brasch's home town are contained comments on the central human facts of love, separation, and death.

The fourth section deals with the final group of poems in *Home Ground* entitled 'Last Poems'. Here I have concentrated mainly on two poems which are once again concretely based in landscapes - those of Dunedin and Queenstown. (Although the poems written during Brasch's long illness are of great poetic merit, and display an unprecedented emotional honesty, they are not of particular relevance to a study of landscape imagery.) This section includes a qualification to the statement that *Home Ground* marks a return to a former type of writing. Even though these two later pieces are similar, in the ways mentioned above, to Brasch's earlier visual writing, the poet is by no means simply regressing to the safe ground of a tried and true style. There is a new sense of 'belonging', and a skilfully concise blending of personal, national, and universal concerns, in this poetry which unmistakably mark it as Brasch's most mature work, and suggest that both literally and poetically, this poet has found his 'home ground'.

The feeling of establishment in this mature poetry contrasts sharply with the uneasy atmosphere pervading Brasch's earlier volumes, and I feel that the sense of security finally gained within the poet's home country has been greatly strengthened by his focus on the land throughout several decades of writing. This focus has not only been instrumental in defining a national identity for him, however, but has also acted as a medium through which he has been able to discover, objectify, and express his innermost emotions. As such, landscape imagery is a vital and inherent part of the entire corpus of Brasch's poetry. This study is intended to show that, by a focus on exterior landscape, Brasch's poetry is one which effectively depicts that universal 'landscape of the heart.'

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>. Ian Milner, 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 368.
- <sup>2</sup>. *Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 368.
- <sup>3</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 171.
- <sup>4</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 126.
- <sup>5</sup>. 'Man Missing,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 135-36.
- <sup>6</sup>. 'The Ecstasy,' *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p.3.
- <sup>7</sup>. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' p. 367.
- <sup>8</sup>. 'Wartime Snow, London,' *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p.28.

## CHAPTER I

### IMPRINTS

#### EARLY WRITINGS

*Let Nature be your teacher . . .*

- Wordsworth

It is generally understood that Charles Brasch did not become a poet of recognized standing until relatively late in his life. Leaving for England after a brief visit home to New Zealand in 1938, he had completed the typescript of his first collection of poems, which was to be published the following year under the title *The Land and the People*; he himself stated: 'It was late,<sup>enough</sup> if I was ever going to write well; I was nearly thirty, and nothing yet to show for my life.'<sup>1</sup> Yet he had, in fact, been writing since childhood and despite his assertion that, as a poet, he had achieved nothing of significance up until this time, an examination of his poetry of the 1920's suggests that this largely unpublished writing had more bearing on his mature work than he perhaps thought.

In an interview with Ian Milner to commemorate the one hundredth issue of *Landfall*, Brasch was asked about his earliest verse and reminisced:

*The first poems I remember having written were when I was about nine and we were staying at Henley-on-Taieri and I wrote about briar roses and such subjects.<sup>2</sup>*

Such a choice of subject matter for a nine-year-old is of course unremarkable in itself. But from this point onwards, throughout his teenage years, Brasch's leanings were obviously towards nature poetry characterized by a strongly visual element, and these trends, although naturally much refined, were to become typical of much of his later work. Indeed, Henley-on-Taieri, the place of Brasch's first poetic endeavours, became the title for one of his

poems written over two decades later, which was included in his second volume *Disputed Ground* (1948). It is interesting to note just how often throughout the six volumes of poetry he completed during his lifetime Brasch mentions scenes which had become familiar to him in his childhood. Pipikariti, Waiānakarua, Waitaki, Mount Iron, Karitane - all landscapes are recalled by Brasch some twenty years after his first acquaintance with those places, in evocative word pictures of great detail.

Much of Brasch's juvenilia is of course unpublished. However, he wrote prolifically during his years at Waitaki Boys' High School during the 1920s, encouraged by his headmaster Frank Milner, and many of these poems were published in *The Waitakian*. 'To the Wind' was the first of his poems to be printed in this school magazine, in May of 1924, when Brasch was fifteen. With its romantically descriptive, and rather archaic, style, it is typical of most of these early pieces:

Wind! Thou timeless wanderer!  
 Oh pray, where wast thou born?  
 By the waving fields of corn  
 Or comest thou with the rosy dawn?  
 Or 'mongst the wastes, cold and forlorn  
 Of Greenland's icy sea?<sup>3</sup>

This poem, and others such as 'The Spirit of the Ocean' and 'Prospect from the Hills', bear no stylistic resemblance to the poetry of the late 1930s and the 1940s, for which Brasch was first to become known. Neither are these early pieces established in any distinct time or place, unlike the majority of Brasch's mature poems, of which a notable feature is their firm basis in actuality of landscape or situation. Yet, despite these differences, the juvenilia are evidence of the existence of an already keen interest in landscape and a sensitivity to natural forms which were to become the strongest focal points in Brasch's later poetry. And the importance of the landscapes with which he became familiar while a schoolboy, although not recognizably included in his writing during these years, came to be acknowledged poetically in later years,



with poems such as 'Waianakarua' (in *The Land and the People*) and 'Waitaki Revisited' (in *Disputed Ground*).

The development of Brasch's responsiveness to landscape, and his increasing use of it as inspiration for his poetry, can be traced throughout his poetry of the late twenties and early thirties. During this time he was reading Modern History at St. John's College, Oxford. His father, Hyam Brasch (or Henry Brash, as he later called himself) viewed these few years as a suitably solid foundation for a career in the family business, but for Charles they had a different and more personal significance.

I had not come to Oxford to get a degree, but without any defined object, simply for a whim of my father's on his side, and on mine, secretly to confirm my tastes and interests, and become a poet. I had no doubt where my tastes and interests lay, but what was there, outwardly, to show that I was a poet? No book, and the merest handful of poems published. It was nothing to take a stand on; I had no conviction for a stand.<sup>4</sup>

This 'merest handful of poems', however, published in Oxford university journals, must surely have gone some way in allowing Brasch to begin discovering himself poetically. All his life he was to assert his belief that a poet writes, not through a wish to create, but rather through a compulsion. Years after his time spent at Oxford, as editor of *Landfall*, he wrote to a contributor that 'one doesn't write a poem because one judges that subject is *worthy* of etc., but because one is impelled to write it - impulse, not purpose, is surely what lies behind most poems.'<sup>5</sup> In his autobiography *Indirections*, Brasch looks back on his early attempts at writing and dismisses them as not being 'real' poems; and he expresses the frustration he felt throughout his twenties at not being able to 'find a subject, or be chosen by one'.<sup>6</sup>

Yet upon reading a poem such as 'The Walker by Night', published in *The Oxford Outlook* in 1929, it is noticeable that an affinity with the landscape is already present. One wonders if Brasch at the age of twenty, choosing to write about 'the silence-bounden trees' and 'the deep sky'<sup>7</sup>, had in fact already found

the subject of his own which he so longed for, yet did not recognize it or bring it to full expression for almost another ten years. Certainly a preoccupation with natural forms can be traced throughout Brasch's verse of the next few years, either as personal metaphor as in 'Cold Music':

Though I change as the seasons,  
Veil me and unveil  
Treelike, there's no poison  
Of snow or rident storm  
Can destroy from me  
The archetypal form  
Of branch, bud, leaf . . .<sup>8</sup>

or descriptively, as in 'Mountain Storm':

. . . Wind  
Staggers, brokenly wailing,  
Sifting finely the soft rain,  
Reeling against the black masts  
Of pines firmly rooted in  
A rock beyond the whirlpool air.<sup>9</sup>

The strong appreciation of nature which is evident even in these relatively early poems is also clearly apparent in Brasch's prose memoirs, compiled from his private journals and notebooks. Some of the most memorable passages in *Indirections* are the vivid and detailed descriptions of landscapes both local and foreign; significantly, these passages convey more passion and conviction than those of an ostensibly more personal nature. It appears to be through contemplation of landscape that Brasch comes closest to finding that sense of fixed identity which he so desperately sought throughout his lifetime. In a passage describing the view from Flagstaff Hill behind Dunedin, for example, he moves quite naturally from a strongly visual description to an analysis of what relevance this scene has to him.

*At the top of the road, a little further on, suddenly the hill fell away and an astonishing world leapt into being immediately ahead, expectant, still, frozen in grandeur as if it had been waiting there through all time, undiscovered till this moment: wave upon wave of silent smoke-blue ridges, with sheer gorges muffled in bush plunging blindly between, and far inland against the sky a long bare featureless wall, the rampart of the Rock and Pillar, the vast southern wing dipping and sweeping out to the high wind-scoured fells of*

*Lammerlaw and Lammermoor. All quivering in haze and distance, near, alive, inaccessible. Still but alive. Was its life also mine? Was the earth's life, that of wind, light, rocks and waters, plants and trees, insects, birds - was all this life related to mine, identical with mine? Was I part of all this, and this part of me?*<sup>10</sup>

In the light of prose writing such as this, it hardly seems surprising that such a large part of Brasch's best poetry is landscape poetry, either purely descriptive or as a vehicle for meditation on abstract issues. At most times during his life, Brasch was troubled by a sense of his own volatile nature, or, as he put it, of 'almost having no philosophy of life, no consistent one because I seem to myself to veer about like a weathercock.'<sup>11</sup> Small wonder, then, that he turned (perhaps with relief?) to landscape as something made certain through familiarity, something 'consistent' and enduring which held significance for him as a man and as a poet. Moreover, through his love of nature, he appeared to gain a sense of self-sufficiency - a rare feeling for someone who claimed to find 'no living space / Except in his friends' love and the momentary grace / Of real identity they lent him who had none. . . '<sup>12</sup> Mustering on Minaret Station, by Lake Wanaka, for the first time he encountered alone the majesty of the vast Otago landscape. Recalling this occasion in *Indirections*, he remembers claiming this sight as his own with a certainty that foreshadowed, or perhaps contributed to, the sureness of his landscape poetry.

*The quiet lake, the brown and tawny hills, tussocked, rock-strewn, steep and broken, and the snow peaks above, dwelt with me for the whole of that long slow mellow afternoon as I dawdled down the huge face, and sat to gaze and daydream and gaze, drinking in the sun. The whole world before me seemed my possession; I had never before, alone, held such a vast scene in my eye and mind, had never been subjected to and penetrated by one so grand, so rich. All I had ever known of the visible creation was gathered there in my sight: no matter that it was country in fact new to me: it was not strange, that day I came to know it, and it was made mine for good.*<sup>13</sup>

GEORGIAN AND ROMANTIC INFLUENCES

*Tongues in the trees, books in the running brooks . . .*

*- As You Like It*

Regarding Brasch's tendency towards natural subject matter in both prose and poetry, it seems inevitable that some comparison be drawn between his writing and that of two schools of English writers who also focused largely on the world of nature: the Romantics and the more minor group of the Georgians.

From his childhood onwards Brasch read widely and was constantly in touch with the European literary scene. It seems unlikely, therefore, that he was not influenced in some way by trends in English poetry, particularly in the years that he was experimenting with his craft. It is quite possible that these trends helped to form Brasch's attraction to landscape poetry, and that he adopted certain characteristics of the Georgian style of writing to suit his own particular needs.

It was during the second decade of the twentieth century that the Georgian movement had its brief heyday, and it was not until the following decade, which witnessed this movement's subsequent decline, that Brasch began writing poetry seriously. Yet the changes which the Georgians made in poetry undoubtedly affected the way in which writing developed in England for years to follow and thus, indirectly, in New Zealand. The movement was, at best, a minor literary movement and the term has since acquired a pejorative sense; but its five anthologies published between 1912 and 1922 included the work of some of England's best-known poets, such as Rupert Brooke, W.H. Davies, D.H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare, John Masefield, and Siegfried Sassoon. Brasch actually cites several of these poets as primary influences in his Oxford years (although admitting that his 'notions of poetry were extremely limited'); he names 'Shelley, Keats, some of Wordsworth, early Yeats, Brooke

and Flecker and de la Mare, Housman and a few later Georgian poems' as his reading at this time, and adds that he 'wanted to work in a manner as close to theirs as possible.'<sup>14</sup>

The Georgian school of poetry began as an assertion of freedom from the Romantic-Victorian tradition, both from the somewhat precious and langorous state into which poetry had declined, and from the language of patriotic rhetoric which writers such as Kipling, Noyes and Newbolt employed. The Georgians saw neither purely 'aesthetic' nor purely 'moral' poetry as having any relevance to the world of reality. Instead they attempted, in the words of Rupert Brooke, 'to just [look] at people and things as themselves - neither as useful nor moral nor ugly nor anything else; but just as being.'<sup>15</sup> In tone and diction, too, these poets strove for a simple clarity, far removed from the ornateness and sentimentality of the late Victorian tradition.

Despite the fact that there was a reaction against the Georgian school in the post-war years (the Neo-Georgians' writing had declined into a remote and consciously 'poetical' mode), these poets must be seen as the forerunners of a more honest style of poetry. It is unclear from Brasch's autobiography exactly what attracted him to their writing during his university years. Indeed he states that, even to himself, he 'scarcely defined' what he wanted. The imitations he produced seldom satisfied his own critical judgement, even at that time, and with hindsight he rather sardonically condemns his early efforts:

*... a more general criticism could only have concluded that I was a woolly-minded scribbler of the feeblest sort of worthless Georgian-Romantic verse with nothing of my own to say, and no style of my own to say it in.<sup>16</sup>*

Perhaps, however, this interest in the Georgian style was of more benefit to Brasch than he realized, for the Georgian poets' praiseworthy aims of unpretentious diction, clarity of form and, above all, realistic subject matter, all manifest themselves in Brasch's mature writing. Indeed this influence is evident as late as the 1950's and 1960's, for poems such as 'Fuchsia Excorticata'

and 'Mountain Lily' (from *The Estate* (1957) and *Ambulando* (1964) respectively) are, consciously or not, modelled along the lines of Georgian nature pieces. Karl Stead said of the Georgians that their achievement was 'a poetry which refused to move from specific location and specific incident into generalization.'<sup>17</sup> This is surely one of the greatest strengths of Brasch's work, for, as in the two poems mentioned above, he too constantly reduces the wide sweep of the universe to concrete particulars, such as 'scrawled rocks', 'snow-grass plumes', and the 'tear-drops / Of rainbow water' within the leaves of a lily.<sup>18</sup> His poetry, like the Georgians', invariably stems from a direct response to his surroundings. Admissions into his poetry of a more abstract way of thought - such as his preoccupation in *The Land and the People* with the European's instability as a newcomer to New Zealand - are nonetheless firmly rooted in the reality of the visible landscape.

It is this concrete embodiment of themes in Rupert Brooke's 'world of real matter'<sup>19</sup> that is, I think, the greatest similarity between Brasch's writing and the Georgian nature lyrics. The pre-war English nature poets were able to achieve this because of their vital and genuine love for their countryside. Brasch is likewise successful in conveying central themes through a vivid depiction of the New Zealand landscape which he understood and loved. Yet he avoids the escapist nature of the later Georgian poetry, which, with the rediscovery of pastoral tradition, tended to idealize the English countryside. The intensity of Brasch's vision stems from its truthfulness; his understanding of the land was achieved gradually and not altogether easily, and he makes no attempt to hide this. His first two volumes, *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* emphasize the wildness and unfamiliarity of New Zealand's natural beauty. This poetry expresses Brasch's realization that acquaintance with the land cannot be forced, and his belief that 'Man must lie with the gaunt hills like a lover/ Earning their intimacy . . .'<sup>20</sup>.

With its predominance of nature imagery, Brasch's poetry also shows a strong affinity with that of the Romantics. As well as mentioning the influence of the Georgians on his early work, Brasch also, and more frequently, stated his attraction for the writing of the great Romantic poets, particularly in his youth. In *Indirections*, he speaks of Keats as being 'the first poet I came to know as a person', and describes himself at sixteen as being 'deep in his spell.'<sup>21</sup> When asked by Ian Milner whether he was conscious of any influences on his earlier poetry, Brasch quotes both English and other European Romantics as being important to him:

*Shelley was my great love when I was young and then  
Wordsworth and then Rilke and a host of others after that:  
Leopardi and Hölderlin, and Yeats . . .*<sup>22</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume, especially since throughout his lifetime Charles Brasch stressed the debt of New Zealand writers to the European tradition, that the initial literary influences behind his landscape poetry were prominently the writings of the Romantic poets. This tradition was, in fact, one followed by most of Brasch's predecessors, and some of his contemporaries. The vitality which the Romantics sought to bring back to poetry, the fresh vision which they hoped to express through their writing, became concretely embodied in the landscape; and naturally this imagery was attractive to New Zealand poets to whom nature was such a powerful and everpresent force. Vincent O'Sullivan, however, in his article 'Brief Permitted Morning', strongly discredits the theory of a Wordsworthian influence on Brasch's poetry, stating:

*It is easy, and wrong, to let this lead to the opinion that  
Brasch is applying what he has learned from Wordsworth.  
Obviously a man cannot write about nature, or about social  
values based on nature, without at some point touching on  
the largest English poet who has turned his mind to these  
same considerations. But the presence of mountains is not  
enough to claim descent.*<sup>23</sup>

The subject matter of Brasch's early poetry at least is, of course, the most obvious reason for a reader or critic to trace links back to this 'largest' of

English poets and his followers. In both *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, the focus is primarily on mountains, lakes and the seashore, just as it was in the Romantics' work. The very titles of the poems reflect a preoccupation with the primal power of nature: 'The Land and The People', 'Otago Landscapes', 'Great Sea', 'Tryst by Water'. Yet I feel that Brasch's connection with the Romantics, and with Wordsworth in particular, is much more substantial than this one superficial similarity. The number of times he refers to Wordsworth in personal correspondence and prose writings, both when speaking of the arts in general and also regarding himself, cannot be ignored. And there are other elements in his poetry which suggest an affinity with the Romantics extending far beyond the mere 'presence of mountains' as subject matter.

The style of Brasch's first two volumes seems to me to reflect the influence of Wordsworth and Shelley, and the Italian Romantic poet Leopardi whom Brasch quotes as being important to him. Brasch's writing here does not exhibit the verbal economy and incisiveness which is characteristic of his later poetry, but is generally meditative and lyrical, with loose rhythms and flowing lines, as seen in the opening of 'Waianakarua':

Tall where trains draw up to rest, the gum-trees  
Sift an off-sea wind, arching  
Rippled cornland and the startling far blue waves.<sup>24</sup>

The very tone of such writing is similar to that of the Romantics. There is little directly personal context (which is typical of Brasch in any case), nor are there many topical allusions. The general effect is one of slightly inscrutable, elegaic beauty, not unlike the early writing of Yeats which also displays echoes of Shelley and Keats.

The imagery and vocabulary of these earlier poems also points to the influence of these poets. In a poem such as 'Simeon's Land', from *The Land and the People*, there is use of the classical imagery of the pastoral tradition (which Brasch very rarely uses); phrases like 'the shepherd's life' and 'the



summer piping under the olives' immediately puts a reader in mind of a poem such as Keats's 'Endymion'. Moreover the Romantic influence is inherent in the formality and high-flown language of lines such as these:

Pure of line, no more speaking curve than  
 Its own slow rondure, silent lies  
 Earth, patient of the clouds' passage, the absolute  
 Sun, with unprotected breast  
 Glorified and suffering under heaven.<sup>25</sup>

Not only does Brasch focus on the larger sweep of the sea and sky but, as Wordsworth frequently did, he reduces his vision to minute particulars of nature, describing the 'night-blue' grape hyacinths and the 'greying asphodel' growing from a crack in the stone.

Besides the obvious resemblances of subject matter, style, and tone between Brasch's poetry and that of the Romantics, there is similarity to be detected in the fundamental beliefs behind the poetry. Of course, Brasch's beliefs were not identical to those of his predecessors, as O'Sullivan points out in the aforementioned article. As further evidence for his theory, he highlights the fact that, unlike Wordsworth, Brasch does not find liberty or comfort in solitude:

*What Wordsworth admires in solitaires is self-sufficiency, and sanity, the very opposite to the loneliness that pervades much of our writing.*<sup>26</sup>

Certainly this is true. Throughout the whole corpus of Brasch's poetry the underlying note is one of loneliness, and lament at the inability of human beings to ever fully identify with each other. (This aspect is reminiscent of Arnold, whose writing Brasch greatly admired) In *Indirections* he states this belief more explicitly than anywhere in his poetry, although even here there is little personal revelation.

*I had longed for a complete impossible union of souls and bodies, physical and spiritual in one, a living together of perfect openness, absolute trust, total sharing and reciprocity. When it was over, I knew I should never love in that way again (let alone be loved), and never find what I*

*sought; knew that such entire mutuality in love is not to be hoped for; that I was alone and would always be alone.*<sup>27</sup>

Nor does Brasch believe that man can really find true communion with the surrounding landscape. *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* are haunted by the troubled realization that man is alienated from the land, in a way that Wordsworth's child-like solitaries never were. Humans must remain, then, 'half-alien'<sup>28</sup>, must stay locked within the limited world of their own perceptions, until the passing of many centuries will remedy the situation.

These dissimilarities, however, cannot be seen as conclusive proof that Brasch owed little to his Romantic forebears; they must be seen in a historical and geographic perspective, and viewed as ways in which Brasch departed from a tradition for which, in most other respects, he had great sympathy. As a New Zealander writing in the thirties and forties, he was naturally facing the problems confronting almost all of his contemporaries: of trying to establish a national identity and discovering a personal niche in a country with little sound literary tradition, and a still short European history. The concept of self-sufficiency *was* at the core of their writing, yet they were still struggling to find ways of achieving this, rather than being able to assert individual worth with the supreme confidence of the Romantics who were writing within a stable tradition built up over centuries. The loneliness which O'Sullivan notes as pervading Brasch's writing surely has much to do, also, with the poet's own personality. His reticence and conception of his own inadequacies must have had some bearing on his vision of the individual being permanently and tragically isolated.

Probably the greatest affinity between Brasch's writing and that of the Romantic poets is the use of landscape in a symbolic way: the extension beyond straightforward description to imbue certain scenes with a spiritual or imaginative power. In the September 1950 issue of *Landfall*, Brasch stated that 'Nature to Wordsworth was a power, in the full sense of that pregnant word; a

power which he divined through its many manifestations.<sup>29</sup> As an atheist, Brasch did not see nature as a manifestation of God's power, as Wordsworth did; yet for him the landscape held intimations of timeless absolutes which were of an almost sacred nature. Thus the natural world for him, as for the Romantics, became the embodiment of truth, and he too believed that only through communion with this world could man hope to apprehend the reality of eternity.

Brasch's sonnet sequence 'Nineteen Thirty-nine' is notably reminiscent of the Romantics in the message it conveys: that decades of living in the materialistic cities of the modern world have distracted and blinded us from perceiving the realities of a larger world.

The walls divide us from water and from light,  
Fruits are sold but do not ripen here;  
We cannot tell the time of year,  
And lamps and traffic estrange us from the night.<sup>30</sup>

The specific subject here is London under the shadow of war, but it can also be seen as any city of any time, the existence of which threatens mankind's relationship with nature; causes hearts to grow 'narrow like alleys'; creates fear of 'quiet, emptiness, the far away.'

Just as the Romantics did, Brasch too believed that salvation from this 'intolerable death' of the soul was possible through a return to nature, if only there is a recognition that a kinder world still exists.

Far on the mountains of pain there may yet be a place  
For breath, where the insensate wind is still,  
A hollow of stones where you can bow your face  
And relax the quivering distended will.

There earth's life will speak to you again,  
An insect in the grasses, a meagre bird,  
There in that outpost faithfully maintain  
The pulse of being so slowly, weakly heard.

And they remain...

Not only did the Romantics see nature as a reality with which one could communicate and in which one could find refuge, but they also saw it in a more

subjective light. A poem such as Shelley's 'Alastor', for example, shows a landscape setting being used allegorically, both as reflecting the landscape of the Poet's mind and as being affected by the workings of his imagination. This is akin to Brasch's own concept expounded in his prose work 'Present Company': that the imagination, expressed through poetry, simultaneously creates and discovers the real world; or, in his words, 'By creating the world we discover the world<sup>and</sup> ourselves in it - and we discover something that has always existed'<sup>31</sup>. If one believes in the power of the imagination to not only divine the truth in life but also to *create* it, then one is necessarily led to the conclusion that there are limitless interpretations of the same external absolute, which in turn become realities in their own right.

As seen in *Indirections*, Brasch began to formulate this concept at a young age, during summer holidays spent at Lake Wakatipu.

*Although our view of [the Remarkables Range] from Frankton was an oblique one in which the highest point, the rock pinnacle of Double Cone, appeared lower than the other points, yet since I knew it best this view of the mountain seemed to me the most true and real one. Indeed I found the nearly full-face, more distant view from Queenstown, which gives a juster impression of the proportions and magnificence of the range and its peaks, not only less satisfying but as well less true - less true to its immediate presence and intimacy in our lives at Frankton. It disturbed me to find the mountain changing shape as I walked from Frankton to Queenstown, where a third point came into sight beside the twin peaks of Double Cone, so confounding its very name. Which view, which shape, was real? What is reality? How can mountains, which are as real, as palpable, as any object in the visible world, be subjected to the relativity of our limited sight?*<sup>32</sup>

Although at first 'disturbed' by this revelation, Brasch, as he wrote more and more poetry, surely came to realize its double-edged nature: that although every poet's imaginative vision of nature is inevitably 'limited' just as physical sight is because representing the perspective of only one individual, it is also unique because of that very isolation of experience. It is the uniqueness of the vision, the result of a poet responding to and simultaneously recreating the so-

called 'reality' of the visible world, which gives a poem its own particular strength. Many years after this first discovery, Brasch was to state his belief that it was this combination of imagination and concrete reality which elevated the art of poetry to a position of importance in life:

*Poetry expresses the hard fact of experience both painful and joyful; it touches on, and embodies in imaginative form, the ultimate reality of life, and thought, and language: divorce that from reality and it turns to mere decoration, fancy, make-believe.<sup>33</sup>*

It was perhaps this, then, with which Brasch most identified in the poetry of the Romantics, and most sought to achieve in his own: a fresh and original personal vision of the natural world, which was constantly changing yet changeless. Certainly he saw this as bestowing on their work a depth and significance which would not lessen with the passing of time. Writing of Wordsworth in his Landfall 'Notes' of September, 1950, he commented that '[Wordsworth's] concern was with "enduring things, with life and nature"; and it is because he gave his finest work something of their inevitability and necessity (which makes it indeed, as he had hoped, "a power like one of Nature's") that it is possible one hundred years after his death to go back and find it increased rather than diminished in stature by all that has happened since, and as relevant to the human condition as when it was written'<sup>34</sup>.

Brasch's own landscape poetry has a sense of this permanence about it, for, in choosing the natural world as his subject matter and presenting it to us as perceived by his own imagination, his writing has both a personal and universal relevance which transcends specifics of time. In 'Waitaki Revisited' he states his belief in the powers of nature, portrayed as elusive yet undeniable truths which demand to be expressed through him, and which bestow on his expression something of their external quality of permanence:

No; not for these my spirit was drawn to haunt  
This place of hints and tokens;

But to be fashioned, surrendering and elate  
A voice, an inviolate instrument for the powers

That through all sensible process, and in the moods  
Of light, in reconciling

Or rebel hours, distantly, fleetingly touch us,  
But as in summons descend at times and press  
On all the doors of being, not to be denied,  
As here and to me befell:

And with the endurance of the shadowy forms  
Of earth to stand in pure submission, timeless . . .<sup>35</sup>

Returning to New Zealand after the war, Brasch acknowledged the 'realism, honesty, energy' of the poetry of contemporaries such as Denis Glover and Allen Curnow, but lamented the fact that 'they had no sense of truth as something to be pursued through life, imaginative truth above all'; and he voiced his feeling that these poets wrote as if 'somehow shackled and earthbound.'<sup>36</sup> It was surely the presence of this 'imaginative truth,' which he found lacking in the vision of his contemporaries, which so attracted Brasch to the work of the Romantics. Like them, he too searched for some nobility in literature, and aimed to express profound human truths through his writing - truths which, to him, seemed best symbolized by the landscapes of the natural world.

#### THE EFFECT OF VISUAL ART

*Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art . . .*

*-Walter Savage Landor*

Interestingly in his *Landfall* 'Notes' of September, 1950, Charles Brasch traces a link from Wordsworth to the great Chinese landscape painters, as having this same ability to present the human condition within the framework of nature. Both the Romantic poet and these painters, he believed, 'saw man - human society - always in the setting of nature, which ennoble at the same time as it seems to humble him, because its vast and mysterious life is not alien

to his own.<sup>37</sup> An exhibition of Chinese art at Burlington House in London, at the end of 1935, seems to have influenced Brasch greatly, both in his writing and on a purely personal level; he later described it as having given him 'a new understanding of the world.'<sup>38</sup> The fundamental aspects of these sculptures and paintings exemplified, for him, his own ideals for art and life which he had also seen contained in the best of the Romantics' poetry. Significantly, the main subject matter of Chinese painting is landscape, and the way in which it is dealt with seems to sum up Brasch's whole concept of 'imaginative truth' in art. Writing about the exhibition in *Indirections*, he describes the rare ability of these painters to embed their work firmly in the reality of their surroundings, yet, with the genius of personal vision, to recreate these landscapes in such a way that they are transformed.

*The four elements of landscape are mountains, clouds, trees and water. The forms of the mountains, so often towering up perpendicular through swathing mist, are said to be taken from the scenery of central or western China; their consistency points to a firm basis in things seen. Equally clearly, they have been refined and idealized to a rare degree, so that they are as much scenes of the mind as of nature. Yet one does not feel that they depart from nature, or deviate in any way from its truth. While remaining scrupulously faithful to the reality of nature known to the painter, they are inward, visionary landscapes such as we scarcely know in the west. They are in no senses copies or imitations; they have been remade, made new, in imagination.<sup>39</sup>*

Several years after this exhibition, at the beginning of the war, Brasch was to begin achieving this quality, which he admired so much, in his own writing. The short pieces about New Zealand which he wrote at this time (later included in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*) had, he felt, 'a quiet salt tang of imaginative truth and reality.'<sup>40</sup> At last he had discovered a subject about which he felt a compulsion to write, and now he was able to express his own personal vision of that subject. The poem 'Waianakarua', one of his best-known pieces, exemplifies the way in which an artist can begin with the physical reality of what lies before him and transform it under his particular

creative vision. The traveller's glimpse from the train of gumtrees, hills and the far-off sea, is the 'knowledge' which is available to all; this knowledge becomes imbued with significance by memory and imagination, and thus truth and imagination blend and become inseparable. Within the poem itself, Brasch directly comments on this process:

But there imagination wakes  
 Vivid with an alternative creation  
 But near-related, complementary,  
 Later attainable; and flashing  
 Unknown visions of the known,  
 Rivals that time's tenderness shall reconcile.<sup>41</sup>

Equally appealing to Brasch was the Chinese painters' vision of nature as a force independent of the human world, not existing solely for, or in relation to, man as it is portrayed in the landscape paintings of the Italian masters such as Raphael and Botticelli. Brasch saw the 'clouds, mist, . . . haze of the distance, muffling snows' which featured in classical Chinese painting as somehow veiling the world from our direct sight as much metaphorically as physically, as if implying that the laws of the natural world are not readily accessible to us, although we 'may possibly come to understand if we too submit to them . . .'<sup>42</sup>. Even though Brasch discounted as 'failures' the poems he immediately wrote under the powerful influence of this art (and few of these poems have been published), it is clear that its effect on his writing extended beyond this strong initial impact, offering him not just fresh visual images but a whole new way of thought.

Although the subject matter of *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, where the main preoccupation is the uneasy relationship between the European settler and the New Zealand landscape, appears far removed from any possible Chinese influence, the attitude displayed towards the natural world in these poems is in fact very similar to that which Brasch had discovered in the work of the Chinese masters. Although scarred by the 'vain memorials' of men, nature is shown to be essentially unchangeable, a vast force which keeps its



secrets in 'the rocks and the sombre, guarded lakes'<sup>43</sup> and will only become known to those who admit their human inadequacies and 'live by its redeeming rule.'<sup>44</sup> Even in his last volume *Home Ground* (published posthumously), although the emphasis has shifted from a focus on landscape to a more personal stance, Brasch still presents nature as a half-alien force, true knowledge of which is not easily gained and is never certain, but which must be sought or earned over time. The poem 'Trees at Totaranui' (one of six short pieces based on works by the New Zealand painter Doris Lusk) clearly shows that Brasch, even in the last years of his writing, still maintained this attitude:

Hold hands under arching trees.  
Walk alone the rock-flagged way.  
Underfoot, overhead, guarded -  
Watched, no promise given;  
Promise dwells in the root  
Only, in rooted heart,  
In fast rooted trees  
Whose arms meet overhead  
In air, in watching air,  
In the uprooting storm.<sup>45</sup>

The fact that an exhibition of visual art could so impress and influence Brasch is significant. Throughout his life he believed steadfastly in the close and interdependent relationship between visual or 'concrete' art and the written word, and this is reflected in several ways throughout the corpus of his work.<sup>46</sup> At times he takes for his actual subject matter some visual work of art - perhaps sculpture, as in 'Chinese Temple Guardian', or painting, as in 'Six Water-colours.' His poems in these cases faithfully and accurately represent what he sees before him through a different medium: that of words. The focus on landscape which is so often a part of his work also gives his work a pictorial quality. Whether he is merely writing a descriptive piece or taking a certain feature of landscape as a starting point for a meditation on some personal or universal issue (as is more often the case), Brasch's eye for detail enables him to create word pictures of remarkable vividness. In a poem such as 'Harvest is

Over' we see his ability to sketch, in only a few lines, an image of nature with startling clarity:

Stubble fields rough after reaping,  
Straw-pale, patched with new green -  
Prisoner's shaven, scurfed head -<sup>47</sup>

In 'Rain over Mitimiti Mountains', he again combines natural and human elements to create, in a few lines, a world which we may immediately inhabit. The natural setting is personified: a 'grey stole of weather' drapes between sky and sea, and the 'clouded harbour breathes lightly as rain.' Brasch peoples this scene with figures who appear as much as a part of the landscape as the mist or mountains themselves: a silent horseman, and pipi-gatherers on the 'wet shore'.<sup>48</sup> Such a poem, although consisting of only seven lines, amply demonstrates the visual element which is so characteristic of his best writing. James K. Baxter, in *The Fire and the Anvil*, states, 'I have often felt the same excitement in reading a nature poem by Brasch or Glover as in looking at a painting by Rita Cook or Doris Lusk . . .'<sup>49</sup> Certainly in his landscape poetry Brasch is capable of creating visual effects as vivid and real as those of a painting (although the latter medium is perhaps more quickly and immediately accessible than the medium of words). His poems offer us miniature worlds, but ones that must be perceived by the imagination rather than the eye.

The importance of the visual, in art and in life, was always emphasized by Brasch. He once described 'seeing' as his 'keenest sense'<sup>50</sup>, and this is clearly evident in both his poetry and the evocatively descriptive passages in *Indirections*. The development of such a strong visual sense must partly be attributed both to the influence of his grandfather on his upbringing, and to the thorough cultural grounding he received at Waitaki Boys' High School. After his mother's death in 1914 Charles was brought up in Dunedin by his father, Hyam Brasch; yet it was not his family home, Bankton, which was the 'real centre' or foundation of his life, but rather the house of his maternal

grandfather, Willi Fels. Here at Manono, Charles Brasch was not only to find the affection and support which was so conspicuously lacking at Bankton, but was also to discover a love of art and visual beauty which was later to profoundly influence his poetry. Reminiscing about his father's house, Brasch wrote:

*The pictures there I thought neither beautiful nor interesting; an etching of San Gimignano made the famous towers look like factory chimneys; a heavy oil of the Routeburn under snow repelled me by its cold emptiness. . . . By contrast, I found the pictures and the furniture at Manono and the de Beers<sup>51</sup> house either beautiful or interesting if not both, and they had a wealth of books.<sup>52</sup>*

Fels, an art connoisseur and collector, not only had a large Maori collection (now in the possession of the Otago Museum), but had gathered together books, artworks and curiosities from all over the world: from Europe (particularly Italy and Greece), India, Malaysia, China and Japan.<sup>53</sup> Fels's terraced garden, too, featured marble copies of Roman statues, some of which had been brought back from Italy by Bendix Hallenstein, Brasch's great-grandfather.

Thus, both as a child and during the six months he spent in Dunedin before leaving for Oxford, Brasch became absorbed in this wealth of art which represented civilizations from all over the world. He described his response to Fels's collection as 'sensuous, but otherwise passive', and continued: 'although I did not know this yet, I wanted to steep myself in the sensuous and not to stop, neither clinging to it nor passing beyond, but passing into it, making it mine by becoming it.'<sup>54</sup> The influence of this cultural education during such impressionable years undoubtedly developed Brasch's appreciation of the visual - as in a different way, did the frequent walks with his grandfather and his sister Lesley through the countryside surrounding Dunedin. It was on one of these outings, and on the annual family holidays to Wakatipu, that he first came

to strongly identify with the different landscapes around him, and closely observe the subtle changes of light and perspective.

The acute sensitivity and response to nature which is displayed in Brasch's landscape poetry almost certainly began in these early years, as is evident in his account of the deep hold the Otago countryside came to have on him in his youth:

*It impressed itself on me so strongly that it seemed to accompany me always, becoming an interior landscape of my mind or imagination, unchanging, archetypal, the setting of what I had read about as well as of all the life of the present. The shapes, textures, scents, sounds of all its landscapes grew into me and grew with me.<sup>55</sup>*

As a child he would instinctively identify the scenes before him with whatever poem or novel he had recently read. He described this identification of 'poetry and place' as continuing into middle age, 'as when I suddenly saw an old down-at-heel familiar house on the edge of Jubilee Park in Dunedin as belonging to the setting of stories of the Baal Shem Tov and others of the early Hasidim.'<sup>56</sup>

Continually coloured by the influences of both man-made and natural creation, then, Brasch's childhood and teenage years were ones during which his visual senses were heightened. His appreciation of art and nature was further strengthened by the four years he spent at Waitaki Boys' High School. Here his education in the visual arts, begun at Manono, was extended, for the headmaster of Waitaki, Frank Milner, had collected and framed a vast number of prints for the school, particularly Dutch and English work, including the work of a number of landscape painters such as Gainsborough, Constable and Turner. This, as Brasch later realized, played an important part in the boys' education, although taken for granted at the time:

*They familiarized us with scores of famous works, and by peopling the worlds of history and literature for us they made those subjects seem alive and close at hand; we lived in the air which they inhabited or which the painters had imagined for them.<sup>57</sup>*

The influence of the actual countryside around Waitaki on Brasch as a poet is indisputable, requiring no further proof than a glance at two of his best-known poems, 'Waianakarua' (in *The Land and the People*) and 'Waitaki Revisited' (in *Disputed Ground*). The visual images Brasch includes in these pieces are astoundingly evocative and fresh, although written over a decade after his years spent in this region. One suspects that most of his schoolboy impressions are recorded in detail in the journals he kept during this time (to which public access is still restricted), and that he drew largely on these for his poetry later in life. 'Waitaki Revisited' was in fact not started until late in 1939, and took him nearly eight years to bring to a form with which he was satisfied. The final form, however, despite the fact that Brasch was not even in New Zealand but in England when writing it, conjures up the very atmosphere of a wild Otago coastline:

Absolute above these drifting fields  
Reigns the sky; wind is warm in the needles,  
Its northern breath still fragrant with eucalyptus;  
And the same shore in trouble,

Look, white foam-fronds lacing waxen stones  
That the spent wave clutches with a hollow grinding,  
And the gulls winging plaintive through the morning  
pallor  
To the fishing grounds and the trawlers . . .<sup>58</sup>

Undoubtedly he had this poem in mind when he stated that 'the foreshore and its grove and gulls, the north boundary, gave me more poems than all Waitaki besides.'<sup>59</sup> The love of the landscape he gained in these years clearly remained with Brasch for the rest of his life, and in his best poetry descriptions of the natural world are extended to become a means of expressing personal vision or universal statement.

Fortunate enough to have substantial private means, Brasch was able to travel extensively and this broadened his knowledge of all genres of art, and deepened his poetic vision. The experiences gained while travelling in his twenties and thirties permitted him to form strong opinions on art, which he

confidently expresses in his lecture 'Present Company' and elsewhere; the landscapes he encountered are reflected and enlarged upon in his poetry. On his first visit to London in August, 1927, before commencing study at Oxford, Brasch visited the National Gallery nearly every day and looked back on this as 'the beginning of my absorption in pictures . . .'<sup>60</sup>. It was the Italian painters who 'captivated' and 'held' him: Piero, the Bellinis, Giovanni, Titian. And after travelling widely throughout Europe, it was Italy's countryside that most appealed to his already highly developed visual senses:

*I did not respond fully to Italy on that first winter visit. It was later that it captivated me completely, when I watched it steep everything seen and heard in "a bath of azure light", so that each time I entered the country my senses seemed to wake from a long sleep. . . . Italian light had a glow and bloom which I have not yet found in any other country although I think Greece may claim it (I know Greece little); a glow of substantial existence, of body, which in turn lends to forms and colours an intensity that they possess nowhere else. . . . I seemed to myself to come to life and to live more fully in Italy than elsewhere, to be alert and responsive to a degree I had not known before, both inwardly and outwardly; particularly in seeing, my keenest sense.<sup>61</sup>*

After three years at Oxford (where he gained an 'ignominious Third'<sup>62</sup>), and vacations in Italy, France and Germany, Brasch returned to New Zealand. Although he found the country physically as beautiful as ever, he was still drawn to the rich cultural life and varied landscapes of Europe. Despite pressure from his father to pursue a career within the family business of Hallenstein Brothers in Dunedin, nine months later, early in 1932, he returned to England where he was to spend the greatest part of the next decade. For three seasons he worked with the Egypt Exploration Society at Tell el Amarna on an excavation site; between his stints at archaeological work, he visited Greece, Crete and Palestine. The latter had, for him, 'a strong affinity with Central Otago', that landscape with which he was so familiar:

*From Hebron to Damascus one might almost be in Central Otago; and the hills beyond, all the way to Antioch, have some quality of Central Otago hills, especially those*

*between Cromwell and Wanaka. The strong light, clear air, the hot rich rocky barrenness, were such as I knew and loved at home.*<sup>63</sup>

Brasch's passages on these countries in *Indirections* are characteristically descriptive, focusing on the details of colour, light, and the contours of the land. His prose writings in such passages is as evocative as any poetry; yet the richly varied visual effects he has noted in his travels were also to reappear time and again in his poetry, written of with as much ease and familiarity as displayed in his New Zealand pieces. There is 'Simeon's Land', for example, written about St Simeon's columns in Northern Syria. The 'austere silver-greys of Simeon's stone world' which Brasch describes in *Indirections* become transformed into poetry with no loss of visual impact:

Immoveable and voiceless earth, barren, yet not barren  
The land that formed her, grey, a wavering  
Mirror of light; the figtree's winter silver.<sup>64</sup>

'Rest on the Flight into Egypt', too, paints for us a landscape of a sharpness and precision only made possible by Brasch's familiarity with this country. As we read it we momentarily inhabit this landscape, sharing with the poet the sight of 'the sea below falling in a clear bay' and of 'mermaid grass springing fresh among rocks / Ancient with silvered lichens . . .'<sup>65</sup>

The years from 1936 to 1946 Brasch largely spent in England, working first at Little Missenden Abbey school, an establishment for problem children, and then, during the war years, as a junior assistant in the Foreign Office in London. During this time he included a visit home to New Zealand in 1938 and a trip through America with two great friends from his school days, James Bertram and Ian Milner. He returned to New Zealand in 1946 to settle permanently, yet the two decades he had spent abroad - the numerous countries he had visited and cultures he had observed - had deeply influenced him and were to affect his writing for the rest of his life. As a writer for whom natural forms held great attraction, the wealth of scenery he had steeped

himself in was invaluable material for his poetry. Not only had his appreciation of landscape been sharpened, but his knowledge of art, too, was of considerable depth after these years abroad. Because of this he was able to formulate certain views about the relationship between visual and written arts, between art and nature, between nature and mankind, and was able to express them with confidence.

Thus in 'Present Company', a prose commentary on the nature of the arts, Brasch backs up his conclusions with a remarkably wide range of reference to European sculpture, painting, and literature, and to classical history and legend. Here the visual element which predominates in his poetry becomes explained in theoretical terms, for one of the main points he makes in this dissertation is the common aim of all genres of art. 'All works of art', he states, 'whatever form - music, plays and poems, painting and sculpture - both represent and form part of the universal dance.' To him, art works are essentially 'communications' which connect the individual 'to other people and to everyday living.'<sup>66</sup>

With his comments on the 'inevitable separateness' of one's existence, Brasch is not dissimilar in his views to Pater. Yet unlike Pater, who expresses the view that all art aspires to the condition of music<sup>67</sup>, Brasch suspects that this is illusion and that music is no less 'pure' than the other arts. Expanding on this, Brasch shows this belief in the affinity between the visual, plastic, arts and literature. He classifies painting, sculpture and poetry together as 'static arts' and says that, despite their static material, they express rhythm and individuality just as music does. The examples Brasch names here as illustrating the 'living quality' of the static arts are not works of literature but, significantly, works of sculpture with which he became familiar on his travels: 'the bronze quartzite head of Queen Nefertiti in Cairo, the seated Buddha in meditation from Anuradhapura, and Michaelangelo's three late Pietàs.'<sup>68</sup>



The fundamental theory on which Brasch builds his argument is that a work of art is both a 'creation' and a 'discovery' - a creation in its own novelty, and a discovery of some truth which has always potentially existed but which the artist has had to somehow release. Again, he uses Michaelangelo's work as an example of this - this time his carvings. One almost feels as if, with Brasch, it is not music which is the primary condition of art, but is in fact sculpture and painting, and that these visual arts are in some way more vital in establishing a culture than other art forms. When, not surprisingly, the element of landscape is introduced in this discussion (in Brasch's prose writings, as in his poetry, nature and art are continually and closely linked), it is through the mention of landscape painters, not poets.

Once again the examples he gives are drawn from the first-hand knowledge gained from his years spent in Europe. 'That we do not see things until works of art show them to us is a commonplace,' he claims. 'Italy was discovered, visually, in the landscape settings, seemingly incidental, but how lovingly dwelt upon, of figure paintings by Giotto and Fra Angelico and Piero and Georgione and Bellini; China in the astonishing wealth of its landscape painting from at least the seventh century A.D. The English did not know what their country looked like until landscape painters showed them first in the eighteenth century and more fully in the nineteenth, through the eyes of Gainsborough, Constable, Turner, and others . . .'<sup>69</sup>

Clearly this was no new idea to Brasch. Writing over twenty years earlier, in an article entitled 'New Zealand, Man and Nature', he asserts the need for 'some good painter' to interpret and 'fix' New Zealand for its people, just as the landscape painters of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries taught us to see England.<sup>70</sup> The importance of the visual arts in Brasch's scheme of things, then, is indisputable: it is through painting and sculpture that we discover both ourselves and an understanding of the external world. With such a view, it seems entirely appropriate that Brasch's most convincing work is landscape

poetry of a highly visual quality, as if emulating those more tangible forms of art.

THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE

*'And why does it always come back to me?'*

*- Rainer Maria Rilke*

Near the end of 'Present Company', when speaking of the artist's vital role of constantly re-establishing our relationship with external reality, Brasch quotes from one of Rilke's sonnets:

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

Without knowing our true place  
We act in real relationship.<sup>71</sup>

This reference to the German lyric poet comes as no surprise, for the influence of Rainer Maria Rilke on Charles Brasch was perhaps greater and longer lasting than that of any other writer. In *Indirections*, Brasch recalls buying a copy of Rilke's selected poems in 1928. He was able to read the works in German, although slowly, and dates his 'preoccupation' with the poet from this point. It was 'the exquisite rhythms and verbal music of his earlier work' which first captivated Brasch. Much of Rilke's early work, like Brasch's, is written in a deeply poetical and romantic manner, as seen in his volume of 1902, the *Book of Images*. Upon familiarity his work came to seem as 'close to [Brasch] as Shelley and Wordsworth and Keats.'<sup>72</sup> Yet the likenesses between the German poet and the New Zealander must be seen as extending far beyond this early attraction for a lyrical romantic style; in the visual quality of their later poetry, and their general outlook on life and the function of art, the two are remarkably similar.

Just as Brasch did, Rilke had a deep regard for the visual arts which came to affect the very style and subject matter of his poetry. For him, this began with the influence of the sculptor Rodin, about whom Rilke had been commissioned to write a monograph. After much time spent with Rodin, with his much repeated precept 'Il faut travailler', Rilke longed to 'find in his own profession of poetry something corresponding to that practical and manual element he so envied in the plastic and visual arts, something that would enable him, like Rodin, to exercise his creative gift continuously and almost as a matter of course, without waiting for "inspiration"'.<sup>73</sup> And so he began to write a more objective and descriptive kind of poetry which, rather than consisting of inner contemplations, based itself in concrete reality and took as its subject matter external objects: buildings, works of art, natural scenes, seasonal phenomena.

This development was, of course, almost exactly paralleled by Brasch, although several decades later. He too abandoned the romanticism of his early verse; he too learnt from the example of the best of the world's painters and sculptors to look to the external and the visual as a means of either distancing or discovering personal emotion.

Undoubtedly one of the most appealing aspects of Rilke's work for Brasch was the way in which landscape was focused on, not merely descriptively but symbolically. Both poets were, in different ways, preoccupied with defining the 'self' and with realizing their individual potential to the utmost. (In this, they had much in common with the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth.) Not only Brasch's poetry but also his prose works and personal correspondence are full of allusions to his lack of 'identity', and his desire to firmly establish an image of his own fluctuating self, not only in others' eyes but also his own. Rilke defined his concept of 'being' as 'the experiencing of the completest possible inner intensity', and at first, wanting to fully experience such inner intensity, his poetry was one of 'excessive self-preoccupation.'<sup>74</sup> Brasch's

problem, then, was that he seemed to himself incapable of 'being' with any consistency or steadfastness, Rilke's that he became overly involved in his own subjectiveness from which there seemed to be no escape; Brasch felt he did not live with enough intensity, Rilke that the burden of his 'inwardness' was too intense. Yet both poets (Rilke by a conscious decision, and Brasch perhaps more instinctively) turned to the visible external world as a means of objectifying and thus alleviating the insoluble problems of existence. In the poetry of both, interior landscapes become concretely embodied in more tangible landscapes.

Writing to a friend in 1915, after a visit to Toledo in Spain, Rilke expressed the possibilities he had found in that landscape:

... there the external thing itself - river, mountain, bridge - already possessed the stupendous, unsurpassable intensity of those inner equivalents by means of which it might have been represented. Everywhere appearance and vision came, as it were, together in the object, in every one of them a whole inner world was exhibited...<sup>75</sup>.

And to another correspondent he wrote:

... in that incredible sublimation of an earthly sight the externallest thing here possible became, so to speak, one for me with the very idea of an imaginary and intellectual thing...<sup>76</sup>.

Rilke's belief that 'appearance and vision' were united in landscape is remarkably similar to Brasch's concept of 'imaginative truth': that every poet's interpretation of the external world is an inseparable blend of concrete reality and personal vision. Landscape became, for them, a way of indirectly expressing the self and, as an extension of this, the condition of mankind. The reciprocity of the relationship between inner and outer worlds becomes evident in both poets' use of metaphors which blend the personal human elements with that of the natural world. Thus Rilke uses phrases such as 'the hills of the heart' and 'farmstead of feeling'<sup>77</sup>, and Brasch, 'landscape of the heart' and 'flanks of the earth.'<sup>78</sup>

In their love poetry, both use extended landscape metaphors to describe a condition which is simultaneously universal and very personal. Rilke writes:

Again and again, however well we know the landscape of  
                   love,  
 and the little church-yard with lamenting names  
 and the frightfully silent ravine wherein all the others  
 end: again and again we go out two together,  
 under the old trees, lie down again and again  
 between the flowers, face to face with the sky.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, in his 'Tryst by Water', Brasch looks to the natural world to externalize a private relationship:

You lay like evening's  
 Graven land  
 Stillness and light  
 Of evening crystal;  
 And I as shadow  
 Crept from the rocks,  
 Rose, hovered,  
 And was the night.<sup>80</sup>

In the second part of this poem he speaks of his lover's 'white torrential arms', and of the two of them being enfolded in 'an isle of silence.'

Whether describing landscape in human terms, then, or human emotion through the imagery of natural forms, both Brasch and Rilke appear to find their most certain voice in poetry which deals with the external and the visual. It is as if, through nature, they found some way of achieving true 'identity' or the ultimate intensity of 'being'. A nocturnal piece of Rilke's seem to me to verify this statement. In 'From the Thematic Material: Nights', the poet addressing 'Night' confesses:

... though the mere fact of your being there  
 almost annihilates me;  
 one with the dusky earth, I dare,  
 even in you, to be.<sup>81</sup>

Brasch also sees true self-knowledge as lying in the cycles of nature, both seasonal and diurnal, and in the natural forms of land and seascape. His 'Word by Night' begins:

Ask in one life no more  
 Than that first revelation of earth and sky,

Renewed as now in the place of birth  
Where the sea turns and the first roots go down.

By the same light also you may know yourselves . . .<sup>82</sup>

Later in the same poem he urges knowledge of both human limitation and potential through a return to nature:

Come again to the shore, the gathering place,  
Where cries of sea-birds wring the air,  
And by the poverty of rocks remember  
Human degrees.

In this attitude Brasch not only resembles Rilke but once again displays an affinity with the Romantics, for they too saw in nature an ideal model both for human life and manmade art. It was this, in fact, which gave Brasch the strength to return to England and pursue his career as a writer, rather than submit to his father's will. A few days spent in Queenstown helped him to resolve his doubts, for in Queenstown Park he first realized that natural processes could be seen as a paradigm for human existence, that despite the transience of mortal life, one could take on some of the enduring power of natural objects if only one remained open to all experiences and was not afraid to take risks. His account in *Indirections* of this moment of illumination is characteristically visual and rhythmic, reading almost like poetry, yet it expresses the relevance of the scene to himself more explicitly than is usual in his poetry:

To be like the Park itself, a jewelled leaf, long, narrow,  
finely drawn, thrusting into the cold waters of the lake,  
nearly all shore surrounding a mere spine of rock and  
earth and that tall prow-wedge of trees, warm in their  
darkness, rocking, soughing. Like a dark agate, seen from  
above, the dense black centre, the palely lit shores.  
Shores of whitened stones that glowed in the strong clear  
light; a myriad of stones, each one warm and polished to  
its own shape, each veined, marked, glittering with mica  
grains, or with flecks of gold, or milky-glassy with quartz;  
each, it seemed, an individual that had taken hundreds or  
thousands of years to reach its special perfection. Those  
must be my exemplars, if natural objects could be;  
patient, wholly themselves, enduring.<sup>83</sup>

The concept of the natural forces of wind and water moulding objects to a 'perfect shape', creating objects of a unique and lasting nature, appears time and again in Brasch's poetry. It is evident in 'Back from Death', in the section entitled 'In the Rangitata Gorge', for example:

Beloved trees, that long outgrow us,  
Mountain heads too far to know us

Bless you for your lives, my meat  
Unfailing and my winding-sheet.<sup>84</sup>

'The Clear', a poem based on Prospect Park in Dunedin, emphasizes too the great forces of nature which make up an age-old pattern and achieve a harmony never attained in the human world. The sky, the mountains and the sea surrounding the park are described as:

'Working together  
Time-long  
World's way.'<sup>85</sup>

Drawn directly from the revelation he experienced in Queenstown is the poem published in his last volume *Home Ground* simply entitled 'Queenstown Park.'<sup>86</sup> The description of the park is couched in language very like that used in *Indirections*:

Jewel-leaf water-drop,  
All-but island emerald  
Anchored on azure-dark . . .

In this mature expression of his belief in the power of landscape, Brasch emphasizes the secrets held by nature, the 'bright and dark lore' of the waves and the 'starry shore', which are infinitely more significant and permanent than all the accumulated knowledge of men. Because of their endurance and individuality, natural objects are elevated to a position of supreme importance in this poem. Mountains are king-like, 'grave peaks on their thrones', and in the phrase reminiscent of Hopkins, 'leaf-voice, life-voice', trees are, by implication, the symbols of existence itself. There is an inherent note of

warning here, to any man who fails to recognize the supremacy of nature over his own petty concerns:

He who murders trees and stones  
 Shall hear their roots crack in his bones,  
 Shall feel their shade darken his eyes,  
 Trees and stones are the world's pride.

Much can be read into the last three lines of this poem, succinct as they are:

Lambent leaf-pen  
 Heart-still haven,  
 Pointing, still.

These lines seem to me to be of profound importance in an interpretation of the beliefs behind Brasch's poetry, for, by implication and the juxtaposition of words, they convey the way in which nature and art were inextricably linked in his thought, and the way that, for him, these two elements combined to provide a paradigm for human existence. 'Leaf-pen', of course, admirably creates a visual image of the long, narrow shape of the Park; at the same time it succeeds in linking landscape and literature in the mind of the reader in an association which was clearly fundamental to Brasch's poetry. It is implied in these lines that self-knowledge can be attained only through an intuitive understanding of the natural world, and once this true 'identity' is grasped, one can for a time transcend the problems of human existence and gain admittance to this 'heart-still haven.' The repetition of the word 'still' is extremely effective here, the second usage implying not the silence and calm of the first, but rather the enduring quality of nature contrasted with the brevity of human life.

Not only did Brasch find the natural world appealing for what it represented, however, but he also loved it simply for its visual qualities, its rich variations in colour and form. His strong appreciation of the visual also manifested itself in his attraction to the concrete arts of painting and sculpture; these arts, like landscape, satisfied his 'hunger for beauty of every kind, for



proportion, for meaning...'<sup>87</sup>. He saw Italy as the 'paragon of countries' because it was the one which 'nature and art had combined to make supremely beautiful.'<sup>88</sup> In a letter to Ursula Bethell in 1939, he described England's beauty as almost 'holy', for here 'nature and art [are] fused at their height; or what is divine in man consecrating what is divine in nature.'<sup>89</sup>

With these words as evidence, it is almost certain that Brasch would have seen the ideal literature, like the ideal country, as one which included a combination of these two elements, so that it became work possessing something of the beauty and enduring quality of nature and the best of man-made art. And indeed, his mature poetry, to a large extent, achieves this. One of its most outstanding aspects is its strikingly visual quality; one sees the landscape, or monument, or painting, as clearly as if one is physically contemplating it, such is the vivid detail of Brasch's word pictures.

Through his focus on external objects, moreover, Brasch is able to confront and objectify the problems of human existence: the essential isolation of the individual, the desire to find some enduring meaning in life, the need to accept one's own mortality. By taking nature and the concrete arts as both exemplars and inspiration, Brasch achieves, in his best poetry, a visual impact which is remarkable. With the use of these elements to portray the personal and the universal, this poetry has an immediacy which has not diminished over the years and that quality of permanence and solidity which Brasch perceived in nature and held to be the ideal condition. It is poetry which is relevant to any time or place.

## NOTES

1. Charles Brasch, *Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 343-44.
2. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 365.
3. Printed in *The Waitakian*, XIX (1924), 235. Cit. by Alan Roddick (ed.), *Collected Poems* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 209.
4. *Indirections*, p. 171.
5. Letter to D. Anderson, 4 Aug. 1958. Cit. by John Geraets, "'Landfall" Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey'. Thesis: Ph.D.: English (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1982), p.153.
6. *Indirections*, p. 190.
7. 'The Walker by Night', printed in *The Oxford Outlook*, X (1929), 375. Cit. by Roddick (ed.), *Collected Poems*, p. 210.
8. Printed in *The Phoenix*, 1 (March 1932), n. pag. Cit. in *Collected Poems*, p. 212.
9. Printed in *The Phoenix*, 2 (March 1933), 34. Cit. in *Collected Poems*, p. 213.
10. *Indirections*, pp. 121-22.
11. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 370.
12. 'To J.B. at Forty,' *The Estate and other poems* (1957) in *Collected Poems*, p. 46.
13. *Indirections*, p. 125.
14. *Indirections*, p. 150.
15. In *Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Edward Marsh. Cit. by C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964), p. 82.
16. *Indirections*, p. 151.
17. Stead, p. 82.
18. 'Mountain Lily,' *Ambulando in Collected Poems*, p. 87.
19. Cit. by Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt: Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal* (U.S.A.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 240.
20. 'The Silent Land,' 'Uncollected and Unpublished Poems' in *Collected Poems*, p. 218.
21. *Indirections*, p. 78.
22. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 369.
23. "'Brief Permitted Morning"- Notes on the Poetry of Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 23 (196), 340.
24. 'Waianakarua,' *The Land and the People and other poems* (1939) in *Collected Poems*, p.4.
25. 'Simeon's Land,' *The Land and the People in Collected Poems*, p. 10.
26. O'Sullivan, p. 340.

27. *Indirections*, p. 171.
28. 'The Land and the People (III), *Collected Poems*, p. 7.
29. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 4 (1950), 185.
30. 'The City' from 'Nineteen Thirty-nine,' *Disputed Ground: Poems 1939-45* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 29-30.
31. 'Present Company,' *The Universal Dance* ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), p. 24.
32. *Indirections*, p. 99.
33. 'Present Company,' p. 26.
34. *Landfall*, 4 (1950), 188.
35. 'Waitaki Revisited,' *Disputed Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 34-35. The last few lines of this poem are extremely akin to the style of Shelley and Wordsworth, with phrases such as 'flame-like quivering breath' and 'the wintry, perpetual/Flashing of violent stars.'
36. *Indirections*, p. 389.
37. *Landfall*, 4 (1950), 188.
38. *Indirections*, p. 244.
39. *Indirections*, pp. 242-43.
40. *Indirections*, p. 360.
41. *Collected Poems*, p. 4.
42. *Indirections*, p. 243.
43. 'Forerunners,' *Disputed Ground* in *Collected Poems*, p. 16.
44. 'The Land and the People (II),' *Collected Poems*, p. 3.
45. From 'Six Water-colours,' *Home Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 183-85.
46. The relationship between visual works of art and Brasch's poetry is further discussed, with specific examples, in the fifth chapter of this thesis.
47. *Not Far Off* (1969) in *Collected Poems*, p. 139.
48. *The Estate* in *Collected Poems*, p. 58.
49. *The Fire and the Anvil* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1960), pp. 63-64.
50. *Indirections*, p. 157.
51. Emily de Beer was Sara Fels's sister and thus Charles Brasch's great-aunt.
52. *Indirections*, p. 25.
53. In *Indirections*, Brasch describes Manono as being 'most disappointing' in its paintings, which were 'nothing' beside the other collections - yet in the same paragraph mentions original etchings by Rembrandt, Ostade, and Whistler! (p. 115.)
54. *Indirections*, p. 114.

- <sup>55</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 20.
- <sup>56</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 106.
- <sup>57</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 67.
- <sup>58</sup>. *Disputed Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 32-33.
- <sup>59</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 61.
- <sup>60</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 131.
- <sup>61</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 157.
- <sup>62</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 171.
- <sup>63</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 215.
- <sup>64</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 224; 'Simeon's Land,' *The Land and the People* in *Collected Poems*, p. 10.
- <sup>65</sup>. *The Estate* in *Collected Poems*, p. 54.
- <sup>66</sup>. 'Present Company,' *The Universal Dance*, pp. 39-41.
- <sup>67</sup>. Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione,' *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. and intro. Harold Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 55.
- <sup>68</sup>. 'Present Company,' p. 43.
- <sup>69</sup>. 'Present Company,' p. 36.
- <sup>70</sup>. *The Geographical Magazine*, 12 (1941), 342.
- <sup>71</sup>. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets* I. xii. Cit. by Brasch, 'Present Company,' p. 45.
- <sup>72</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 191.
- <sup>73</sup>. J.B. Leishman, trans. and intro., Introduction, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Poems 1906 to 1926* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 11.
- <sup>74</sup>. Leishman, Introduction, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>75</sup>. Letter to Ellen Delp, October 1915, cit. by Leishman, Introduction, p. 33.
- <sup>76</sup>. Quoted by F.W. Wodtke in an inaugural dissertation on *Rilke und Klopstock*, Kiel (1948), p. 98. Cit. by Leishman, Introduction, p. 33.
- <sup>77</sup>. Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. J.B. Leishman (London: Hogarth Press, 1941), p. 58.
- <sup>78</sup>. 'Wartime Snow, London' and 'Night Air, Early Summer,' *Disputed Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 28, 38.
- <sup>79</sup>. *Selected Poems*, p. 59.
- <sup>80</sup>. *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 38.
- <sup>81</sup>. *Rainer Maria Rilke: Poems 1906 to 1926*, p. 329.
- <sup>82</sup>. *Disputed Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 39-40.
- <sup>83</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 178.

<sup>84</sup>. *Home Ground* (1974) in *Collected Poems*, p. 205.

<sup>85</sup>. *Home Ground* in *Collected Poems*, p. 207.

<sup>86</sup>. *Home Ground* in *Collected Poems*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>87</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 161.

<sup>88</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 240.

<sup>89</sup>. Letter to Ursula Bethell, May-June 1939, Bethell Papers, Manuscript 38, Correspondence, Box 1, in the University of Canterbury Library.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE, DISPUTED GROUND

#### A NATIVE POETRY

*No dream, no old enchantment chains this land;  
 Its ice and dripping forests know  
 one spell alone deeper than spell of snow:  
 The life that knows not life.*

*- James K. Baxter*

The second issue of *Phoenix*, in 1932, boldly exhorted New Zealand writers to establish a literary tradition of quality, which would be recognizably their own:

Are we poor that we should beg or steal? Let us work  
 with our hands and the sweat of our low brows until we  
 have our own wealth to scatter.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the thirties and forties leading poets of the time, contemporaries of Brasch such as R.A.K. Mason, Denis Glover, A.R.D. Fairburn, Eileen Duggan and Allen Curnow, reproduced the sentiments of this rhetoric in their poetry. All of these poets had written poetry previously, just as Brasch had, but now in their mature work they turned to a poetry that dealt more directly with what they saw as the problem of living in New Zealand and, more specifically, writing in New Zealand, a country with no long-standing tradition and a relatively small literary public.

Thus Glover, in his 'Home Thoughts' (the very title is an ironic echo of the well-known piece by Rupert Brooke), bluntly and succinctly sets out his poetic aims:

I do not dream of Sussex downs  
 or quaint old England's  
 quaint old towns -  
 I think of what may yet be seen

in Johnsonville or Geraldine.<sup>2</sup>

Mason's 'Song of Allegiance' also represents a statement of the poet's determination to establish a national literature. Born in New Zealand only four years earlier than Brasch, and well-educated in the English classics just as Brasch was, Mason begins by listing some of the great masters in whose footsteps he will attempt to follow, regardless of what hardships he will encounter in this raw young country. Many of the names he mentions are those to whom Brasch also emphasizes his indebtedness: Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge. Mason concludes his poem:

They are gone and I am here  
stoutly bringing up the rear

Where they went with limber ease  
toil I on with bloody knees

Though my voice is cracked and harsh  
stoutly in the rear I march

Though my song have none to hear  
boldly bring I up the rear.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly these writers of the 1930s have become prominent figures in New Zealand literary history, deserving much of the credit for establishing a literature which clearly belongs to this country and could not have been written anywhere else. Much of Brasch's best-known and most 'New Zealand' poetry was also written during the decades of the thirties and forties, yet he stands apart a little from these contemporaries. In his peculiarly impersonal way, there is no direct statement of his own literary aims to be found in his poetry, and no textual evidence to suggest that the creation of local tradition was his primary concern. His verse, however, particularly that of his first two volumes, *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, has a relevance to New Zealand and its landscape equal to that of any of his contemporaries' work.

The easy and natural inclusion of the local in Brasch's poetry surely stems from his familiarity with, and love of, New Zealand - a love which Brasch

himself did not recognize and acknowledge in his poetry for some time. His search for subject matter which seemed to 'belong' to him in some way preoccupied and troubled him for years. Despite extensive travels through Europe and the East which provided him with fresh and unlimited impressions to include in his writing, he still felt unable to write from the 'centre of himself'<sup>4</sup>; it was as if, despite his conviction that to be a poet would justify his very existence, something was constantly eluding him when he attempted to write. After his stand against his father in the matter of his career, and his return to England in 1932, Brasch found to his dismay that a determination to write was not sufficient, that inspiration was also needed:

... I was to find, through groping and frustration, that I had nothing I must say, no subject of my own to write about; though I doubt if I ever saw the matter so clearly, or admitted it to myself. As it turned out, I was not to find a subject, or be chosen by one, for nearly eight years longer.<sup>5</sup>

It was not until Brasch began writing poems about the country of his birth that he felt he had finally been 'chosen' by a subject, and through this writing he started to discover himself poetically and, as he himself stated, emotionally. Living for a few months on the north coast of Cornwall at the end of 1935 and into early 1936, he commenced a poem in several parts, 'a kind of ode', about New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> The final result, in fact, failed to satisfy him, but some fragments of this ode are to be found in 'Genesis', in *Disputed Ground*. Of all the poems in these first two volumes, this piece, which describes the early Polynesian migration, is one of the most lifeless and unmemorable. The abstract philosophizing here is not firmly enough grounded in physical realities, so that the poem lacks the vivid pictorial quality of Brasch's best New Zealand poems.

Although Brasch realized that he had not achieved all he was capable of in this ode, however, at the same time he recognized the importance of this work. It marked, in his words, 'a necessary stage in my long tedious painful



apprenticeship, the first time that my whole life had gone into a poem.’<sup>7</sup> Four years later, he wrote his first ‘real poem’, which came to be published in *Disputed Ground* under the title of ‘The Islands’. In its initial stages, the piece began with what, in the revised version, is the second part:

Always, in these islands, meeting and parting  
Shake us, making tremulous the salt-rimmed air;  
Divided, many-tongued, the sea is waiting,  
Bird and fish visit us and come no more.<sup>8</sup>

There is no explicit connection with locality in this poem, only hints which are typical of the indirect way Brasch presents a work to his reader, who might or might not know, for instance, that ‘the haunted bay’ from which the godwits vanish is Spirits Bay in the North Island.<sup>9</sup> Yet the subject is unmistakably New Zealand, and the theme the insecurity of the European amidst an unpredictable and alien landscape. The visual details provided are those which, upon a thorough reading of these two volumes, one comes to realize symbolize New Zealand for Brasch: rocks, stones, hills, the ‘falling flight of streams.’ Curiously enough, these are the icons Wordsworth took as his own, which for him were the symbols of rural England. Brasch, although basically following in the English Romantic tradition, transmutes the significance of these objects into one which is firmly linked to the New Zealand landscape and what it meant to him.

Throughout 1939 and 1940, Brasch continued to write poems on New Zealand, in keeping with his belief that groups of poems on a single theme were more ‘satisfactory’ than short unrelated pieces.<sup>10</sup> These, he believed, were the best he had yet written, and this certainly because they were based in the reality of a landscape which he had known and loved since childhood. It was not until this time, when his two worlds, Europe which was his present and New Zealand which was his past, were threatened by war, that Brasch realized which of the two meant the most to him:

It was New Zealand I discovered, not England, because New Zealand lived in me as no other country could live, part of myself as I was part of it, the world I breathed and wore from birth, my seeing and my language. England, deeply as I had come to love it, was not myself in that way and could not be.<sup>11</sup>

His conviction that he had at last found a subject vitally important to him meant that he had also found some fixed point of personal identity which would remain as a constant throughout his life; the discovery of his native country was, in some small way, also a discovery of self. For a man whose life was a constant search for a secure sense of selfhood, this was a vital realization.

Writing to Ursula Bethell from London, in 1940, Brasch expressed his desire for some poet to do for New Zealand that kind of service that Yeats did for Ireland - make its place names and traditions and legends live in poetry, bring them into a wider circle of relevance and meaning, and so enrich by reciprocity the places themselves. Alluding to Glover's 'Home Thoughts' as 'Denis's Deprecation', he concedes, 'They [Johnsonville and Geraldine] *are* bad names . . .' Yet he continues, '. . . but we have good ones, names with as noble a music as Lissadell and Knocknarea, though Yeats could use commonplace ones also with great effect. Names acquire their greatest beauty and richness, and their power, only when they can be turned on the tongue and repeated in poetry like spells, and something of these qualities then passes into the places.'<sup>12</sup>

Contemporaries of Brasch were, in fact, by this stage including New Zealand place names in their poetry more naturally than ever before. Like Brasch, many of them only reached this point after self-imposed exile from their home country. Robin Hyde, who left New Zealand for England and China, discovered a true feeling of nationality while overseas; towards the end of 1936, she wrote, 'It's just dawned on me that I'm a New Zealander, and surely, surely the legends of the mountains, rivers and people that we see about us should mean more to us than the legends of any country on earth.'<sup>13</sup> The

poems she wrote in maturity about New Zealand were some of her best, and her use of specific place names in 'The Thirsty Land', one of her last works, seems uncontrived and blends with the general visual effect:

... where handful puffs of gulls  
 Drift on green galleon waves, and foam plumes nod;  
 Past Reefton's line of surf, Lyttelton lights,  
 Lake - locked Manapouri, half untrod.<sup>44</sup>

Denis Glover is another poet whose objective vision of New Zealand was strengthened by distance (as a member of the navy, he left New Zealand for several years during the war and was based in England). In the well-known introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, Allen Curnow says of Glover that 'he has named places in verse more naturally, I think, than any other New Zealand poet'<sup>15</sup>; and indeed, it is difficult to refute this claim when confronted by a work such as 'Holiday Piece':

Now let my thoughts be like the Arrow, wherein was gold  
 and purposeful like the Kawarau, but not so cold.

Let them sweep higher than the hawk ill-omened,  
 higher than peaks perspective-piled beyond Ben  
 Lomond;  
 let them be like at evening on Otago sky  
 where detonated clouds in calm confusion lie.<sup>16</sup>

In Brasch's first two volumes, in fact, New Zealand place names are seldom used (and scarcely ever in the four volumes which follow, where the specifically 'native' element is less prominent). Occasionally pieces are entitled with the names of places which were important to Brasch in his youth. This occurs twice out of the twenty poems which constitute *The Land and the People*, with 'Pipikariti' (Brasch's spelling of Pipikaretu, a beach near the Otago Heads<sup>17</sup>) and 'Waianakarua'; and in *Disputed Ground*, five of the twenty-three poems bear New Zealand titles: 'A View of Rangitoto', 'Waitaki Revisited', and the three pieces, 'On Mt Iron', 'Karitane' and 'Henley on Taieri', which are collected under the title 'Otago Landscapes'. When place names are used in the actual text of the poems (and this happens only twice), it is so unobtrusively

as to seem inevitable. In 'Photograph of a Baby', there is mention of 'Mt Herbert', which 'floats weightless in the glass-clear air.'<sup>18</sup> The visual image here is characteristically sharp, yet in some curious way is incidental to the rest of the poem; here Brasch is commenting on the way the very young can perceive reality, 'the strangeness of life', more clearly than we ever can, and specific localities are of little significance here, except to provide a small touch of native colour.

'Waitaki Revisited', of all the pieces in these first two volumes, is the one which is most explicitly grounded in a particular region. In the first four stanzas Brasch vividly paints for us the fields and coastlines of the Otago area where he spent his school days and to which he now returns. The sensory impact of these lines is immediate and compelling, appealing to sight, sound and smell:

Absolute above these drifting fields  
Reigns the sky; wind is warm in the needles,  
Its northern breath still fragrant with eucalyptus;  
And the same shore in trouble,

Look, white foam-fronds lacing waxen stones  
That the spent wave clutches with a hollow grinding . . .<sup>19</sup>

When Brasch names the great rivers which feed the current scouring this bleak coastline, it is naturally and unselfconsciously:

Mingling the sallow Taieri with the Shag  
And sucking from mouth to mouth the glacial torrents,  
Rangitata, Rakaia, and the lawless, the hoarse,  
Unappeasable Waimakariri.

The inclusion of such place names here which can be 'turned on the tongue and repeated . . . like spells' certainly bestows on the work the 'beauty and richness' which Brasch had hoped for, and the flowing rhythms of the Maori names create an incantatory effect.

In the one other verse where Brasch uses place names, it is again with the quiet familiarity born of years spent amidst this setting; the express trains thundering by are a reminder of 'distant worlds', but

. . . the watcher can only see to cold Cape Wanbrow,

To the tall questioning trees that crowd on Buckley's  
 And like an accuser prick him, self-distrustful,  
 To search his need and motives. . .

Despite the use of references to real New Zealand places and rivers in 'Waitaki Revisited', as in 'Photograph of a Baby' the locality is not of primary importance. The firm grounding in the Otago region, achieved by both the inclusion of place names and the vivid description of the area, does give an immediacy and a sense of reality to the poem. Moreover, the setting is naturally important, for Waitaki, the scene of Brasch's youth, is now imbued with a different significance as it is 'revisited' in maturity, providing a starting-point for deep contemplation. Yet this much-worked piece, which Brasch wrote and rewrote over a period of several years, confronts, not the difficulties of being a New Zealander, but the ones of human existence in general, as the poet meditates on the unavoidable 'ardours, ordeals, betrayals' once one has left the stable 'realm of the young'.

Many writers of Brasch's generation, particularly those of *Kowhai Gold* fame, determinedly included concrete details of situation in an attempt to establish roots in this new country. D'Arcy Cresswell, for example, named his poem 'Lyttelton Harbour', but the actual work conveys nothing of the essence of the place:

Ye myrmidons of ocean, where ye lie  
 How thin a veil divides ye from despair.<sup>20</sup>

In Eileen Duggan's early poetry, too, there is the same sense of dislocation; in poems such as 'Titahi Bay', 'New Zealand', and 'Tua Marina', New Zealand place names abound yet provide a reader with no vision of the actual places themselves. A volume such as her *New Zealand Poems* is evidence that a frequent use of place names is simply not sufficient to create any real atmosphere, and does not necessarily result in poetry which truly 'belongs' to the country it refers to. This, surely, is what Brasch was implying

when he wrote to Bethell of the need to bring place names 'into a wider circle of relevance and meaning, and so enrich by reciprocity the places themselves.'

Clearly Brasch himself felt no need to force acquaintance with the land in this way. The familiarity with New Zealand acquired throughout his childhood meant that literal use of place names in his poetry was not, for him, a necessity, or even particularly desirable. With or without these indigenous 'signs', his poems unmistakably belong to New Zealand. In this respect, they have much in common with work by R.A.K. Mason and Ursula Bethell, both of whom wrote poetry essentially 'native' in character but avoided a stridently New Zealand idiom. Seemingly paradoxically, Brasch's most 'New Zealand' poems are those without any excessive native emphasis. Many of the pieces in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* deal with the failure of the European to adjust to New Zealand and come to terms both physically and spiritually with its alien landscape; and it is Brasch's gift for vivid description which gives them their New Zealand essence, rather than the use of any deliberately local references. He is at his best in landscape writing for, by focusing on details of scenery he was familiar with, he first portrays the physical aspects of the land and through these quietly progresses to contemplation of two major themes which recur throughout his first two volumes: first, the theme of impermanence and second, of the need for harmony between man and nature.

The way Brasch makes New Zealand his own through his understanding of landscape is significant, for this is the very message he is conveying to us in these poems: that patience, and acceptance of the New Zealand landscape on its own terms, are the only way to make a spiritual home in this land. His poem 'The Silent Land' contains a statement of this belief:

Man must lie with the gaunt hills like a lover  
Earning their intimacy in the calm sigh  
Of a century of quiet and assiduity  
Discovering what solitude has meant

Before our headlong time broke on these waters . . .<sup>21</sup>

Only by acknowledging his solitude and estrangement from nature will man overcome them, and only then will earth relentingly 'tame her tamer' and 'seal his homecoming to the world.' The very epigraph to *The Land and the People*, taken from Isaiah 23:2 - 'Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle' - sums up Brasch's plea for submission rather than aggression, for quiet reconciliation rather than unpremeditated action.

'Pipikariti', from this first volume, typifies Brasch's ability to present image and theme as an organic whole, to blend the visual and the abstract so that they appear inseparable. This short piece contains Brasch's impressions of one of the 'special beaches' on the Otago Peninsula which he and his sister Lesley used to visit as children.<sup>22</sup> As is usual in his most successful poems, he bases any general meditations firmly in concrete detail. In fact, as John Weir notes in his commentary on this poem, on a first reading 'one might think it little more than a closely-observed landscape poem.'<sup>23</sup> Brasch's sharpness of vision, and his eye for detail, capture the very essence of a wind-swept New Zealand coastline:

Stone weapons, flint, obsidian,  
Weed and waveworn shell and bone  
Lie in mellowing sand with wood  
Of wrecked ships and forests dead.<sup>24</sup>

From these smallest of beginnings, the fragments of weed and shell, and the Maori 'curios' (as Brasch used to call them as a child) buried in sand, the poetic vision widens to include the larger elements of wind, sky, earth and sea, yet again the emphasis is visual and sensual rather than philosophical:

Winds confuse the sand and soil,  
Long-rooted grass and sea-fed pool  
Contend between the cliff and sea  
That creep closer for fiercer play -  
The caress of earth and water  
Stretched together till they shatter  
Impetuous side against stiff side  
One silent and one loud.

In the final four lines, however, it becomes clear that this poem is more than a vividly descriptive nature piece. Through close observation of a familiar landscape, Brasch has perceived both parallels and contrasts between nature and mankind. He presents these conclusions to us without excessive emphasis, quietly moving from a description of the interplay between the natural elements to a contemplation of the interaction between men, similar yet inherently different at the same time. The way in which earth and water so stridently clash on the shoreline reminds Brasch of New Zealand's history of conflict and 'wasting strife'. Yet there is beauty and, paradoxically, a kind of harmony to be perceived in the ruthlessness of nature which is never present in human warfare. In the portrayal of this beauty, Brasch's imagery once again has a strongly visual impact due to his skilful selection of words:

The sweet sun and the wind's light stroke  
Charm that fury into smoke  
And music, twirling the blue spray  
And lighting rage with a fierce joy . . .

For a short poem, 'Pipikariti' is a piece of surprising depth, and as such typifies Brasch's 'New Zealand' work. In such work, Brasch paints, with words, strikingly vivid pictures of the local landscape which create a lasting impression in the mind of the reader, yet the significance of the poems extends far beyond this visual surface. The same landscape offered him the opportunity for meditation on the failure of mankind to love and respect it. Images of nature provided him both with metaphors for the human condition and a concrete starting point from which he could progress naturally to the abstract.



THE SILENT LAND

*Young crude country, hard as unbroken shell . . .  
She was hard to love, and took strength, like a virgin.*

- Robin Hyde

Perhaps Brasch's closeness to the landscape, and his ability to convey the spirit of what he knew and loved best in New Zealand through sound and image, enabled him to avoid the bitterness found in the poetry of many of his contemporaries. Not for him the irony of Curnow's 'House and Land' where the poet speaks of this gloomy 'land of settlers / With never a soul at home'<sup>25</sup>; nor the derision of Fairburn's 'I'm Older than You, Please Listen' which describes New Zealand as 'a lump without leaven / A body that has no nerves'<sup>26</sup>; nor the determined tones of Mason's 'Sonnet of Brotherhood' which attempts to come to terms with this 'far-pitched perilous place.'<sup>27</sup> There is little or no harshness of tone in Brasch's description of his native landscape and man's inability to make a spiritual home here. To him (and his attitude certainly reflects his own personality), passivity and patience were the keys to a true understanding of any place. His poetry is full of an implicit criticism of those who attempt to overcome the land by force, to 'impress themselves / Like conquerors, scarring it with vain memorials.'<sup>28</sup>

Yet, although bitterness is absent in the poems which focus on the New Zealand landscape, there is a quiet but all-pervading loneliness, a 'mild despair'<sup>29</sup>, behind the strength of Brasch's vivid description. Despite his belief that acquaintance with the land cannot be forced but is possible simply through waiting for time to pass, at the same time Brasch realizes the difficulty of achieving this acquaintance. Many of his works convey a sense of the inaccessibility and indifference of the wild New Zealand landscape, largely untouched by human contact. His foreign travels had obviously strengthened

this impression of his home country. Relating sights he saw abroad to his native land, as he so frequently does in *Indirections*, he writes:

Wherever you stand in Greece the earth and the air are thick with legend and history; they populate it even more densely than in Italy; only in Palestine are they so dense. . . . New Zealand was the exact antithesis of this; there, every hill, plain, lake and stream was encountering man's gaze for the first time - for it was only in the north that the Maoris had left any imprint on the country; and that first raw meeting of man and nature was shocking and sterile.<sup>30</sup>

In 'The Land and the People (III)', Brasch rephrases these feelings poetically, beginning:

There are no dead in this land  
No personal sweetness in its earth;  
Mountain and forest stand  
Solemn and dumb as the forever  
Stars . . .<sup>31</sup>

Once again he stresses the fact that 'the conquest and the taming' cannot make this country speak to us. We cannot 'compel / Here our acceptance', but must instead wait for centuries to pass before this 'new air, new earth' (this phrase is almost an exact quotation from *Indirections*) can be understood.

'The Silent Land', written in the same vein as most of the poems in Brasch's first two volumes but actually published in Curnow's *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, represents Brasch's most explicit statement on this aspect of New Zealand. (The very title foreshadows the main theme of the poem.) Here the land is portrayed as one of vast emptiness, unpeopled by myth or legend and thus, as yet, without any meaning to mankind. The first verse emphasizes the shortness of human history in New Zealand, and the insignificance of man's effect on the land:

The mountains are empty. No hermits have hallowed the  
caves,  
Nor has unicorn drunk from the green fountain  
Whose poplar shadow never heard the horn.  
Lives like a vanishing night-dew drop away.<sup>32</sup>

The impression of the land which Brasch conveys to us in this piece is more than one of impersonality - this country is in fact hostile to man and guards its secrets jealously:

The sea casts up its wreckage, ship or shell,  
Beams of day and darkness guardedly  
Break on the savage forests that from groins  
And armpits of the hills so fiercely look.

This poem abounds with the type of visual images so characteristic of Brasch's writing. Phrases such as 'the bleaching plain', 'the gaunt hills', and 'the pine windbreak where the hot wind bleeds', demonstrate this poet's ability to conjure up, in a few well-selected words, a very real picture of the stark New Zealand landscape.

Throughout both *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* Brasch consistently presents this image of a country which is ripe with promise if only time is taken to learn its secrets, but which is also silent and not easily known, and is occasionally brutal in its primal force. 'On Mt Iron', the first section of the tripartite 'Otago Landscapes', is a piece based on Brasch's childhood memories of the Wanaka area, and here nature is presented at its harshest and most pitiless:

Red sun, remember  
The waterless hills,  
Glare of light in  
The water-courses.

No milk of cloud  
Shall be offered you  
From these dried breasts,  
To your bronze heaven  
No pitying tears.<sup>33</sup>

The third piece of the same sequence, 'Henley on Taieri', is also written about a place where the poet spent time in his youth, although this time the descriptive focus is not on the element of earth but of water. Once again, the hostile face of nature is emphasized; this landscape is not a sympathetic one, and is certainly not easily known or loved. The Taieri of Brasch's vision is a

'friendless river' which is alien not only to man but also to the surrounding elements and wildlife:

Sullen, the stream gives no clear image back  
 To the black swan,  
 Scarcely answers the even, rippling wind  
 Or press of cloud, but slides  
 Noiseless in umber coils, eluding  
 The light that patters on the willow leaves  
 And flares from the white flanks of the hotel.

This stream is no giver of life or hope, but is instead 'a cold seeker / Of self-dissolution.' Likewise, the sea, which is at times in Brasch's work an emblem of vitality and the source of all creation, is here 'bitter', 'light-engulfing', and 'desolate'.

'A View of Rangitoto', also to be found in *Disputed Ground*, similarly portrays the potential threat Brasch felt to be everpresent in the New Zealand landscape.<sup>34</sup> The writing here seems less elegant and less contrived, the tone more direct, than in many of his poems. The emphasis here is on action rather than contemplation, with the use of strong verbs such as 'tug', 'sprint' and 'cuffed'. Once again there is no sympathy to be had from this landscape, with the 'harshness of gorse' darkening the cliffs and the 'pert waves' dashing against the rocks. Although the 'rushing anger' of volcanic activity has now subsided, the mountain itself still smoulders, living out 'that fiercer life / Beneath its husk of darkness.'

One of Brasch's most visual works, this poem too could be seen primarily as a descriptive landscape piece; yet, characteristically, Brasch extends and deepens the reflective surface of the work, so that it becomes not just a mirror for the landscape that he observes but also an implicit commentary on this landscape. Thus Rangitoto is more than a 'long-limbed mountain / Dark on the waves' - it is also a symbol for the power and permanence of the natural world, that 'world of fire' which must never be underestimated or disregarded. Even when the land is portrayed at its most menacing, however, there is no trace of bitterness in Brasch's writing. He may have felt, as Robin Hyde did,

that this 'young crude country' was 'hard to love, and took strength'<sup>35</sup>, but in his poetry he faithfully recreates his time and place without allowing personal feelings to distort the presentation of physical reality. The truthfulness of his vision is one of the greatest strengths of his poetry, for he came to an acceptance of the New Zealand landscape on its own terms in a way that many of his contemporaries found impossible.

In these first two volumes, Brasch does not attempt to diminish the country by portraying it as a second England, nor does he ignore the potential threat that this landscape presents to mankind. He confronts rather than avoids the problem all poets of his generation faced, of writing amidst a landscape not made familiar by centuries of literary associations and largely untamed by the marks of civilization. Brasch was perhaps one of the first poets to fully comprehend the paradox of living in a country with little literary tradition: the void is there, and is difficult to overcome, but by the same token there is limitless material for a new and innovative imaginative literature to be created:

Shades impatient to put the future on  
Loom and beckon us from the teeming dark;  
Waiting for our songs, the woods are still,  
The stones are bare for us to write upon.<sup>36</sup>

Through his honesty of vision, and his consequent discovery, not only for writers but for all inhabitants, of the potential implicit in the apparent emptiness, Brasch was able to see beyond the void which for many writers was the only thing that represented New Zealand. In the first two sections of the four-part sequence 'The Land and the People', from which the first volume takes its title, he stresses the need to search beyond one's initial impression of this unfamiliar country, and to 'listen for its heart.'<sup>37</sup> Only then, he concludes, will one find true meaning and warmth behind the silent exterior; only then will one find redemption and completeness (for Brasch seems to imply here that man is incomplete if not in harmony with nature). In these pieces there is

no sense of recrimination towards the land for its reticence or its seemingly cruel indifference to human life. Indeed, this is significantly lacking in all his writing. (Even in the later piece, 'A Climber's Death', written in the memory of Jeremy Stammers-Smith (a son of one of Brasch's cousins), there is no bitterness towards the mountains which claimed this life, but instead the implication that, of all deaths, this was the 'true end', one which finally admitted the climber to the peaks' 'timeless company.'<sup>38</sup>)

If any accusatory tone is to be detected in this poetry, it is directed not towards the natural world but towards the humans who fail to understand this world. In the last verse of 'The Land and the People (I)', the second person is directly addressed (which is unusual in Brasch's early, more impersonal, poetry) in a foreboding, almost prophetic tone:

Yes weep, for you have cause: the burden  
Is on you, who cannot break -  
And still world-strange, self-ignorant: vision  
Ails you: and no truce, no pardon.<sup>39</sup>

M.H. Holcroft, a leading critic at the time Brasch was writing, expounds views in his commentary on New Zealand literature, The Waiting Hills, which are very close to those in Brasch's poetry. Indeed, Brasch's personal correspondence indicates a good deal of sympathy for Holcroft's views; in a letter to Ursula Bethell, for example, he comments that this critic's essays may be more important than 'anything else that has yet been written in or about New Zealand.'<sup>40</sup> Holcroft, too, saw New Zealand's history as 'an age of silence'<sup>41</sup>, and from this point his thoughts progress in a way strikingly similar to Brasch's own:

Yet there is nothing to fear from silence. Only those who are unwilling to confront it must find that it has become a receptive background into which they project the enlargements of their nervous thoughts. Silence is full of creative possibilities. . . . There is no essential darkness or evil in the primeval influence - only a sense of strangeness which can pass quickly into a recognition of beauty if we pause without fear to look, and think, and remember. . . . It is easier . . . to see that in this country

we dare not accept the obvious and misleading appearances. We must learn to be venturesome, going down to the silence in the way that our forefathers went down to the sea.<sup>42</sup>

Even when describing his native country at its most hostile, as in the poems mentioned above, Brasch's poetry gives no impression of containing 'nervous thoughts'. In its own quiet, unobtrusive way, this poetry *is* truly 'venturesome', for in it Brasch responds to the unfamiliar in a new and more receptive way than any other poet previously.

In fact, the success of his vivid landscape writing is partly due to the fact that he found himself able to love New Zealand's natural beauty for the very untamed quality which others found so hard to accept. He recognizes the menace implicit in the wildness of its elements: the wind in 'Waianakarua' is 'bright and dangerous', the mountains in 'The Iconoclasts' are not benevolent guardians but are described as 'frowning', and in 'Karitane' there is 'muted thunder' to be heard in the echo of the waves. Yet, although he acknowledges this everpresent threat, Brasch does not appear to actually feel threatened by this wildness; on the contrary, there is a sense of exultation in the vast magnificence of the landscape and the feeling of strength with which it imbued him. Returning to New Zealand after the war, he stayed with Frederick and Evelyn Page at Governor's Bay, and wrote:

The rocks on the hill above - the rim of the ancient crater, toppling nearby above our heads - were menacingly savage and near. It took me almost by violence, that rich rough breathless world of wild unpolished beauty, so strong that to live by and for it seemed life enough.<sup>43</sup>

A SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPE

With face turned always to the sea, where night  
Rises and day is overcome,  
What expectancy or dream,  
Mountains, holds your inward sight?

- Charles Brasch

As *Indirections* shows, Brasch travelled widely around New Zealand, particularly in his later years as editor of *Landfall*. From his literary and artistic connections he had, scattered throughout the country, numerous friends and acquaintances who were only too pleased to offer him hospitality: the Pages at Governor's Bay, Ursula Bethell in Christchurch, Blanche Baughan at Akaroa, Toss and Edith Woollaston in the Nelson district, James Bertram, at different times in Auckland and Wellington, and many more. Through his travels he came to know the different faces of his country in all their variety, and love nearly all of them. In the *Landfall* 100 interview, Milner enquires about what caused Brasch to feel so strongly about New Zealand that he began to write poetry about it and returned here after the war, and Brasch responds simply:

How can you help loving the world around you when you grow up in a country as beautiful as this? When I travelled, I instinctively referred everything I saw to New Zealand, which is the alphabet of the world for me.<sup>44</sup>

Although he does not specify it here, and although poems such as 'A View of Rangitoto' and 'Crossing the Strait' deal with his North Island experiences, Brasch's allegiance seems to have been with the South Island, and particularly the Otago region, with which he was most familiar. The vast proportions of this southern landscape, its mountains and rivers, greatly appealed to him, both for their visual beauty and for what, in his eyes, they represented symbolically. A passage in *Indirections* echoes the conversation with Milner, suggesting that the notion of Otago's mountains being like giant symbols which interpret and



express Brasch's inner experiences for him, was one to which he had given much thought.

Wakatipu had lost none of its hold on my senses and imagination. I was struck now by the grand simplicity of the landscape, disposed in the vast masses which are its elements - Cecil, Walter, Bayonet, the Remarkables, huge initial letters of an alphabet of countless signs, or the thunderous opening notes of a symphony in which every leaf, grass and stone had its own distinct vibration. Detail was secondary, subdued in the splendour of those ample forms: in England by contrast detail is everything, because the landscape offers few large forms.<sup>45</sup>

The 'ample forms' of the Alps feature frequently in Brasch's poetry. Indeed, in his first two volumes almost all the 'New Zealand' poems make mention of them: the first three parts of 'The Land and the People', 'The Iconoclasts', 'Forerunners', 'On Mt Iron', 'Genesis.' 'The Land and the People (I)' is the first poem in Brasch's first volume, and significantly, its opening verse includes the mountains:

With face turned always to the sea, where night  
Rises and day is overcome,  
What expectancy or dream,  
Mountains, holds your inward sight?<sup>46</sup>

It is not only in this earlier poetry that Brasch focuses on the mountains. In his later work, although he turns to a more personal style which is less firmly based in concrete detail, his writing is nonetheless equally vivid pictorially when he turns to this subject. This is particularly noticeable in 'Letter from Thurlby Domain', where he speaks of

This towering snow-dazzled sun-shot world  
Of rock on rock, mountain on mountain hurled . . .<sup>47</sup>

or in 'The Estate', with the lines:

Mountain midsummer, the sun's bright burning-glass  
Hovering westward over the peaks of the Darrans,  
High yet in heaven; the snow-touched airs still . . .<sup>48</sup>

In his focus on the mountains, perhaps Brasch reveals himself as fundamentally a South Island poet, and can be grouped with other southern

poets such as Ursula Bethell, Denis Glover, Allen Curnow and Basil Dowling; for the magnificence of the Alps dominates the South Island scenery and demands to be written of. It is not only New Zealand's mountains which feature prominently in Brasch's poetry, however. The sea is equally important to him poetically, and in this he not only has a bond to his South Island contemporaries but also to those from the north such as R.A.K. Mason, A.R.D. Fairburn, and Robin Hyde. For a poet living in any region, who focuses in some way on the New Zealand scenery, the sea is inevitably a presence which cannot be ignored. Allen Curnow pinpoints the inclusion of seascape in poetry as a trait peculiar to New Zealand writing, stemming from the very nature of our land:

To an English poet, in the instances that occur to me - Wordsworth, or in our time, Auden - the sea is a feature of the landscape, to be greeted, and left, with a gesture of exaltation or surprise. We, if the difference may be put so crudely, more often take our land for a part of our seascape.<sup>49</sup>

There are few of Brasch's contemporaries who did not incorporate this element into some of their poetry. It was a part of Bethell's landscape, as it glimmered beyond the stretch of the Canterbury plains:

Beyond those trees, the morning's opened gateway  
And the great ocean's sharp, responsive blue  
I saw . . .<sup>50</sup>

The sea coasts of the North Island are often included in Fairburn's writing, literally and metaphorically:

We climbed down, and crossed over the sand,  
and there were islands floating in the wind-whipped blue,  
and clouds and islands trembling in your eyes . . .<sup>51</sup>

There are many examples in New Zealand's short literary history where the same beach or coastline has been focused on. James K. Baxter in 1961 wrote of Makōra Beach, and Louis Johnson, in 1975, took the same 'barbarian coast' as his subject, dedicating his poem to Baxter.<sup>52</sup> The 'wet shore' and

'clouded harbour' beneath Whiria Pa Hill are the focus of Brasch's 'Rain Over Mitimiti Mountains' (1957), and seventeen years later are again dealt with poetically in Hone Tuwhare's 'A Fall of Rain at Miti-Miti.'<sup>53</sup> Robin Hyde's 'Whangaroa Harbour', Kendrick Smithyman's 'Bream Bay', Glover's 'Summer, Pelorus Sound' - the list, and the various interpretations, are endless, but the initial focus is always the same. And thus a body of 'sea-coast' literature, which has a very native feel to it, has been created in the space of only a few decades.

As Brasch's autobiography shows, the sea had always been a part of his life. As a child he bathed and played at the Otago beaches, and during his years at Waitaki many hours were spent on the cliff tops by the sea. He acknowledges his poetic debt to this time in *Indirections*, saying: "The foreshore and its grove and gulls, the north boundary, gave me more poems than all Waitaki besides."<sup>54</sup> In his first two volumes, images of the New Zealand coastline abound. At times the sea is included as a touch of visual detail, as in 'Waianakarua':

Tall where trains draw up to rest, the gum-trees  
Sift an off-sea wind, arching  
Rippled cornland and the startling far blue waves.<sup>55</sup>

In other poems the New Zealand seascape becomes the centre for Brasch's vision, and evocative descriptive pieces are the result, such as 'Pipikariti' and 'Karitane'.

The latter poem, the second part of 'Otago Landscapes', is a particularly effective mood-piece, with its swinging rhythm suggesting the swell of the sea. This short piece admirably displays Brasch's skill at selecting certain natural details which together compose a remarkably vivid and accurate picture; even the alliterative first line, in its simplicity, creates a visual image in the mind of the reader:

Sea - flower, seaweed, shell.  
Hollow bells of the sea  
Ringing, ringing  
For the red sea-anemone

Swaying over the rock,  
 For the grasses tall as waves  
 That bow and sing to the wind,  
 And the black keep of pines  
 Where day its sweetness stores,  
 That, loosened, loads  
 The strewn, shaken airs.<sup>56</sup>

Almost all the imagery in this piece is linked to, and evokes, the sea, and the result is highly successful. The grasses are 'tall as waves', the girls' thoughts 'sigh and swell' like the water, and the mention of their 'blown hair' is closely followed by the phrase 'the amber tresses of the sea.'

Clearly, part of the attraction of New Zealand's mountains and coastlines as poetic subject matter was simply their visual appeal. Throughout his life, Brasch was always sharply aware of the physical look of his external surroundings, and he believed that lack of proportion, taste, or beauty could have an 'intangible malign influence' on the human spirit. Even as a boy, the 'raw mean ugliness' of his Dunedin primary school and its grounds affected him; he reminisces: 'I believe I loathed the place and was constantly depressed by it; I am repelled whenever I think of it.'<sup>57</sup> Later in *Indirections* he speaks of the needs within him which had become so vitally important to him, of 'the hunger for beauty of every kind, for proportion, for meaning.'<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly this hunger was satisfied by the scenery of New Zealand, and, when describing his native landscapes and seascapes, his writing takes on something of their natural beauty and dignity. Yet his words 'beauty of every kind' (the italics are mine) seem to suggest that merely visual splendour was not sufficient to fulfil this need within him, that his physical surroundings must, for him, also contain some deeper 'meaning'.

This need, or desire, is reflected in his poetry. Neither mountains nor sea are included in his poetry solely for descriptive purposes; in most of Brasch's work they also become imbued with symbolic connotations. Alan Roddick, commenting on the inclusion of mountains in New Zealand poetry in an article for the *Alpine Journal*, states that, traditionally, 'they have stood for

permanence and purity and aloofness from human concerns, as well as by their very dimensions imposing some perspective on these concerns.<sup>59</sup> At no time in his early poems does Brasch portray the New Zealand mountains as protective or comforting buttresses against the force of the elements; these are no projections of a maternal earth. At best they are, as Roddick's words imply, impersonal and unrevealing, as in 'The Land and the People' sequence where they stand 'solemn and dumb', or in 'Forerunners' where they hold the shadows in their 'powerful repose.'<sup>60</sup> More often they represent a rather threatening presence, despite their beauty. In 'The Iconoclasts' they are described as 'frowning', in 'The Ugly Duckling' we find the chilling lines 'cold crag / Wind over scree', and in 'The Enemy, Past and Present', the mountains are portrayed as the 'steeled implacable bones' of time, the enemy of our world.<sup>61</sup>

Yet the power of the mountains also represents something very positive for Brasch, for theirs is the power of endurance. The patience of the land becomes an important theme in both *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*; it is contrasted with the transience of mortal life, though not with anguish but with the quiet acquiescence which one comes to associate with Charles Brasch. Human occupation of the land is 'shallow', our behaviour 'rootless'<sup>62</sup>, and this is unobtrusively but constantly emphasized by references to the 'wind-scourged patient land' and its 'unfailing music'.<sup>63</sup>

The symbolic connotations of the sea in Brasch's poetry at first appear to oppose those of the mountains. While the land stands for permanence and wholeness, the sea is an element of flux which disturbs our own tenuous existence and which can even affect the equilibrium of the land. Its erosive nature is stressed in 'The Iconoclasts':

Channel and swelling cave divide  
The massive patience of the land,  
Empty cancers in its side  
That thrive upon destruction and  
Bring all to thriftless drifting sand.

Here the sea is almost an enemy of earth. Brasch's sea is quite the opposite of Kevin Ireland's 'fragile surf' which shatters on the 'iron beach' in 'Summer Evening: Piha.'<sup>64</sup> It is a powerful opposing force which would bring the earth to a state of submission, and erase the features of the land; it would have earth, unresisting, to

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

Several times in these first two volumes, Brasch portrays the sea as a destructive force which will eventually bring land and people to a state of oblivion. In 'Henley on Taieri', the sea is 'bitter' and a 'light - engulfing / Pit' in which the stream seeks, and finds, 'self-dissolution.'<sup>65</sup> As is shown in this poem, Brasch frequently links the earth with the sun and life, and water with darkness and sleep. In 'The Land and the People (I)' he traces the natural and inevitable progression from the former state to the latter:

Flowing of light to darkness  
Life to darkness burning down.<sup>66</sup>

The verbs selected here bring to mind the elements of water and fire - the sea which destroys the land and the sun which brings life to it. The theme of the eternal contrast, and conflict, between earth and sea also lies beneath the descriptive surface of 'Pipikariti', where cliff and water 'creep close for fiercer play', and then shatter against each other.<sup>67</sup>

Upon a close reading, however, one discovers that, although this poem is a short piece, it is by no means a straightforward presentation of conflict. Indeed, few of Brasch's poems should be taken at face value, for many contain paradoxes which, unobtrusive as they are, add an extra dimension to his work. In 'Pipikariti', water and earth *are* presented as elements of opposing natures, as different as the qualities of endurance and flux which they represent:

Impetuous side against stiff side  
One silent and one loud.

Yet although they appear to clash so stridently at the coastline which is their battleground, there is a sense that, on some deeper level, earth and sea exist in a more harmonious relationship. Their play is 'fierce', but it is nonetheless play and not the 'wasting strife' of human warfare. In the lines 'The caress of earth and water / Stretched together' there is a lover-like implication which must not be overlooked; transformed by sun and wind, their outward fury also contains 'fierce joy'.

In this poem, then, it seems that Brasch saw earth and sea existing in a complementary relationship brought about by the very contrast of their own distinctive characteristics, but also one whose essential nature is one of conflict. Elsewhere in his poetry are references which suggest that he saw still less difference between these elements than is implied here - as if, by both being part of some larger scheme of the natural world, earth and sea somehow merge and become one. This is perhaps clearest in 'Word by Night', the final poem in *Disputed Ground*, for here Brasch couples together water and earth as one, despite their differences; in the union of these elements true revelation is found:

By the same light also you may know yourselves:  
 You are of those risen from the sea  
 And for ever bound to the sea,  
 Which is but the land's other and older face.<sup>68</sup>

The shoreline where the two meet is still 'disputed ground', and the fact that Brasch takes this phrase as the title for the entire volume means that this theme of union and division is an important one. Yet this ground is not a sterile place of conflict, but is a 'rich boundary' from which all life springs; the creatures that have originated from it are both 'water and earth.'

In 'Genesis', too, the long formal ode found also in *Disputed Ground*, there is a specific centring on seascape as the place of all origins. The poem deals with the early Polynesian migration and is not as successful as Brasch's shorter, more incisive pieces. Here, I feel, the poet momentarily loses his sure

instinct for the concrete details of reality which usually enables him to create poetry of great visual impact. Once again he includes the elements of earth, fire, water, air, darkness and light, but here overuses them. After numerous repetitions, they tend to lose the significance they achieve when used less obtrusively, and the movement of the poem founders amidst the abstract symbolism.

Yet, although lacking the clean lines and sense of reality inherent in Brasch's best poetry, 'Genesis' embodies the same themes which run throughout both *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*. Once again the sea is of a double-edged nature; it is both 'hideous' and full of beauty, hostile yet promising fulfilment to those setting off on their journey. There are direct echoes of 'Word by Night' to be heard here, in the portrayal of earth and sea coming from one beginning, and all life stemming from this one source:

In the beginning they came of earth and of water.

After the birth of light  
After the separation of elements  
When all things in the beginning rose  
They came of earth and of water  
And lay in water  
And grew in darkness before they sought the day.<sup>69</sup>

The fruitful marriage of water and earth (and hence, of darkness and light) is an idea expressed several times throughout the work, with only the wording slightly varied. 'They' are 'Children of water and light', and 'creatures of wind and water'; their origins are 'earth and fire', and their history and legends are born 'out of earth and water.'

In Brasch's poetry, then, the sea is paradoxically both destroyer and life-giver. This apposition of opposites is not only present in his first two volumes but can also be detected in his later poetry. In 'Ben Rudd', for example, the sea is likened to the end of time, a 'Cold ocean, grave of waters / And world's burial ground.'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in 'By That Sea' it is a bitter place 'where men have laid their dead since the first flight / From Eden...'<sup>71</sup> Later in this same



poem, however, the waters are described as 'salving grief'; and in 'Bred in the Bone', although alien, the sea is at the same time 'familiar'.<sup>72</sup>

In *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, the two volumes which contain most of Brasch's specifically 'New Zealand' poems, the dual symbolism of the sea is particularly evident, and is extended in meaning because of the bearing it has on the nature of this country. For Brasch, concerned as he was with spiritual instability in New Zealand, the sea appeared a restless and divisive force, a reminder of the newness of the European's occupation here and a barrier isolating him from his age-old cultural heritage. 'The Islands' makes this clear:

Always, in these islands, meeting and parting  
Shake us, making tremulous the salt-rimmed air;  
Divided, many-tongued, the sea is waiting,  
Bird and fish visit us and come no more.  
Remindingly beside the quays the white  
Ships lie smoking; and from their haunted bay  
The godwits vanish towards another summer.  
Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring  
Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;  
And none knows where he will lie down at night.<sup>73</sup>

The concept of the sea as divider and separator was a common one in New Zealand verse at this time, for so many of Brasch's contemporaries still looked upon England as the 'Motherland', from which they were cut off by the vast ocean - as did Brasch himself, to an extent. Yet once more his sense of proportion and his ability to see the paradoxical nature of all things assert themselves. In this verse from 'The Islands', the sea is a volatile agent of change, holding forever an implicit reminder of our rootlessness in this land; but even here the 'murmuring shadow of departure' is perceived within 'light and calm'. In 'The Land and the People (III)', also, the sea surrounding New Zealand enforces the alienation of newcomers from their heritage, yet at the same time holds the suggestion of union, and promises knowledge of self and surroundings:

Only in the wash of time

Identifying, as the sea  
 Isolates, can earth and man  
 Into understanding grow  
 And to a common instinct come.<sup>74</sup>

By the same token, darkness, which Brasch associates with the sea, is imbued with a seemingly contradictory symbolism. True to centuries-old tradition, in his poetry it is linked with death and oblivion. It is one of 'the iconoclasts' of the poem bearing this title, inherent in the waves and the rain which attack the long-suffering land and attempt to wear it down to 'thrifless drifting sand.' Yet this foreseen destruction is described, not in terms of death, but of sleep and forgetfulness. There is something positive about the possibility of the earth's submission, as if in the 'dark of the waves' it will finally discover peace:

And heaven that is the sea's ally  
 Would have earth yielding to its breast,  
 Smooth-skinned, not to strain and cry  
 Lawless from the level dust,  
 To sleep, and never to resist . . .<sup>75</sup>

There is a definite maternal implication here which is to be found elsewhere in Brasch's poetry; although darkness can be cruel, there is also a curiously protective aspect to it which is not possessed by the aloof and impersonal mountains. The maternal image linked with darkness is also found in 'The Land and the People (I)', where the 'greater sea' is a place of birth, and nightfall brings not death but renewal of life:

Do you remember through this plausible day  
 The maternal nightly flood  
 Where all things rest and are renewed  
 And separateness falls away?<sup>76</sup>

Clearly the 'disturbing power' of the sea, as the place of all beginnings and endings, greatly affected Brasch, and this is reflected in his poetry. Not unnaturally, it features most prominently in his New Zealand poems, not only because it is a powerful presence in this country's landscape, but also because these poems are primarily concerned with the rootlessness of the New

Zealander and his search for his origins. Yet in *Disputed Ground* is a poem which Brasch wrote while on the Kona coast in Hawaii at the very beginning of the war, when he had decided to return to England, and New Zealand was far from his mind; and this poem, entitled 'Great Sea', portrays the ocean as a great resolving and unifying force perhaps more clearly than any of the indigenous poems in *The Land and the People*. As he does in these poems, Brasch again links the power of the sea to darkness and the night, but there is less of the descriptive element characteristic of the earlier pieces. However, the emphasis on the abstract rather than visual reality, which usually results in Brasch's less successful poems, does not diminish the impact of this piece.

Speak for us, great sea.

Speak in the night, compelling  
 The frozen heart to hear,  
 The memorized to forget.  
 O speak, until your voice  
 Possess the night, and bless  
 The separate and the fearful;  
 Under folded darkness  
 All the lost unite . . .<sup>77</sup>

Brasch's writing here is succinct and direct. He himself felt that this writing captured something of the spirit of the sea, as this passage in *Indirections*, referring to the composition of 'Great Sea', shows:

I felt myself numb and leaden and without hope, and because of that my father and I had almost nothing to say to each other, trivialities apart. Only the unquiet sea was alive, I thought. It seemed to speak what we could not speak, and I was able to catch a few lines of verse that rose in me as if out of the sea itself, like a difficult prayer addressed to the sea. Of all I wrote and tried to write at that time these were the only words that seemed to keep any meaning.<sup>78</sup>

The image of the sea in this poem is one of a great framework which gives validity to human existence:

Each to each discovered,  
 Vowed and wrought by your voice  
 And in your life, that holds  
 And penetrates our life:  
 You from whom we rose,

In whom our power lives on.

The implication here is one of continuity - the ocean's primal power is like a sublime and lasting version of our own transient and limited power. This, perhaps, is the final paradox in Brasch's seascape symbolism, for the sea is simultaneously both all-consuming flux and permanence. Its nature is restless and it brings about change to the contours of the land, yet in the very constancy of its motion it becomes something immovable and permanent. There is a sense of stability to be gained, then, from instability. Although in 'A View of Rangitoto' the image of the trees in the water is always broken, the movement of the 'inward and returning swells'<sup>79</sup> which disturbs the reflection is regular and never ceases. The waters may appear 'shiftless' but they are, in fact, responding to the unseen laws of the natural world, and these laws endure regardless of the passing of time.

For Brasch, not only New Zealand's seascape but also its landscape symbolized this union of the seemingly opposed elements of flux and stability. The mountains and shorelines, however, embodied this union in a mirror image to that of the sea. Appearing to the human eye to be static and permanent forms, they are, in fact, constantly changing in minute ways under the influence of time and the elements, which are bent on 'effacing feature' and 'rubbing blunt' the seemingly enduring stone. There is<sup>a</sup> feeling of acquiescence in the poems which describe these age-old changes: in 'Last Day', for example, the land is 'wind-scourged' but 'patient'. It is as if both land and sea easily submit to their state of flux and thus are able to incorporate the changes within themselves without anguish or struggle:

... As upon the snow-grey sea  
Change is assimilated and lies  
Invisible to all the eyes and skies  
That search and sound it.<sup>80</sup>

The natural world in Brasch's poetry, then, is one of transience like the human world, but the constancy of its changes becomes absorbed into a vast

pattern. Cycle exists within cycle - day passes into night, season into season, one year into the next. And through these rhythmical, regular cycles of change, landscape and seascape achieve a state of immovability and permanence never attained in the human world of random mutability:

Darkness and light in archetypal sway  
Keep there for ever shore and grove and height,  
From whose unfailing music grows that rite  
In which the creatures offer up their day.<sup>81</sup>

Ruth Dallas, contemporary and close friend of Brasch's, wrote in her 1953 volume *Country Road* of the patterns she observed in the Southland landscape which she loved:

I shall be content with the watermarks on the sand,  
Experimental colours and casts of shells,  
The shapes of trees and time-worn rocks and hills,  
With all things carefully moulded, patterned or planned,  
And the rhythmical cycle of plants and seasons and lives  
That come and go like the tides, as slowly, as surely.<sup>82</sup>

Brasch's first two volumes are full of the same theme: of the need to observe, and 'be content with', the constant flux of nature, and to perceive the eternal patterns within this flux. If we are distracted by superficial changes, Brasch implies, the 'apparent patience' of the land will seem to us little more than 'an illusion'; all we will come to understand is the brevity of our petty triumphs, and for our lack of perception the land will betray us:

Perhaps it keeps not faith; will laugh  
Upon our conquerors with like charm,  
Quickly earthing our bones from chance  
Encounter of their touchy sense.<sup>83</sup>

Certainly Brasch holds no illusions about the frailty of human existence. His poetry is characterized by a quiet resignation - here is a poet who fully realizes that 'Nothing of this endures.'<sup>84</sup> His acute awareness of the natural world around him, which is most obvious in the landscape poetry of his first two volumes, heightens his perception of the contrasting 'quickness' of the human world. Mankind, moreover, has little effect on land or seascape, despite

attempts to conquer these and establish memorials of permanence. Nature is basically indifferent to human needs and desires, a fact which Brasch honestly confronts in 'Waitaki Revisited':

For in the time of the heart man is alone,  
And to those he longs to confide in, the nights, the wind,  
He is but surface and texture

In a world of contours they are forever retracing  
Through infinite change of crystal, fibre, shell.<sup>85</sup>

Despite its unquestioning acceptance of mortality, however, Brasch's poetry is not without hope. Now and again appears the possibility of redemption - a suggestion that, by opening ourselves to the influence of the land and learning its laws, we may achieve a spiritual wholeness which is more enduring than physical strength and bestows on us a kind of permanence. For those who admit their own 'incompleteness' and live by the rule of the land, he states in 'The Land and the People (II)', there are rewards 'beyond all riches.' And in 'Waitaki Revisited', although he stoically acknowledges the triviality of mortal existence beside the vast patterns of nature, he also implies that if one willingly submits to the land, one may gain something of its immovable strength and energy:

Yes, here you found me; here, O dissonant sea,  
And sky's intent, absolving calm, you spoke  
And entered, making me your joint possession,  
Your battleground and home,

Imbuing the least motion of my spirit  
With stillness and fever in indissoluble marriage.

The end of the same poem combines this belief with the other strand of symbolism vital in Brasch's landscape poetry, for here, near the end of *Disputed Ground*, the poet once again introduces the idea of nature achieving stillness through motion, and permanence through transience, which has been frequently referred to throughout the two volumes. The note of hope which has been occasionally sounded becomes stronger here. Brasch now maintains that

if willing, one can be 'fashioned, surrendering and elate' by the powers of the natural world, which bestow upon the individual their gift of endurance:

And with the endurance of the shadowy forms  
Of earth to stand in pure submission, timeless,  
Entering imperceptibly the dance  
Of substance, and absorbed

To front the echoes and mirages of air  
With flame-like quivering breath, its solitary passage  
Swept by a vast wind and the wintry, perpetual  
Flashing of violent stars.

I am reminded by these two verses of T.S. Eliot's symbol of the dance in his *Four Quartets*. Within the constant flickering movement of the dance of life exists the stillness of eternity; and the very energy and restless quality of the dance is an integral part of the still point:

... at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it  
fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement  
from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still  
point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.<sup>86</sup>

The same balance of apparently opposing elements which appears in the *Four Quartets* - 'So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing'<sup>87</sup> - is consistently evident in Brasch's work. (The New Zealand poet might almost have written such a line as 'Time the destroyer is time the preserver', which appears in 'East Coker.')

In Eliot's writing, too, there is a glimmer of the hope seen in the conclusion of 'Waitaki Revisited', that a 'timeless' and enduring moment can be experienced which gives meaning to an otherwise superficial existence, and this moment can be grasped through an absorption in nature:

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts.<sup>88</sup>

And Eliot's claim in 'Burnt Norton', that the only way we can transcend our mortal existence is 'if our temporal reversion nourish . . . / The life of significant soil', is strikingly similar to the beliefs expressed in Brasch's 'The Land and the People (III)':

. . . Dearest dust and shadow  
 Must we offer still, becoming  
 Richer as our loss falls home  
 Into her safer present keeping, who  
 Compounds our ash with the trees' blood,  
 The living and the dead inseparable.

Whether or not Brasch was greatly influenced by T.S. Eliot is debatable. Of the 'modernist' writers, he showed more preference for the writings of Yeats and Auden, stating: 'Two qualities I look for in a great poet I do not find in Eliot, passion first, and magnanimity, generosity of mind.'<sup>89</sup> Yet in its recognition of the opposing yet complementary natures of absolutes such as transience and permanence, movement and stillness, Brasch's poetry does bear a resemblance to Eliot's. Both poets, moreover, present these eternal questions to the reader largely by portraying them through the concrete details of their own particular reality, whether it be Eliot's grimy city streets or Brasch's bleak Otago coastline.

#### THE EUROPEAN TRADITION

*Little clinging grains enfold  
 all the mighty mind of old . . .*

*They are gone and I am here  
 stoutly bringing up the rear . . .*

- R.A.K. Mason.

The majority of poems in Brasch's first two volumes are so centred around the visual detail of the New Zealand landscape that they are markedly



indigenous in context and essence. The major themes which run throughout *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* are those of human transience, contrasted with the permanence of the land, and the uneasy relationship between human beings and their physical environment. Both themes, of course, had a strong relevance to New Zealanders at the time Brasch was writing; for nature was a powerful and omnipresent force in their lives, and feelings of rootlessness and instability in this wild, unfamiliar landscape were prevalent amongst those of European descent. The intimacy with the unique New Zealand landscape displayed in these poems, and their focus on the problems of nationality in a new land, results in a body of work which unmistakably belongs to New Zealand.

Despite the accuracy and vividness with which Brasch captures his own 'land and people', however, the themes of mortality and alienation which he touches on are not only relevant to his time and place, but have a universal and ageless significance. Any tendency, therefore, to regard this poet as one with solely national concerns, based on the indigenous surface of his early poems, results, I feel, in a diminishing of the value of his work. In a way these 'New Zealand' poems are so successful entirely because of their double-edged nature, the way that they deal with both the local and the universal. I find the much quoted statement from Yeats' *Letters to the New Island* particularly apposite here - the more so because Brasch was so influenced by this poet:

... But to this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveller, your village and the cobwebs on your walls. . . . One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand - that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of.<sup>90</sup>

Brasch was, of course, an experienced world traveller, yet in most of the poems in his first two volumes he deliberately and wisely concentrated on his native country, which he knew so well. This is one of the greatest strengths of his early writing, for he almost always begins his reflections by focusing on a

familiar scene, and rarely moves beyond this into general contemplation, preferring to imply the abstract through the concrete and the visual. 'Pipikariti' is perhaps the most obvious example of this, as it commences with the 'stone weapons' and 'weed and waveworn shell' lying on the beach. A focus on the smallest of details naturally progresses to a description of the vast wilderness of their setting, from which a reader can infer Brasch's statement on 'the wasting strife' of human conflict.

The majority of the poems in these volumes display this talent of Brasch's for attaining universalism in his poetry through limiting his vision to the well-known 'world' of the New Zealand countryside. His choice of subject matter in *The Land of the People* and *Disputed Ground* is, on the whole, the equivalent of his 'village' and 'the cobwebs on [his] walls': the darkened waters of Cook Strait, the 'dry manuka thickets' of Waianakarua, the great form of Rangitoto, the playing fields of Waitaki. Thus he constantly reduces the wide sweep of the universe to concrete particulars and his occasional forays into a more abstract way of thought are nonetheless firmly rooted in the reality of the New Zealand countryside.

Indigenous details of land and seascape, for which Brasch had such a sharp eye, then, became his 'glove', enabling him to reach out to the universe through his poetry. Although much of *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* has this native focus, however, there are, too, certain poems in both volumes which suggest that Brasch's vision extended far beyond the regional; and comments he made, both personal and in the capacity of the *Landfall* editorship, confirm that part of his attention, at least, was constantly focused on European landscape and literature. In the first issue of *Landfall* in 1947, he commented that any good New Zealand artist's subject matter should be 'local at least in the sense that he belongs to this particular time and place . . .'. Yet, in the same notes, he nonetheless stated his belief that, 'however the arts may develop in New Zealand, they will still be working within and must still depend

on the European tradition', assertively adding, 'of that there can be no question.'<sup>91</sup>

That Brasch maintained this attitude throughout his lifetime is evident from an examination of not only his editorial notes, but also his critical prose writings - reviews, and the texts of lectures and radio talks. When asked to lecture on 'New Zealand Literature' in 1950, for example, he declined and instead worded his topic as 'Conditions for Literature.' The reasons he gave for this may well have offended the many contemporaries who, for the last few decades, had devoted themselves to building a national literature. He stated:

... I declined ... because I don't think there is a New Zealand literature. There are a few novels and stories and poems by New Zealanders that one could mention overseas without embarrassment; but that doesn't constitute a literature.<sup>92</sup>

Brasch's continual awareness of overseas standards evident here is equally noticeable in his best known essay on the arts, 'Present Company', based on the text of a lecture given to the Auckland Gallery Associates in 1965.<sup>93</sup> Here, considering the nature of a work of art and its relationship to creator and audience, he displays his usual depth of literary and artistic knowledge. His touchstones for all genres of art are, significantly, drawn from European culture: the sculptures and paintings of Michelangelo, Bellini, Van Gogh and Manet; the poetry of his great masters, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Rilke; the prose writings of Chekhov, Proust, Kafka, and Virginia Woolf. Seldom does he mention New Zealand poets, musicians, or painters.

In his roles as both editor and art critic, Brasch was often criticized; for many of his contemporaries felt that his frequent reference to things foreign undermined the value of their national culture. In a review of 'Present Company', E.H. McCormick saw Brasch's omission of the native element as 'illfounded', and stated that 'one can only regret that the person who has done more than any other to foster the arts in New Zealand should not have found here "his home on earth"'.<sup>94</sup> More recently, in the December 1987 issue of

*Islands*, Bill Manhire states his view that the New Zealand tradition had to 'stop paying homage to the whole metaphor' of European tradition, something which he thought was encouraged by the 'Eurocentric' vision promoted by Brasch; and he criticizes Brasch's 'blind spot' when it came to not only New Zealand but also American literature.<sup>95</sup>

Admittedly Brasch's stance towards New Zealand culture could be seen as somewhat patronizing, and his 'consistently lofty standards', which McCormick denounced, as too demanding. In his lecture entitled 'The Structure of Verse', for instance, he once more turns to European works to illustrate certain classifications of form. He mentions Dante, Auden, Eliot and Bridges, and then, in a phrase which is perhaps unfortunate in the light of today's criticism, turns to Curnow, Baxter and himself with the intention 'to come nearer to home, and to descend the scale...'<sup>96</sup>. Such comments undoubtedly fuel the general trend of opinion about Brasch which seems to have strongly prevailed over the last decade or two in particular, condemning him and his followers for a conservative and backward-looking attitude.

Yet the poetic conditions of the time, and the work of Brasch's predecessors, must also be taken into account when judging his biases, national or otherwise; and his own poetry belies the criticism that he was interested in things European to the exclusion or detriment of things New Zealand. His attitude seems to me a realistic one more than anything, for, as he realized, a new literary tradition cannot independently exist but must develop slowly and naturally from the cultures of other countries - self-sufficiency cannot be gained overnight. Brasch had witnessed the unsuccessful attempts to develop a solidly-based indigenous culture which had resulted in the forced and unbalanced poetry of the versifiers represented in *Kowhai Gold* (1930). These writers had desired to break away from the fixation with the English tradition and the 'Motherland' all too evident in the 1906 Alexander and Currie anthology, yet (perhaps inevitably) their reaction against this 'forelock-pulling

obeisance to current English practice<sup>97</sup> was taken to extremes. The poetic assertions of allegiance to New Zealand of Brasch's immediate predecessors, with their heavy emphasis on all things 'native', had as little relation to reality as the replicas of English romantic verse which had preceded them. Arthur H. Adam's 'Maoriland' is an extreme example of a poet striving for familiarity with his land, yet failing dismally to achieve any visual effect or originality of vision:

O my land of the moa and Maori  
Garlanded round with your rata and kauri . . .<sup>98</sup>

In his poetry at least, then, Brasch saw the European tradition not as something to be hastily broken away from before a distinctly New Zealand literature could be created, but as a valuable reinforcement to the construction of a new tradition. He would certainly have agreed with Holcroft when the latter stated that 'the artist's function is to make the people feel more clearly, to make them feel more strongly and honestly, to give them glimpses - perhaps only brief and indistinct, yet emotionally potent - of the larger world of continuing experience which surrounds and feeds their national activities.' Holcroft continued, 'And so it is necessary for the artist to go back through time to the sources of communal experience. . . . The historian is concerned with events. The novelist is concerned with events and people. But the poets and thinkers . . . must open themselves to those ultimate influences of space and time which are unacknowledged forces of the spirit.'<sup>99</sup> Brasch's continual reference to the European tradition must not be seen as unpatriotic; he admired the great masters belonging to this tradition not on any nationalistic grounds but simply because they had produced works of the highest quality which dealt with these 'ultimate influences of space and time.' Because of the universality of his vision, he was able to transcend the pressures which forced many of his contemporaries into writing poetry of a narrow nationalism.

David Hall, in a review of *Landfall Country*, drew attention to a comment by Winston Rhodes which suggested that 'New Zealand criticism is too

occupied with discovering national characteristics at the expense of "the search for meaning."<sup>100</sup> This comment seems to me to have particular validity in the case of Brasch for, although many of his poems do display 'national characteristics', this inherent sense of the local is certainly no yardstick for the quality or significance of his work. Some of the poems in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* hold no reference, explicit or implied, to New Zealand, yet the observations they contain are as relevant to the human condition as any of Brasch's more 'native' pieces. During his years of travelling, Brasch found the scenery of Europe in all its variety stimulated both his intellect and his senses just as that of New Zealand did; and his strong response to the foreign landscapes he experienced became reflected in his poetry. The same universal questions which lie behind poems concerned with national identity - 'Forerunners' or 'The Land and the People' sequence, for example - are dealt with in Brasch's poems based on Syria ('Simeon's Land'), or on England ('Wartime Snow, London'). Clearly he saw no need to limit his poetic vision to the local when he saw the same themes central to human existence also embodied in other, more distant landscapes. His first two volumes consist of a blend of New Zealand and foreign landscapes, described with an ease born of familiarity, and all represent in some way the universal values central to his poetry.

In *The Land and the People* there are only two poems drawn directly from landscapes which Brasch saw on his travels: 'Simeon's Land' and 'Little Missenden Abbey.' ('For the Dead in Spain' is written in the rhetorical style with which Brasch was less successful, and is not based in physical reality.) The former of these two poems describes the site of St Simeon Stylites's column, in the north Syrian desert, where the saint remained for thirty years 'fasting, preaching, and performing miracles.'<sup>101</sup> A passage in *Indirections* describes the scene of the fallen column and the great church around it:

The whole scene was rock, a sea of it, rough, broken

by small wadis. It is as if the saint had chosen to live at the edge of that monastic rock sea, and to speak from it to the green world beyond, the world of growth and decay.<sup>102</sup>

The poem itself focuses on the contrast between barren rock and natural life in this scene, thus implying the dual nature of the earth. Here Brasch beholds the same pitiless and barren world which he saw embodied in Otago's Mt Iron, half a world away; and, like the wilderness of New Zealand's scenery, this landscape is silent, revealing nothing.

O stony breast of earth - stone the mountain  
The gorge, the plain, ridge and hollow and shoulder  
A land of stone, and stone the foundation  
Of ruined stone, broken pillar arch and fallen vault.  
Immovable and voiceless earth . . .<sup>103</sup>

As in 'Mt Iron', where Brasch uses the phrase 'No milk of cloud / Shall be offered you / From these dried breasts', the image here is one of female barrenness: the earth's breast is 'strong', and she is 'silent', 'barren' and 'patient'. Contrasted with this, however, is the same vivid proof of life and new growth seen in the New Zealand poem 'Karitane' (which immediately follows 'Mt Iron'); as in the opening of 'Pipikariti', Brasch focuses on minute detail to illustrate a larger theme.

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

The detail of this foreign landscape is as sharply perceived, and the resulting poetic image as strikingly visual, as in any of the pieces which deal with Brasch's 'home country'.

'Little Missenden Abbey' has less visual impact, for its language is simpler and there is less of the word-painting at which Brasch excelled. Yet this too is an example of the poetry successfully introducing universal implication through the concrete details of a well-known scene. Indeed, apart from certain parts of New Zealand, the location on which this is based would have been the most

familiar of all for Brasch, since he lived and worked at the Abbey, a school for disturbed children, for over a year and grew to love the countryside around the Chiltern hills. In this piece, he muses on the history of these 'fields that have known the plough / Since men first knew the shires'<sup>104</sup> and, by looking back in this way, perceives time as both the enemy and friend of man, a theme which is constantly present in his work.

The final verse takes the form of a supplication to time to 'be gentle to this place', and ends, typically, with the paradox of permanence gained through transience, and reward through apparent loss:

Reconcile their fire  
With your one gift of loss,  
Temper them to endure.

The way that both this piece and 'Simeon's Land' are interposed amongst poems which unmistakably belong to New Zealand suggests that Brasch saw no division between his foreign and his native work, instead seeing all landscapes the world over as reconciling opposites and embodying themes which are central and unchanging in life.

In *Disputed Ground* the grouping of European poems is more regular, forming the balanced tripartite structure of this volume. The middle section of the three is devoted to overseas subject matter, whereas the first and last largely consist of native landscape poems and descriptions of personal relationships connected, for Brasch, with New Zealand. Yet the same themes recur from section to section regardless of setting: mortality, human conflict, the endurance and power of the natural world. 'Great Sea' (discussed earlier in this chapter) was written while Brasch was on the Kona coast in Hawaii, and this perhaps best illustrates the fact that, in Brasch's poetry, all landscapes are in a sense one; this seascape embodies for the poet the same values of permanence and strength as does the more familiar one of the Otago coastline. This great ocean, 'from whom we rose', is the source of all life, as it is in



'Genesis' or 'The Land and the People', and when we return to it 'our power lives on.'

Man's far from satisfactory relationship with nature is, in this section, proved to be more than a national concern for Brasch. In 'Wartime Snow, London', he speaks of the way that man has desecrated his physical environment, just as in 'Forerunners' he mentions the 'vain memorials' which scar the land, and includes the grim suggestion that this is indicative of man's internal or spiritual state:

... the sorry  
 Memorials of our living,  
 The monstrous countenanced,  
 The misery disavowed,  
 Characters written large  
 Across the torn world's face  
 In shameless reproduction  
 Of the defiled and tortured

Landscape of the heart ...<sup>105</sup>

The sequence 'Nineteen Thirty-nine', for which Brasch draws on his experiences of wartime Europe, contains similar themes of man's blindness to nature, and the resulting estrangement between human and natural worlds.<sup>106</sup> 'The City', presumably based on his perception of London during the first year of the war, reveals the consequences of such a division 'from water and from light' - hearts grow 'narrow like alleys' and fear of one's fellow beings springs up. There is a hope of redemption, Brasch hints, in nature, where 'earth's life will speak to you again' and 'the quivering distended will' may be relaxed. Yet all too often, he implies, such a refuge is ignored due to human pride, and thus nature becomes our enemy, cold and indifferent:

... But you go on, and bear  
 The frail life farther yet, blindly and slow,  
 Into the pitiless mountains and the glare  
 Of deathly light, ceasing to know or care  
 If you are still man; but the frozen rocks know  
 And the white wind massing against you as you go.

Again there are echoes of Brasch's New Zealand poetry here, for 'The Land and the People' (II) also promises spiritual rewards if we submit to the rule of the land, and warns of only hostility and betrayal if we do not 'listen for its heart.' 'The Desert Fathers', the second part of 'Nineteen Thirty-nine', also prophesies our inevitable downfall if we ignore the larger world outside our own petty world of bitterness and suspicion:

Always defending, always justifying  
 We lose the power to receive and give  
 Among the creatures in their living and dying,  
 Estranged from earth, uncertain how to live.

Clearly, then, whatever part of the world he was in, Brasch found material with poetic potential, for he looked always beyond superficial differences for the 'continuity of human experience, the unity of man, and . . . the inexhaustible richness of life that is open to men in New Zealand as elsewhere.'<sup>107</sup> Obviously the landscapes of Europe, steeped in centuries of literary and historic tradition, offered him something which his own country, comparatively recently settled, could not. The first poem in *Disputed Ground*, dedicated to C.H. Roberts, an Oxford friend, suggests that the years spent travelling were the most important poetically, for he cites this time as 'those years that are most my theme, / Oxford, Soulbury, Llanthony, Trier, Venice, Kôm Aushim.'<sup>108</sup> Countries such as Egypt, Italy, and Greece, with their ancient ruins and buildings hundreds of years old, fascinated him and naturally influenced his poetry. The age-old aspect of such countries, both in their landscapes and their manmade sights, had a particular relevance for a poet one of whose central themes was the archetypal one of permanence contrasted with human transience, and it clearly had a tremendous influence on Brasch, as is evident in his description of Egypt in *Indirections*:

It was a whole world to take in. Egypt was and is a world to itself, physically and historically - that of the Nile valley. It is a world of immense age and great stability, a setting unusually secure for human life . . .<sup>109</sup>

Brasch's poem 'The Colossi of Memnon' is part of the outcome of this time spent in Egypt. The painted tombs of the nobles have, for the poet, taken on the stillness and permanence of natural phenomena, like 'mountains of silence . . . purged of their human weakness'; and, perhaps even more than nature can, because of their 'neighbourhood to man', they can imbue human beings 'with more than human stature.'<sup>110</sup> New Zealand had no such ancient wonders about which Brasch could write. Yet interestingly he did not include 'The Colossi of Memnon' in the European section of *Disputed Ground*, but placed it in the first and, as I see it, most strongly native group of poems, as he did also with 'Wevelsfleth', a descriptive piece about the meadows of Holstein. It seems likely that his reason for this was, as James Bertram suggests, to place his New Zealand impressions 'against the antique ruins of an older world' and the countryside of Western Europe.<sup>111</sup> In a sense, then, Brasch's European work does not detract from his New Zealand vision but in fact complements and strengthens it. The recentness of man's occupation of New Zealand is put in a larger perspective by contrast with ancient European history.

Although lacking a long manmade history, however, New Zealand provided Brasch with another, different, example of permanence in its primeval natural beauty. The presence of eternal time, that 'child of bright and dark / Married in water, rock and sky' which Brasch saw in the countryside of Germany<sup>112</sup>, could be felt even more strongly in the untouched land and seascapes of New Zealand; the fierce untamed quality of this country spoke to him of the existence of 'a world of fire before the rocks and waters.'<sup>113</sup> In a world of flux and uncertainty, consolation for Brasch was to be found in the sheer endurance of the primal elements of fire, wind, rock and sea; beside these, even centuries-old monuments and sculptures are comparatively short-lived. His instinct when confronting the inescapable problems of the human condition was to turn unerringly to the unchanging absolutes of land and sea, as

the only true certainties in life, and for these he needed to look no further than his own country.

Despite Brasch's claim that his years overseas were most his 'theme', and despite the inclusion of a good number of poems based on European sights and scenery, I do, in fact, still feel that the predominant character of his first two volumes is a strongly New Zealand one. With the exception of 'Simeon's Land' and 'Wevelsfleth', I find the native poems much more vivid visually, and their impact is strengthened because of their general simplicity, in contrast to the conscious formality of poems such as 'Wartime Snow, London'. It is probable that this direct response to New Zealand is due to the fact Brasch spent his childhood here. Through his familiarity with it, this country seems to have grown to become a part of him, despite his extensive travels - or perhaps because of them, for he wrote to Ursula Bethell in 1939: 'My journeyings last year to unknown places made me more of a New Zealander.'<sup>114</sup>

It appears that, while Europe appealed greatly to his intellect, as is evident in his critical prose writings, his strongest emotional response was in fact, to New Zealand - and it was this response which created his best poetry. He made it clear that as a poet he did not believe in a narrow nationalism, hence he showed no reluctance whatsoever to write on any European subject matter which appealed to him and which prompted contemplation of universal issues. This breadth of vision made him so much more than a regional or national poet, and the merit of his work is diminished greatly if only seen in this light.

Yet at the same time he strongly believed that the universal should be approached through the local and, in this way, age-old questions which have been dealt with time and again in European literary tradition acquire a new freshness and validity in his New Zealand poetry. In one of his lectures he stated, 'We have to put in our own terms the problems which have been posed elsewhere; if we attempt answers to them, and in so far as we do so, the

answers will be in terms of the New Zealand scene and New Zealand conditions.'<sup>115</sup> Typically, he illustrated this assertion by reference to the European masters Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, who 'posed the questions and gave their answers in terms of the Russia of their own day; and the answers were valid for, were vital to, the whole world.' Brasch, like the writers he referred to, turned to the particulars of his own landscape for his answers, and most of the resulting poetry is highly successful, for not only is it 'valid for . . . the whole world' but it is also, I feel, some of the first writing to naturally, yet unmistakably, belong to New Zealand.

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- <sup>69</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 22-26.
- <sup>70</sup>. *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 91.
- <sup>71</sup>. *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 107-8.
- <sup>72</sup>. *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 110.
- <sup>73</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 17.
- <sup>74</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>75</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 7.
- <sup>76</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 1.
- <sup>77</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>78</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 347.
- <sup>79</sup>. *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, pp.17-18.
- <sup>80</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 8-9
- <sup>81</sup>. 'The Islands,' in *Collected Poems*, p.16.



- <sup>82</sup>. Cit. by E.H. McCormick, *New Zealand Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 150.
- <sup>83</sup>. 'The Land and the People (II)', in *Collected Poems*, p. 2.
- <sup>84</sup>. 'The Ecstasy,' *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 3.
- <sup>85</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 32-35.
- <sup>86</sup>. 'Burnt Norton,' *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 191.
- <sup>87</sup>. 'East Coker,' *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 200.
- <sup>88</sup>. 'The Dry Salvages,' *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 212-13.
- <sup>89</sup>. 'Writer and Reader,' *New Zealand Monthly Review*, 53 (Feb 1965), in *The Universal Dance*, ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), p. 126.
- <sup>90</sup>. Cit. by Allen Curnow, (ed.), Introduction, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1960), p. 15.
- <sup>91</sup>. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 1(1947), 5-6.
- <sup>92</sup>. 'Conditions for Literature,' *The Universal Dance*, p. 145.
- <sup>93</sup>. 'Present Company,' *The Universal Dance*, pp. 19-45.
- <sup>94</sup>. Review of 'Present Company,' *Landfall*, 21 (1967), 201-3.
- <sup>95</sup>. 'Breaking the Line: A View of American and New Zealand Poetry,' *Islands*, N.S. 3 (1987), 142-152.
- <sup>96</sup>. 'The Structure of Verse,' based on lecture given at a Dunedin Poetry School, Jan. 1949, in *The Universal Dance*, pp. 46-66.
- <sup>97</sup>. Letter from G. de Montalk to A.R.D. Fairburn, 14 Oct. 1926. Cit. by W.S. Broughton, 'Problems and Responses of Three New Zealand Poets in the 1920s,' in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow, p. 5.
- <sup>98</sup>. 'Maoriland,' *The Penguin Book of NZ Verse*, ed. Curnow (1960), p. 36.
- <sup>99</sup>. *The Waiting Hills*, p. 62.
- <sup>100</sup>. Review of *Landfall Country: Work from 'Landfall' 1947-61*, ed. Charles Brasch, *New Zealand Listener*, 25 Jan. 1963, p. 18.
- <sup>101</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 223.
- <sup>102</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 224.
- <sup>103</sup>. 'Simeon's Land,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>104</sup>. 'Little Missenden Abbey,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>105</sup>. 'Wartime Snow, London,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 28.
- <sup>106</sup>. 'Nineteen Thirty-nine,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 29-32.
- <sup>107</sup>. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 7 (1953), 4.
- <sup>108</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 194.

<sup>110</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>111</sup>. James Bertram, *Charles Brasch* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 17.

<sup>112</sup>. 'Wevelsfleth,' *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>113</sup>. 'A View of Rangitoto,' *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>114</sup>. Letter to Ursula Bethell, London, 27 Mar. 1939, Bethell Papers, Correspondence, Box 1.

<sup>115</sup>. 'Conditions for Literature,' *The Universal Dance*, p. 162.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ESTATE

#### THE HIDDEN 'LANDSCAPE OF THE HEART'

*Sometimes I think of those whose lives touch mine  
Too briefly; who, by a look or a word, show me  
A little of what lies beneath, but leaving then,  
Because we are trained to silence, they are shut away.*

*- Paul Henderson*

In the Spring 1973 edition of *Islands* a section is to be found, dedicated to Charles Brasch who had died earlier that year, entitled 'Tributes and Memories from his Friends.' In the words that follow, written by some of those who had been closest to Brasch - the de Beers, James Bertram, Jack Bennett, Toss Woollaston, Denis Glover, Douglas Lilburn, W.H. Oliver, Ian Milner - a comprehensive picture is built up of a sensitive, well-educated, likeable, and loyal friend. One quality in particular is commented on several times - that of an essentially reserved and private personality. Lilburn, for example, remembers being 'disconcerted by his reserve veiling warmth of personality' and states: 'whole areas of his life and thought remained sealed books to me throughout a long friendship...'<sup>1</sup>. W.H. Oliver, too, speaks of Brasch's 'carefully maintained reserve, his essential privacy and solitude'<sup>2</sup>; and earlier in that year, in the June edition of *Landfall*, writer Philip Wilson's description of his colleague was of a 'shy and reserved person, very quietly spoken...'<sup>3</sup>.

The reserve which was clearly such a fundamental part of Brasch's character not only manifested itself in his personal relationships but also became evident in his style of writing. In the same 1973 edition of *Islands* are included extracts from a diary he kept in 1940 which might be expected to give some insight into his reserved personality. The writing is of great visual clarity, as the entry for the eighteenth of January displays:

Went with L. [his sister Lesley] to Farnham; the curving fields white, with dark lines, and over them stood the bare water-pale trees. The snow was too thin to blur outlines, but made a delicate skin over everything; and shone as we came back in the dark, under a moon voyaging through high clouds which let a few stars shine through. Searchlights veering back and forth, their lovely beams with the little paw of light at the end where they struck cloud seemed to be embracing the whole calm heaven.<sup>4</sup>

The details of the landscape are described with an accuracy of vision characteristic of Brasch's writing, but here, as in the other entries, any personal revelations are, equally characteristically, conspicuously absent.

The feeling that Brasch is reluctant to reveal his own private emotions in his writing is further strengthened by a reading of *Indirections*, his prose memoirs. There is a reticent quality about this work which is perhaps somewhat unexpected in autobiography, often the most revelatory of genres, but is not entirely unexpected in the case of Brasch. His writing here is a curious blend of the subjective and the objective, of his inner, personal world and the external world of dates and events. In its adherence to concrete, proven reality the work is meticulously detailed, so that a reader is kept fully informed of the developments in the writer's study, travels, and career path. Yet in his interpretation of the self Brasch is less scrupulous, less direct; even when writing of intensely personal experiences there is a sense that he is distancing himself from his own emotion and the reader is still further alienated from the original incident.

In a passage describing a love affair during his time at Oxford, for instance, Brasch says 'both too much and too little', to use the words of W.H. Oliver.<sup>5</sup> The description reads:

I had failed in love too, in a hopeless long-drawn out devotion which came to nothing and left me defeated. I had longed for a complete impossible union of souls and bodies, physical and spiritual in one, a living together of perfect openness, absolute trust, total sharing and reciprocity. When it was over I knew I should never love in that way again (let alone be loved), and never find what I sought; knew that such entire mutuality in love is

not to be hoped for; that I was alone and would always be alone.<sup>6</sup>

This short paragraph addresses the question of personal love more explicitly than anywhere else in the autobiography, and Brasch's stoical resignation to what he saw as a state of inescapable loneliness from this moment on is indeed moving. Despite the honesty of the passage, however, at the same time one has the feeling that there is a great deal more which could be said, that Brasch's writing is not directly prompted by the strong emotion he doubtless experienced at the time, but is instead deliberately edited. One is left, therefore, with a carefully worded general statement on love, certainly genuinely and deeply believed in, but lacking a certain 'human' element.

At times, in fact, Brasch's reticence verges on apparent coolness, even towards those to whom he is closest. There is little mention of his sister Lesley, for instance, even in the chapter headed by her name. Her illness, which was to be fatal, is occasionally alluded to in brief and dispassionate tones: 'Lel of course had to miss all this, since she was too ill to go out.'<sup>7</sup> When he speaks of the relapse which led to her death, fears for her health are bound up with those for his own work:

I was afraid for her, and apprehensive for myself: I would have to give myself up to looking after her once more, indefinitely.<sup>8</sup>

There are hints that he felt more deeply about her death than he acknowledges here; he describes feeling 'afraid and remorseful' during her last illness, and as not being able to speak about it with Mrs Lister-Kaye (who ran the Abbey School) 'without prompting from her.' Yet, just as he characteristically kept his thoughts to himself at this time, neither does he enlarge upon them in retrospect. His account of Lel's eventual death is matter-of-fact, his own reaction seemingly affected as much by events of world-wide importance as by this great personal loss:

Lel had several haemorrhages, she was given a blood transfusion. Since her wound had to be dressed under anaesthetic, it could not be dressed as often as necessary; the poison from it spread. In less than three weeks after reaching England, she died.

London was dark and cold. The Spanish Republic was dying, Barcelona fell the same week. Three days later Yeats died, the greatest English poet since Wordsworth as I believed. It was the worst time I had ever known.<sup>9</sup>

Such reserve in Brasch's writing is certainly partly deliberate. For his review of *Indirections*, W.H. Oliver states that 'Art is often a kind of protective coloration', and that passivity, which is Brasch's most frequent stance in both personal and artistic matters, is 'the ultimate protective coloration.'<sup>10</sup> Yet I am sure, too, that often Brasch wished to care more deeply about others or to be able to express his feelings towards them more easily and openly. With his own acute self-awareness he could hardly ignore what he saw as a limitation in his capacity for feeling and making apparent deep emotion, and *Indirections* provides evidence of this realization in several places. Speaking of his childhood governess, for example, he reminisces, 'I think I owe to her something of whatever ardour I am capable of feeling, and my admiration of ardour in other people, in the young and in those whom ardour keeps young.'<sup>11</sup> When saying goodbye to his closest friend James Bertram in 1935, before Bertram left for China, Brasch obviously keenly felt his inability to display the depth of his emotion:

... we said goodbye a week before Christmas at Piccadilly Circus, after lunching together, and in a rather matter-of-fact tone, with a half wry expression, he hoped that my 'literary plans' would go well; while I wanted to take him in my arms and exchange a word of blessing and could not.<sup>12</sup>

The curious blend of intimacy and aloofness which characterizes Brasch's writing, then, is due, I feel, both to artistic design and to his very nature - his essentially private self and a reluctance to reveal this self to others. Not surprisingly his poetry also displays this quality of reserve, while nonetheless

laying out his innermost convictions, on his own life and human existence in general. Perhaps the entire body of his poetry gives a clearer outline of Brasch as a man than his prose writings do, however, for he saw poetry as the ultimate means of self-expression, as the foreword to his memoirs indicates:

Prose is the medium of those who have not been granted the gift of poetry. In these pages I have set down recollections that I was not able to shape into poems. . .<sup>13</sup>

In 'Present Company', too, Brasch compares poetry to prose, and states his belief that the former genre is far superior to the latter because 'more highly wrought still, more intense and shapely, communicating at more levels, and in consequence still more memorable.'<sup>14</sup> Because of the disciplined arrangement of material which the poetic genre necessitates, then, there is no room for superfluous detail which might blur or obscure the central message of the poem, and through this greater conciseness the identity of the poet becomes clearer both to the reader and also to the writer himself. One gains the impression that Brasch's poetry was almost a release for him, for poetic imagery enabled him to objectify his innermost life in a way that other, ostensibly more 'personal' modes of writing did not. In his essay entitled 'Conditions for Literature' he puts forward this view, speaking of the desire to objectify one's life experience taking 'possession of the poet and *forcing* him to objectify it in a poem, and so at the same time to make it as clear and real to himself as possible, and also to work it out of his system, and free himself from it.'<sup>15</sup>

As Brasch felt such a strong affinity with the natural world, not surprisingly landscape imagery became one of the main ways in which he objectified his own 'life experience' in his poetry. In his first two volumes, despite the obvious emphasis on the issue of national identity, there are hints too of the personal identity behind the work. This is largely apparent in Brasch's use of personal dedications, which preface poems of apparently

impersonal content. The dedication of his first volume *The Land and the People* is simply

to  
J.M.B.  
I.M.  
J.A.W.B.

and nothing more. It is only when equipped with autobiographical knowledge that we know these initials refer to three of his closest schoolfriends, James Bertram, Ian Milner, and Jack Bennett. There is no further reference to these friends, direct or indirect, throughout this volume, which deals principally with the general issues of man's relationship with the land. One could assume that these lasting friendships helped Brasch to feel at home in New Zealand, and contributed to the significance that this land had for him, (and proof of this is provided by his correspondence and by *Indirections*), but as far as actual textual evidence goes, this can only be conjecture.

This first volume is certainly the least personal of the six. There is one unusually direct poem entitled 'To Joy Scovell' (an English poet and friend of Brasch's) in which, interestingly, Brasch focuses on Scovell's reserved nature, which seems similar to his own:

... Light upon  
Your face illumines the inward parts, the locked  
Soul, and earth's dance and steadfastness. . .<sup>16</sup>

I feel, however, that there is a rather contrived feeling to this poem. The predominant tone is one of careful formality rather than of strong emotion, and without the visual focus of most of these early poems it has no great impact.

The longer piece 'Waianakarua' is the only other poem in *The Land and the People* which refers, albeit indirectly, to a personal relationship.<sup>17</sup> The title is followed by 'for W.', which Bertram, in his commentary on Brasch's work, informs us refers to Winsome Milner, the daughter of Brasch's headmaster at Waitaki.<sup>18</sup> Once again, like the majority of these poems, the success of this piece lies not with the expression of personal emotion but with the vividness of



its visual quality. Despite the use of personal pronouns, the main focus here is on the landscape of Waianakarua. The 'I' of the poem is not recognizably Brasch himself but the persona of a traveller in a train, whose imagination imbues the scene before him with personal significance. The second person here is never clearly identified as Winsome, and is only brought to mind by the features of the landscape which stir the traveller's memory:

... Only the thorn  
 Alone on the parched rise, inhuman matakauri  
 Dry-green and fibrous, sorrowing,  
 The gum-trees that offer their flower, their sweet fruit  
 Lightly to the bright and dangerous wind,  
 These only eloquent  
 Here at the entrance to your country stir  
 Among the falling years that drift my eyes. . .

This poem is, I feel, extremely significant in tracing the gradual introduction of a more personal element into Brasch's poetry, and his use of landscape imagery to both express and distance this personal element. The initial straightforward description of the scene from the train - the gum-trees, the cornfields, the glimpse of the 'startling far blue waves', and the distant hills of Oamaru - typifies the way that Brasch almost always bases his reflections in the physical realities of local landscape. Memories of this friendship, too, revolve around times spent out in this countryside; it is the scenery which first triggers the traveller's memory, and the recollections which follow remain based around the actuality of the landscape in front of him.

And so, pensive in the still train, I follow  
 Your footsteps on the flying tussock  
 And through the dry manuka thickets,  
 And feel your heart warm to the hilltop winds  
 Won by sea-tales and a mild despair;  
 With you pierce the underbrow caves, forcing the  
 creepers. . .

The continual reference to landscape here, and the use of it as a means of introducing personal themes, becomes characteristic of Brasch's later poetry; for me, this is the first successful piece which displays this technique.

Here, too, Brasch can be detected as beginning to blend human characteristics with those of the natural world, thus subtly implying the strong connections binding these two worlds.

Watch, but nothing here of you  
Speaks the inexpressive face  
The rough skin of your country.

There is no description of Winsome Milner at all, but Brasch's metaphors linking her to the countryside give her a kind of identity, as does the skilful selection of vocabulary. Words such as 'despair', 'sorrowing', 'sweet', 'bright', and 'dangerous' all refer to certain features of the landscape, but implicit in these descriptions of wind and trees is a suggestion of a specific human personality and a hint of tragedy. (In fact, as Bertram tells us, Winsome's life ended in an unhappy love affair and mental instability.) The poet's personal reflections lead naturally to the wider themes of transience and mortality, and again this is touched upon by means of landscape imagery, as the following simile shows;

Hearing the fall of years  
Soft and swift as the fall of leaves  
One-voiced and even as over stones the stream.

The poem concludes with the train resuming its journey, and here, too, there is a blending of visual reality and general contemplation, as the sight of the countryside slipping past the windows is likened to the passing of human years.

... the recollected train  
Moves on, past the landmarks, past the fallen years,  
The passing land, the lives.

Bertram notes that in 'Waianakarua' Brasch is trying out the technique of linking place, person, and memory, which he was to perfect in his third volume, *The Estate*.<sup>19</sup> This technique is further developed in the third section of *Disputed Ground*. After the middle section which consists of Brasch's European poems written from his experiences of World War II, this section returns to the

New Zealand landscape which was the focus of the opening poems of the volume. However, this landscape is now used, not to portray the general themes of the primal power of nature and the necessity of submission to this power, but to symbolize specific relationships important to the poet. The most obvious example of this is 'Waitaki Revisited', which is dedicated to James Bertram.<sup>20</sup>

Once again, there is no direct mention in the text of the person to whom the poem is dedicated, yet clearly Brasch associates this landscape with the memory of his closest school friend, who shared with him 'the unsuspecting air of boyhood.' Like 'Waiakarua' in the previous volume, the setting of this poem is firmly established before more abstract thought is embarked upon. The 'drifting fields' and the 'white foam-fronds' of the shoreline are described with characteristic accuracy, and Brasch builds upon these solid foundations of actuality.

Again the actual landscape lying before the poet holds memories which lead to the central theme of the poem: 'every shape here, hollow and tree, / Tells of a nameless encounter...'. The landscape comes to symbolize the passage from youth to adulthood, with its attendant perils (in fact, Brasch actually uses the metaphor of gales traversing and disturbing the 'landscape of youth'). The playing fields of the school, then, become representative of the stable and falsely secure 'realm of the young.' Beyond these fields are 'whispering thickets of ardours, ordeals, betrayals' which are the reality of an adult awareness. The darkness of the future in store for the schoolboys Brasch beholds, who remind him of himself and Bertram, is implied by the threatening aspect of the landscape surrounding the sunny fields of Waitaki Boys' High School:

... The waves  
Sullenly lunge at the yellow

Edge of the land's low terrace, where only a broken  
Formation of taciturn salt-stung macrocarpas

Binds the poor clay, in narrow corridors arched,  
Precarious refuge of night,

And in that rearguard of trees all bounds are doomed.

The cold indifference of the landscape surrounding the school is also used as a contrast to the pettiness of human existence. It forces the individual to examine and condemn his own failings:

... the watcher can only see to cold Cape Wanbrow,  
To the tall questioning trees that crowd on Buckley's  
And like an accuser prick him, self-distrustful,  
To search his need and motives,

And the daily jealous life claims every thought.

Although the physical aspects of land and seascape become metaphors for the harsh realities of human life, however, it is also through these realities that Brasch reaches the position of acceptance with which the poem concludes. The very permanence and strength of the land, although emphasizing human frailty, also makes the individual's essential solitude more bearable by placing it in a larger framework.

The other two poems in *Disputed Ground* which bear personal dedications are the opening poem of the volume, simply entitled "To C.H. Roberts"<sup>21</sup>, and the piece "In Memory of Robin Hyde 1906-39"<sup>22</sup>. The former is dedicated to an Oxford friend of Brasch's, through whom Brasch initially became interested in working in Egypt and with whom he worked at the London Foreign Office during the war. This is not one of the poems in which Brasch links a personal relationship with a specific location, but it does show the way that he frequently expressed human existence in terms of the physical, natural world. Speaking of himself and Roberts (and, by implication, of all human beings), Brasch writes:

... we are that mortal ground  
The spiritual and temporal powers dispute. . .

Similar imagery is used in the other poem mentioned above, written about the suicide of Brasch's fellow poet and friend, Iris Wilkinson, who wrote under the pseudonym of Robin Hyde. In fact almost exactly the same image is used -

that of human life in general, and Hyde's in particular, being like a meeting ground of conflicting forces, the enduring power of the imagination and the spirit opposing the darker forces of mortality. Brasch actually extends this metaphor now, portraying Hyde's journey through life as if through a perilous landscape (and the very title of the volume is drawn from this image):

By choice you stood always on disputed ground  
 At the utmost edge of life,  
 Gazing into the firepit of disintegration  
 Whose lavas threaten our small inherited fields,  
 Whose poisoned fumes and ash of disbelief  
 Unnerve the quick blood and becloud our vision.

The volcanic nature of the land he paints for the reader is quite probably drawn from his observation of the scenery of the North Island, and one is reminded of the poem 'A View of Rangitoto' earlier in this volume, where the mountain belongs to a similar fierce world of fire. The insidious powers of such a landscape are shown to undermine any certainty we may believe to exist in our lives. The 'small inherited fields' of history and tradition painstakingly cultivated over centuries of human life cannot endure against the vast and threatening forces surrounding them. Even in a short phrase Brasch has the ability to create a clear visual effect which remains in the mind of the reader. Here, for example, he refers to the suicides of a fellow teacher, Mark Gertler, and the German dramatist Toller, and describes Hyde's and their deaths as 'harvests of the hapless' falling before the forces of 'disease, hysteria, despair'.<sup>10</sup> This metaphor is slight but extremely effective.

Because of the visual imagery throughout the poem, then, Brasch's portrayal of Hyde's life and her precarious state of mental health is one of considerable clarity and impact. Undoubtedly he excels in writing of this sort which begins with the visual and which uses natural detail to symbolize less tangible subject matter. Despite the incisive vision which Brasch displays in this respect, however, he appears to be less direct when dealing with the human element of his work. Even in these poems which purpose to deal with personal

relationships, there remains the slight feeling of reserve and impersonality which is more obviously present in his autobiography. Almost all the references to Robin Hyde in *Indirections* are noticeably dispassionate. Whilst staying with Brasch at 'Bishop's Barn' on the Wiltshire downs, Hyde appears to have attempted to initiate a more intimate relationship with him. Characteristically he does not elaborate on this, but the little he does say is coldly matter-of-fact, as he states: 'physically she repelled me; I could not respond more than in friendship.'<sup>23</sup> After witnessing Hyde's self-inflicted injuries as a reaction to this rejection, Brasch merely writes:

I wondered. . . if in this case at least she had cut herself to impress and frighten me. Luckily I was able to appear cool.<sup>24</sup>

And his response to the news of her suicide several months later appears to have been equally unemotional:

I felt some remorse that I had not done more for her. . . It seemed as well that she had escaped the war, in her state of mind; but no, that was too meanly prudential a thought - however neurotic, she ought to be alive, experiencing, writing; she had gifts of value to the world; her death was an appalling waste.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to notice here that Brasch sees the death of a friend, not so much as a personal loss, but as a loss to the cultural world.

Again I feel that the coolness and reserve apparent here, which are also a characteristic of most of his poetry, are partly due to Brasch's own intensely private nature, of which only a small part is revealed in his work, and partly to a conscious decision to maintain some objectivity in his writing. 'In Memory of Robin Hyde' displays little compassion, instead containing what seems to be an assumption that Hyde actually chose to live the life she did, tempting death 'defiantly.' Brasch obviously sees the avoidance of personal conflict and a deliberate distancing of oneself from the darker side of reality as a better mode of living:

. . . you would not turn away to happiness  
In distance and memory where life can be refined.<sup>26</sup>

In his own life, Brasch appears to have maintained a kind of protective wall of personal reserve around himself, further strengthened by the 'cocoon of books and paintings' which Oliver mentions in his personal tribute to the poet.<sup>27</sup> In his poetry it is still easier to preserve his distance as he does in these early poems, becoming the 'genuinely missing no-man' as he described himself in a later work.<sup>28</sup> This he does by directing the attention away from himself as a poet (not even, in the greater part of the first two volumes, creating a persona) to an external focus - that of the natural world. The result is poetry which has a remarkable directness in the pictures it creates, yet little direct exposure of the artist behind the visual facade.

This is particularly the case in Brasch's first two volumes; in his later poetry he states, 'Getting older, I grow more personal...'<sup>29</sup>. His use of landscape to symbolize and objectify the 'landscape of the heart'<sup>30</sup> is very successful in creating poetry of great visual clarity. 'Tryst by Water', for example, shows Brasch at his best in using images of the natural world to portray an intensely personal relationship.

Within your white torrential arms  
Wakes the tumult and the wonder,  
Stillness and evening of our loving.

Soundless leaps the secret, reckless  
Fire between marble bodies lit  
And rounded by your whirling snow.

And darkness after fire; the silence  
Flowering where love lies at rest  
Among the dolphin-play of waters.<sup>31</sup>

Yet despite the poetic skill displayed in the extension of metaphor, and the strikingly unexpected images such as 'white torrential arms' and 'the silence / Flowering', I feel that there is a dislocation between subject and expression here which is disconcerting. The remote quality of this piece and the formality of tone seem oddly at variance with the personal subject matter, and this is the case with many of Brasch's earlier poems. At times the lack of warmth and

'human' content in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* can become frustrating. After reading the poems mentioned earlier in which Brasch links an individual to a specific time and place, one is left somewhat dissatisfied, for the content of such poems is ostensibly as impersonal and general as those dealing with the theme of national identity. Such poems as 'Waitaki Revisited' and 'Waianakarua' are entirely successful on one level, in their vivid portrayal of certain landscapes, and in the way that these landscapes become vehicles for general contemplation. But occasionally one feels that the landscape is focused on to the exclusion of any personal element. Brasch's intention expressed in 'Conditions for Literature', of objectifying his 'life experience' through external details, is perhaps altogether too successfully executed. Although these details may enable his innermost thoughts and his feelings about personal relationships to become more 'clear and real' to himself, by and large they remain obscure to the reader.

Brasch's editorial practices reveal the way in which he preferred to avoid poetry which he saw as excessively self-revelatory, for he tended to select work of a visual and descriptive nature in which very personal material was carefully monitored. John Geraets makes mention of this tendency in his Ph.D. thesis on Brasch's editorship of *Landfall*, stating that 'Extremely personal poems. . . were regarded with caution.' He uses as an example Alistair Campbell's submission of five 'Personal Sonnets' to *Landfall* in 1960; Brasch returned these commenting that the poems were very 'moving' but 'extremely personal', and suggesting that Campbell might therefore 'want to work on them here or there. . .'. On hearing the sonnets at a poetry reading in the following year, Brasch confided to Bertram, 'Their immediacy and nakedness made a strong painful impact on me as I listened to them; hitherto, I've thought them too raw to print, but wonder if I was wrong.' He was similarly dubious about some of Baxter's work, writing to the younger Otago poet in December of 1960:



If I may say so, you allow too many [personal] poems which aren't more than that to see the light, and this tends to debase your currency, and to exhaust readers' sympathy - which I hear said from time to time.<sup>32</sup>

For its first two decades, then, *Landfall* clearly reflects the nature of its editor. The predominant emphasis, particularly for the first decade from 1940 to 1950, is on landscape poetry, and poetry of a certain impersonality - significant traits of Brasch's own work leading up to and during this time. Clearly, from the comment to Baxter quoted above, Brasch saw poetry of an intensely private nature as being somewhat inaccessible to the reader, which is admittedly a justifiable claim up to a point. His own vivid landscape writing is readily identifiable with when accepted solely on this level. Yet in his first two volumes when he does occasionally briefly introduce details of his own personal history, his desire for objectivity above all things can lead to obscurity on this more personal level. At times the connection between impersonal and personal material is not made sufficiently clear to the reader, and the remoteness of tone is disconcerting when one realizes that he is referring to some of his closest friends. In these cases the cool impartiality achieved through a focus on visual detail precludes the emotion one would expect to be attendant in personal reminiscences. (Curiously, such a lack of 'passion' was something Brasch deplored in Eliot's poetry, the presence of which in Yeats's work he saw as the mark of a 'great poet.'<sup>33</sup>) Thus, although accessibility to Brasch's landscape poetry may be immediate due to his unerring eye for detail and his ability to paint colourful word pictures for his reader, when looking beyond this for a more human element one often feels as if one is searching in vain, for the private matter hinted at is known only to the poet.

The opening of 'To. C.H. Roberts' is significant for, although this tribute is to a friend described in *Indirections* as being like 'an older brother, deeply loved and looked up to'<sup>34</sup>, Brasch's dislike of making personal emotion too explicit is characteristically in evidence. In the absence of a specific

location or landscape to symbolize Roberts's characteristics and his importance to Brasch, the only refuge from direct self-revelation is 'silence' or the borrowing of words from one of the great masters of poetry:

I set your name upon the page, but have no  
 Words to express what silence best perhaps can say,  
 Unless I borrow Dante's to the shades  
 Of mount and ditch - *cosi com' io t'amai* . . .  
*m'insegnavate come* . . .<sup>35</sup>

Without an objectifying visual focus, this testimony is indeed, as Brasch admits, 'oblique'.

AN INCREASE IN HUMAN CONTENT: 'THE ESTATE'

*Once I thought the land I had loved and known  
 Lay curled in my inmost self. . .  
 But now I know it is I who exist in the land. . .*

- Ruth Dallas

The difficulty for Brasch, then was to find a way of expressing what Bertram describes as his 'intense commitment to personal friendships'<sup>36</sup> more naturally and openly, while still maintaining the strength of vision of the landscape writing at which he excelled. I feel that he finally achieved this balance in his third volume, *The Estate and other poems*, which was published in 1957. Despite the interlude of nine years between *Disputed Ground* and this volume, the same themes remain in evidence: those of flux, endurance, the power of nature, and the 'unassailable solitude'<sup>37</sup> of the individual. The title of both the volume itself and the lengthy poem from which it draws its name is evidence enough that the preoccupation with land still remains. Once again description focuses on the New Zealand countryside, and once again Brasch's poetic use of the land operates on a double level: it portrays both a landscape of exterior reality and the interior, and equally real, 'landscape of the heart.'

Whereas the emphasis in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* was primarily on the physical aspects of the land, however, with 'man' a shadowy representative of the human race in general, now the human figures inhabiting this landscape are brought into focus and given specific personal identities. Basically *The Estate* represents a marked increase in the human content in Brasch's writing. The visual element is still typically strong, the images of nature as vividly drawn as ever, but now straight descriptive passages are few and landscape is used almost exclusively to deal with the directly personal theme of friendship, love, and death.

The theme of friendship in particular is most fully dealt with in the title poem 'The Estate.' A long piece written between 1948 and 1952, it is divided into thirty-two sections, all of differing metres and lengths. Returning to New Zealand after the war, Brasch was struck afresh by the wild beauty of the country, but he observed that 'most people's view hardly strayed beyond their own street and that they had forgotten the sea and mountains almost at the end of the street.'<sup>38</sup> The other example of New Zealanders' indifference that he noticed on his return was the way they related to each other, which again was in sharp contrast to Brasch's own private creed:

And people, it seemed to me, treated each other like features of the landscape. They were still so few that friendship, as I observed it, seemed a low-grade familiarity which had hardly reached the distinctively human level; it had neither depth nor form, it seemed not to be discriminate at all. Men clung together for mere animal warmth in this empty country where the landscape did not speak. But friendship (I thought) is not a fact of nature, and it has nothing to do with democracy. It is an art of the spirit, it requires cultivation, it is defined by, and contains, silences which express its human finiteness and are at the same time an acknowledgement of the more than human.<sup>39</sup>

The way in which Brasch almost spiritualizes human relationships here is similar, I feel, to the views he puts forward in both autobiography and poetry on landscape. Friendship in its highest form, and nature at its most beautiful, alike

held for him both reminders of the brevity of human life and intimations of eternity. 'The Estate' appears to me to be a celebration of both human and natural worlds, and all that they entail, and the distribution of the poetic emphasis on each world is far more balanced than in either *The Land and the People* or *Disputed Ground*.

Bertram describes the subject of this poem as being 'the new territory the poet has inherited since his return to New Zealand - the old much-loved physical environment, humanized and enlarged in spiritual potential by a growing circle of close friendships. . .'<sup>40</sup>. In this poem Brasch does appear to feel more at home in this land than ever before, and this is undoubtedly partly due to the wide circle of friends and acquaintances he now had throughout the country, particularly in artistic and literary circles. The third section of this poem contains references to several of these friends, the identities of whom are made fairly obvious although, in Brasch's characteristically impersonal style, they are not actually mentioned by name. Bertram, in his comprehensive study of Brasch's work, identifies them as painter Colin McCahon, pacifist Noel Ginn, writer G.R. Gilbert and his wife, and composer Douglas Lilburn.<sup>41</sup> Appearing at first sight to represent a diverse range of occupations, these people nonetheless share two things in common, in so far as they are related to Brasch. First, as mentioned above, they all contribute to the new feeling of establishment which Brasch displays in this poem. More importantly perhaps, when regarding the strong links between nature and friendship present in this poem, they all have some connection with the land, and through these various connections will influence future New Zealanders, thus benefiting both human and natural worlds.

McCahon, well-known for the way in which he used details of landscape symbolically to portray religious themes in his paintings, is shown as interpreting the land and human relationships (both with their environment and with each other) in a bold innovative way. In the December issue of

*Landfall* in 1950, Brasch wrote of McCahon that he was the first painter to express 'the local nature of his truth by setting his figures in a New Zealand landscape.'<sup>42</sup> Now, in this poetic mode, McCahon is described as:

... that painter, contracted to pity,  
 Who first laid bare in its offended harshness  
 The act of our life in this land, expressed the perpetual  
 Crucifixion of man by man that each must answer,  
 Rendered in naked light the land's nakedness  
 That no one before had seen or seeing dared to  
 publish. . .<sup>43</sup>

The next referred to is Noel Ginn, 'he who meditates under the green escarpments / that bound Wanganui.' His association with the land is rather more direct and manual than McCahon's, for Bertram informs us that Ginn worked in a plant nursery. Not only does he enhance the land, constructing gardens of beauty out of 'his rank rough acres', but Brasch prophesies that these gardens will serve to 'cleanse and sweeten the muddied life-stream / of trivial daily existence.' The vineyards and olive groves planted by the Gilberts in Central Otago will similarly benefit the future of both the land itself and its inhabitants:

... They too who are planting  
 Deep in desert Otago Athenian olive,  
 Virgilian vine, pledges perhaps of a future  
 Milder and sweeter to mellow blunt hard natures  
 Of farmer and rabbitier, driver, storekeeper, orchardman,  
 With usage of wine and oil from gorge and vineyard  
 Shading stony terraces, naked gorges  
 Scourged now by frost and fire, no human country.

Of those referred to in this section, Lilburn perhaps has the least tangible connection with the land. Yet Brasch views this composer and his music as interpreting a new country, incomprehensible to most, for those around him, as mediating between the 'forced listener' and the 'virgin-moded / Tongues of these airy latitudes.' In the way that they either enhance the land or make it more accessible to others, then, these friends of Brasch's are portrayed as

ameliorating the relationship between New Zealanders, present and future, and their country.

Later in 'The Estate', in section xviii, another of Brasch's friends is described, introduced only by the lines 'I think of one who stood, our world's apprentice / In silence learning to grow...'<sup>44</sup> but clearly recognizable as the poet Ursula Bethell. She, too, as a keen gardener and sharp-eyed observer of natural detail, had an affinity with the land, and this is reflected in much of her writing which, like Brasch's, is based in the concrete reality of her own surroundings. Almost all of this section consists of extended landscape metaphors, as Brasch traces the links between Bethell's varied talents. Her love of nature, her social conscience and her gift for writing - all are closely interwoven in this section of 'The Estate' by images of sowing seed and promoting new life and growth. Brasch compares the ways in which Bethell improved the quality of others' lives, first by her social and religious work within the English Anglican community, and then, after her final return to New Zealand in 1919, by her poetry. Both aspects are described in terms of one of Bethell's favourite pastimes, gardening:

She had sought early, a gardener by nature,  
The lives of metropolitan yard and tenement  
That, starved of soil for soul and body, might answer  
Her care, putting forth leaves, becoming established,  
Human with blossom and fruit.  
And later on a hillside, with one companion,  
She planted different seed, the unaccountable  
Unseasonable word, that in its summer  
And winter too bore richly, proving all weather  
Salutary to growth.

Her gift for the cultivation of the land, made visible in the creation of her 'high garden' on Christchurch's Cashmere hills, is likened to her gift for cultivating friendships, a comparison which emphasizes the connection Brasch makes in this poem between human relationships and the natural world. Particularly in her later years, Bethell had a profound intellectual influence over many younger writers, described by Brasch elsewhere as 'the gifted and

ardent young'<sup>45</sup>, and they are depicted here as 'fluttering' towards her and forming a 'star-garden' about her. These younger writers, Brasch states, presented to Bethell 'talents needier than she had imagined / Nature could ever be.' The section concludes with Bethell's death, related by one final landscape metaphor:

... [she] bent her way again to the resolving  
 Grave, all loss; a leaf in that unnumbered  
 Forest where dead and living never parted  
 Yield life to life through the mountainous ages  
 And the wind blows and is still.

It is probably because of the deep friendships Brasch gradually established in New Zealand, which made him feel more at home here, that the landscapes he now includes in his poetry are no longer threatening. There is little or no emphasis in 'The Estate' on the hostility of the New Zealand landscape, although it still holds that 'gathered and suspended power' so infinitely greater than man's.<sup>46</sup> In fact, some sections of this poem centre around the domestic landscape of the poet's own garden, that of the Dorset Street flat in Christchurch which he shared with Harry Scott in the summer of 1947-1948. There is a feeling of contentment about the descriptions of this garden which is far removed from the restless and desolate tone of Brasch's earlier poetry, where he was dealing with nature on a larger scale; here at least, in this miniature world, there is a momentary peace to be found. Such a calm quietness is particularly evident in section vii:

Green is the apple garden  
 And deep the summer shade  
 For dreaming or day-dreaming -  
 Lay down, lay down your head.

Here all earth's harvests ripen  
 With apple and with rose,  
 Dead ages and their wisdom  
 A trance of time restores;

And we, as in recollection  
 Rise in our walled demes ne  
 To act the world's unfolding,  
 Dance out the dream of man.<sup>54</sup>

Here there is the movement so characteristic of Brasch's work, from a visual focus, to the significance that this natural scene holds for him, and finally to a general contemplation of the human condition. Clearly whether the scene before him is the rugged wildness of the Southern Alps or the calm serenity of an apple orchard, for Brasch nature symbolizes permanence and the constant cycle of new life. Yet now, rather than this emphasizing the transience and frailty of mortal life, the natural world offers a promise of redemption, a hint that Eliot's 'intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after'<sup>48</sup> can in fact be experienced and through this a vision of eternity gained. And now, too, man has his own 'demesne' or walled estate, a place of his own which holds the vast external world at bay. The epigraph from Hölderlin which prefaces this poem refers to the intense human desire to have some 'estate' of one's own, in order to attain a sense of establishment amidst the transience of life:

... haben die Sterblichen denn  
kein Eignes nirgendwo?

... have mortals then  
nothing that is their own, not anywhere?<sup>49</sup>

This sense of security may be illusion or 'the dream of man'<sup>50</sup>, but at least it allows mankind to momentarily glimpse the enduring quality of nature, unlike the homeless alienated race portrayed in 'The Islands': '... distance looks our way / And none knows where he will lie down at night.'<sup>51</sup>

The 'glare of light' and 'shudder of heat'<sup>52</sup> of the merciless landscape featured in Brasch's earlier poems, then, in 'The Estate' become transformed into the kindlier 'warm and drowsy light' of sunshine through french windows.<sup>53</sup> The waterless hills and grim volcanic mountains are replaced by the lawn and trees of a smaller and more intimate landscape, which nonetheless holds the same implicit knowledge of life and death, permanence and transience:

Cool undertone of leaves lifted and fretted  
On wandering airs, and that of all sounds peaceful  
The happiest - the engrossed, ecstatic murmur



Of bees and sunbeam flies endlessly intoning  
 All summer swam and in all air our years were wafted  
 Through life and death breathed in the pulsing curtains.

Just as elsewhere in this poem Brasch links various friends with certain parts of New Zealand, he also introduces a personal connection into his contemplation of this domestic scene. His descriptions of this 'home and kingdom'<sup>54</sup> become, not surprisingly, associated with Harry Scott, to whom this title poem is dedicated. Scott - lecturer in psychology, mountaineer, and himself a major contributor to many early issues of *Landfall* - becomes the personal centre of this poem, and the 'sunlit haven' of his and Brasch's shared garden becomes the physical centre of the poet's world, as is particularly evident in section vi. Here again Brasch's desire to maintain some distance between himself and the harshness of reality, which his honesty of vision would not permit him to ignore, becomes apparent. Returning to Manono in 1946, during his grandfather's illness, he found that the familiar surroundings gave him the physical and emotional sanctuary that he craved:

In its shelter I was able to breathe and, I found, to work;  
 it was my rock and fortress. The garden secured my  
 peace, holding the town at bay. . .<sup>55</sup>

Just over a year later, he was to find the same sense of security at No. 1, Dorset St. - the same sense (although he knew it was illusory) of invulnerability, of being set apart from a surrounding wilderness.

The grim realities of mortality and the indifference of the natural world were symbolized in Brasch's early poems by forbidding and pitiless terrain. Now, in section vi of 'The Estate', this tamer landscape of wall and garden, roses and fruit trees, becomes equally symbolic, as a place representative of refuge and peace:

. . . And wall and garden  
 - Peach, apple, rose, camellia - seem symbolic,  
 Precinct, *hortus conclusus*, soul's citadel  
 For quiet and contemplation. . .

Here Brasch can hear 'the world surge past' but can remain 'still and private', physically sheltered by the walls of his domain and spiritually and emotionally protected by the friendship he finds within these walls.

The expression of his relationship with Scott, obviously one of the deepest friendships he experienced in his lifetime, is the ultimate example of Brasch imbuing a physical location with personal significance, and also shows the beginning of a more self-revelatory style of writing. Most of the sections in this poem deal in some way with the influence of this friendship on Brasch, and from these thoughts naturally extend to meditations on mankind in general, and their relations with each other. The theme of loneliness and man's isolation, touched upon in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, become more explicitly stated here, but there is also a note of hope occasionally sounded. Brasch describes personal identity as 'that empire where I am absolute and friendless / In unassailable solitude'<sup>56</sup>, and laments this inescapable self-exile. Yet this sense of loneliness can be alleviated and made bearable, he implies, by human friendship, for it is through this that one realizes that exile is a condition shared by all, and comfort is gained from this realization.

In section xix, for example, he states:

Alone together let us go  
Through this day and land we know. . .<sup>57</sup>

and in section xxv, he expands this train of thought:

. . . Only when summoned outward,  
Driven by the needy self from its last refuge,  
Do we encounter and prove and find another,  
And torn up from our solitary caverns  
Breathe the world's air and learn beyond conjecture  
That we are needed, we too, that man is always  
Alone with others, not with himself only,  
Because both he and they move towards each other  
Required without rest to seek the terra firma  
Of those who share his desperate craft of being.<sup>58</sup>

While these themes remain constant throughout 'The Estate', the way in which they are presented varies widely between sections. This poem represents

an advance in Brasch's style towards a much more direct poetry, with greater personal and human content. In some places personal emotion is expressed through visual detail; the 'landscapes of being'<sup>59</sup> which Brasch is attempting to describe are projected by means of links to external landscapes, and this is a gradual and natural development from his earlier descriptive writing. Yet there are some sections also in which Brasch abandons this external focus completely, turning instead to philosophical meditation which is entirely unillustrated by concrete detail. These are surely the sections which Kendrick Smithyman refers to in his 1957 review of *The Estate*, when he says that Brasch's 'deep feeling gets the better of his poetic discretion much too often, and the relationship as set forth is a wordy adolescent crush, got up in a deal of talk about 'Life' and what seems to be a strongly Germanic romanticism. . .'<sup>60</sup>.

Certainly at times this charge of wordiness is justified. In the passages expressing the admiration and love Brasch felt for Scott and his conviction of the importance of friendship as a bridge between isolated individuals, his writing loses its usual lucidity. Section x demonstrates this:

Yet would we wish or even wish it possible  
 To fuse identities, drowning in one another  
 In some extreme inconceivable symbiosis,  
 Losing knowledge of self and of one another,  
 Losing desire and lost to satisfaction  
 In dull insentience of stillness, even memory  
 Failing at our world's cold centre? Never  
 Hear more the voice or see the face we look for  
 In this unpredictable, this fertile, never-to-be-finished  
 Dialogue of days and lives?<sup>61</sup>

The repetition and lack of direction in such sections of abstract philosophizing, while in part illustrating Brasch's view of his own identity as a 'vacillating light'<sup>62</sup>, blurs and detracts from the genuine emotion behind the verse:

. . .I shall never know you completely,  
 You who come to me out of your past and your  
     difference,  
 Launched, in all your powers living and growing

Daily and hourly, growing with me, growing away from  
 me  
 As I too with you and from you: seasons and places  
 Shall find us alone, or with others, but not with each  
 other.  
 Partial then; yes, but sufficient; is love not sufficient?<sup>63</sup>

The desire for truthful self-expression here is obvious, and admirable - yet without some external anchor, something more concrete than personal emotion, Brasch's writing in such passages seems to drift rather aimlessly. Moreover, he is perhaps laying himself open to the charge of inaccessibility of which he himself accused Baxter, for at times 'Harry's poem'<sup>64</sup> is no more than a personal tribute to a very private friendship, and this may indeed tend to 'exhaust readers' sympathy.' This is true not only of the first section, quoted above, but of several others - of section viii, for example, in which Brasch recalls a private moment, clearly of some significance to him. Although for him this moment may remain 'sharp in memory's crystal', however, it is unexplained and thus meaningless for the reader:

How through your eyes one morning gazed unguarded  
 The desolate spirit far out of human encounter  
 Passed beyond grief and love, how laughter caught you  
 And as in a swift lighthouse beam illumined  
 Clear brow and curling hair.<sup>65</sup>

Such uncharacteristically personal writing also verges on the effusive, and one feels at times that it loses touch with reality. In section xxii, for example, meeting Scott at the end of a day Brasch describes him as 'although familiar / Fresh, dewed with surprises', and as 'the inconceivable / Guest out of nowhere suddenly fiery and singing / Before me, midnight word of transfiguration.'<sup>66</sup> The elevated language here raises this friendship, albeit undoubtedly intense, to an idealized and unrealistic level, and one which the reader simply cannot identify with (a result which one feels Brasch himself might have foreseen, aware as he was of the isolation of experience).

C.K. Stead also reviewed *The Estate* in 1957, for the September edition of *Landfall*. While not condemning the title poem as roundly as Smithyman did,

he makes the valid statement that some sections of this work remain 'shadows in a private world', due to Brasch's 'refusal at times to consider the obscurity that results in poetry which is more concerned with being faithful to an experience than with getting itself over the fence into the world where it must live.'<sup>67</sup> The times that Brasch does succeed in transmuting what is essentially a private experience into generally accessible terms are, I feel, the times when he firmly establishes his writing in the visual reality of the world on the other side of Stead's 'fence'. The nature of Brasch's friendship with Scott is far more convincingly projected through the medium of external detail than through abstract idealization and high-flown language.

Once again, section vi exemplifies this, as Brasch successfully fuses internal and external worlds. His description of the garden naturally blends with thoughts of the man whom he shares this home with:

So I shall think of you in this sunlit haven  
 Long after it has lost the warmth you lent it,  
 See you as now watching clouds mount darkly  
 Above the ominous arch of the norwester  
 Or sunlight silver thinly on winter mornings  
 Walnut and oak two gardens away, and hear you  
 In talk or song or laughter, your eyes eager  
 And nostrils full with the sense of life. . .<sup>68</sup>

The vivid images conjured up here, of the nor'west arch so typical of Canterbury skies and the slanting winter sunlight on trees, display Brasch's great skill at descriptive landscape writing. More importantly, the visual focus provided by these details enables him to objectify intense inner emotion, so that his writing regains its visual clarity and his feelings are simply yet strongly expressed.

Another side of Scott, that of the mountaineer, is similarly and equally effectively expressed through a link with landscape, although of a very different nature from the domestic garden scene. In sections xxiv and xxxiv, Brasch turns once more to the rugged scenery of the New Zealand mountains, and his meditations on the potential of human nature are channelled, and thus

clarified, through this external focus. Scott is still implicitly included here, as the person Brasch addresses in section xxiv and as his companion on a mountain journey in the last section of the poem.

In the former section, one can detect an underlying admiration for the physical and mental courage of a man who confronts the 'white inquisitors' and approaches the perilous threshold between life and death, ignorance and self-knowledge. The emotion here is not forced or over-emphasized, however, but merely grows naturally out of a contemplation of Scott's climbing activities. The presences of Brasch and Scott within the poem are similarly unobtrusive, for Brasch structures this piece in two parts; the first stanza phrases his own questions to Scott, and the second is Scott's reply.

The poet asks:

What have you seen on the summits, the peaks that  
 plunge  
 Icy heads into space? What draws you trembling  
 To blind altars of rock where man cannot linger  
 Even in death, where body grows light, and vision  
 Ranging those uninhabitable stations  
 Dazzled and emulous among the range of summoning  
 Shadows and clouds, may lead you in an instant  
 Out from all footing? What thread of music, what word  
 in  
 That frozen silence that drowns the noise of our living?<sup>69</sup>

The answering stanza suggests both Scott's personal outlook on life and, as a natural extension of this, phrases<sup>a</sup> general statement on mortal existence. Brasch's interests in art and man's creative ability, and in the definition of identity (so obvious in his prose writings), become evident here, as he naturally progresses from a description of the power of Scott's mountains to a contemplation of human life:

What is life, you answer,  
 But to extend life, press its limits further  
 Into the uncolonized nothing we must prey on  
 For every hard-won thought, all new creation  
 Of stone bronze music words; only at life's limit  
 Can man reach through necessity and custom  
 And move self by self into the province  
 Of that unrealized nature that awaits him,

His own to enter. . .

This section of 'The Estate' shows Brasch skilfully blending universal questions and his own 'real life' experience by means of landscape metaphor. The 'quivering climate' of the mountain ranges represents for him both ultimate self-fulfillment and pain, promises both 'new creation' and 'annihilation'. The visual and symbolic focus on the dual nature of the mountains is not new in Brasch's poetry, but the way in which he successfully broadens this focus to incorporate a more personal element into his work represents a significant development from his first two volumes.

Section xxxiv is perhaps the most successful part of the entire poem, for not only is it highly memorable in its visual imagery alone, it also conclusively sums up Brasch's deepest convictions through this imagery. The section centres around a 'summer journey' through 'mountain kingdoms' undertaken by two friends, and while the predominantly visual focus maintains a satisfying objectivity, this personal background adds a touch of warmth to the passage. As in his earlier 'native' works, Brasch begins with straightforward visual description rather than with abstract thought. Now, however, the peaks are no longer the symbolic mountains of 'The Land and the People' but are identified by name. Likewise, the human element is included not by a general reference to mankind or by the all-embracing pronoun 'you' used in the first two volumes, but by the description of two companions, clearly Brasch and Scott, introduced by the inclusive personal pronoun 'we.'

The section begins, then, by identifying both physical setting and principal figures:

Mountain midsummer; the sun's bright burning-glass  
 Hovering westward over the peaks of the Darrans,  
 High yet in heaven; the snow-touched airs are still;  
 And we warm in our glade under rough mossed beeches  
 And frail-haired webs of lichen bleaching with age,  
 The lake silent, white the eastern passes.  
 We lie content at day's end, labour's end,  
 Quiet for thought or sleep. . .<sup>70</sup>

The images of this Fiordland scene are beautifully and accurately evoked, and, although Brash moves into general meditation, he retains this visual focus throughout the piece, relating all thoughts back to the physical reality of his surroundings. Once again he comments on the inability of words to conjure up deeply felt emotion, but, whereas in his dedication to C.H. Roberts in *Disputed Ground* he feels he can communicate only through silence or the words of others, here he turns to nature as being best able to express all that he is and feels:

... what can speech tell us  
 Here where all communication is  
 By silence, or by look or sign, or is given  
 As out of the motionless forest a small cry comes  
 Distantly, the soft rainbird's, that seems to echo  
 Some thought we could never utter, never frame. . .

Just as a small bird cry, or even silence, is adequate to attain true understanding in this world, so too are the screams of the keas hovering over the forest:

What more can speech tell than with raucous vowels  
 They hurl in missile messages from rock  
 To rock across the gorges. . .

Words, Brash tell us, can at best offer 'an eye for us to see through', and this is precisely what his writing here is successful in achieving. Through his vivid images of landscape, he creates a world which we can enter to see momentarily that which he sees, and thus his abstract views on life are made both immediate and memorable. His account of the journey through forest, passes, and valleys, is not cluttered by symbolic connotations but simply paints a word picture which remains in the mind of the reader. We see with Brash and Scott the 'trees vaulting / Vast ruined courts of space rent from the sky' and the deer 'plunging / Deep into forest gloom'; we share with them the sight of 'soundless mountain bells and lilies shaken / And cool everlastings wakeful under eaves / Of moss. . .<sup>74</sup>. Only when this setting is firmly established does



Brasch once more embark upon abstract concepts, ensuring continuity by still clothing these thoughts in landscape imagery:

... how often even in our own lives  
 Do we - stumbling towards death in blind impatience -  
 Live from the pure spring of life, the stream  
 That feeding all action flows beneath unhurried;  
 Now in a dream, now in an aimless pause  
 At evening, or overheard through the gales of autumn,  
 Speaking to us in a language we have not cared  
 To learn, and we are caught up, troubled, reminded,  
 And feel its current throbbing far, far beyond  
 The shallows of our day.

The final verse of section xxxiv returns to a description of the summer evening, firmly establishing the piece as a whole in concrete reality, and providing a base for Brasch's concluding thoughts. As in his two earlier volumes, he expresses his belief in the strength and endurance of the natural world, which stands as an exemplar for human life. Yet now, in his more personal style, he directly states this idea rather than merely implying it through symbolism. Moreover, rather than nature's power being portrayed as something mankind can only aspire to, the strength is now within ourselves, discovered by this communion with nature:

Clear through dusk the waters  
 Fall in the forest; now the first dews come  
 With the first star: stillness: and unextinguished  
 The peaks float, dark in the transparent west.  
 Can we preserve till morning, for many a morning,  
 Making it ours through day and night and year,  
 This strength, this ripeness of heart by all earth's powers  
 Confirmed, by crystal air, transfiguring snow,  
 All that we know, all that we are, unfading?

In his literal journey through the mountainous landscape, which he likens to the journey through life, Brasch finds on this summer night a sense of belonging to the natural world. He feels at one with 'all that breathes', and describes himself and his companion as being 'singly, divided / Without isolation' - a phrase which is very similar to those used earlier in 'The Estate', where he speaks of being 'Alone together.' The calm instilled in him by nature

seems to be a sublime version of the peace and happiness he gains through human friendship, which also acts like a bridge spanning the gulf between the inevitably solitary self and the surrounding world.

It is not only in this section that Brasch deals with his sense of companionship within both human and natural worlds. He turns to this theme elsewhere in 'The Estate', again using predominantly landscape metaphor to express human relationships. In the opening section of the poem, for example, he describes the 'partial, but real' love between himself and Scott as an affinity 'disclosed in the desert of living.'<sup>71</sup> Section xi similarly stresses the inescapably partial aspect of human friendship, and almost the whole of this section is an extended image drawn from the natural world:

Side by side we listened to one another  
As trees in wind listen, rooted dumbly  
Although their branches signal from one to another

We drank life from life as the spring wind mounted  
And carried us through a strange masque of seasons  
Far into landscapes of being no word had mounted,

Where we have been borne apart, yet speak over ocean  
Silence, and answer question with echoing question  
That haunts the hollow waste of the heart's ocean.<sup>72</sup>

Such sections show the way that Brasch is able to use an external visual focus to slightly distance himself from personal feelings which elsewhere (particularly for one unused to revealing intensely private emotion) threaten to swamp his writing.

The message embodied in section xxx stands as a contrast to these passages about human relationships, for here Brasch implies that the most complete companionship, and thus the surest road to self-knowledge, is to be found within the natural world. The earth in this poem is no 'silent land' but communicates through its outward features:

Thistle, briar, thorn;  
Dark sayings of an earth  
Austere even in the joy  
That gave them birth.<sup>73</sup>

The simplicity of this section is striking. Brasch conjures up images of these plants, hardy amidst the stark New Zealand landscape, quickly yet colourfully: the 'singing' briar 'sweet across snow, over rock', the thistle with 'barbed defiant crest', the 'seed-pearl flowers' of the thron. The supplication with which he concludes is equally concisely worded, yet heartfelt:

Be my companions still  
With wind and star and stone  
Till in your desert music  
I hear my own.

In most sections of 'The Estate' where Brasch uses details of nature, then, they are as an objectifying medium for personal emotion or as a metaphor for the general human condition. Such use of landscape in his poetry is usually highly successful, for it provides a focal point, a firm centre, around which abstract thought can resolve - something which is significantly lacking in the wholly personal, more obscure sections of this poem. For there *is* much abstract thought in this title poem, unlike some of Brasch's earlier work which consists of straight description. However, there is one section in 'The Estate' where Brasch does not attempt to move beyond the descriptive surface, seeming content to simply paint a word picture. The resultant fourth section is, I feel, one of the most striking passages in the entire piece. The poet's instinct for natural detail is at its surest here; the certainty of the lines with which he etches this very New Zealand scene indicates his deep familiarity with, and love for, his home country:

Dreaming that I am far from home, I come at dawn  
To a white gate under a macrocarpa, giant-grown  
Over its shaded paddock of worn and cropped grass  
That swelling and curving outward dips, falls into space -  
Bare scroll of sky, bare sea, that end-of-the-world sea  
Nuzzling our rocks, the rocks of earth. And it is day,  
Look the white gate opens on crystal, on crests of fire  
That glow, that hover; and in the stillness I can hear  
(As light invokes hillside and town and river-bed  
And models boulder and tree out of anonymous shade)  
A new wind far off waking in tussock and bed of thorns,  
And magpie's water-music among the parched stones.<sup>74</sup>

THE LINKING OF PERSON AND PLACE

*They say to me  
do not pretend to be a stranger here,  
for this is your homeland,  
here is where you really belong. . .*

- Vernice Wineora Pere

From such a verse it becomes very apparent that Brasch's greatest talent lay in this type of descriptive writing. He himself admired this visual element in the poetry of others; in a letter to Ursula Bethell after reading her volume *Day and Night*, he states that the poems which most appeal to him are those in which he sees, as he reads, the places where she wrote them.<sup>75</sup>

The visual quality which is one of the greatest strengths of 'The Estate' is even more evident in the eighteen shorter poems preceding the title poem, for the majority of these are based in specific locations which we are able to visualize, and quite possibly recognize as places we too have visited, as we read. It may be for this merit that C.K. Stead, writing of these poems in 1957, placed them among 'the most worthwhile products of New Zealand poetry.'<sup>76</sup>

The first poem of the volume, 'Blueskin Bay', most obviously displays this visual quality. Once again, the poet draws on the memories of childhood for his subject matter. In *Indirections* his earliest reminiscences are those of summers spent at the holiday settlement of Karitane, and he speaks of looking across Blueskin Bay from the southern beach, towards the Otago heads. The poem has the same evocative quality of Brasch's earlier New Zealand pieces, creating a detailed local scene just as 'A View of Rangitoto' or the 'Otago Landscapes' sequence do, for example. Yet now there is no focus on the intrusion of man and his anxious attempts to adapt and conquer the land; indeed, there is no inclusion of a human element at all, general or specifically identified, to disturb the calm surface of this poem. The inhabitants of this landscape are not the

'world-strange, self-ignorant' newcomers of *The Land and the People*<sup>77</sup>, but are the native plants which belong to this coastline:

Ngaio and broadleaf people the grassy coast  
Of green hills bent to the water  
That stirs, hardly stirs in the wide arms of the bay  
Fingering the rocks lightly, for a season of calm  
Laid asleep in its iron bed  
Under the circling air, the dome of light.<sup>78</sup>

This land has no conqueror but the white gull who is 'master of the air'; is not scarred by man's memorials but records only the 'limpid triumph' of day over the ocean; remembers no history of warfare as the 'trees untroubled dream beside their shadows.' The scene is one of harmony, its silence not the brooding secrecy of the land in Brasch's earlier poems but a peaceful stillness which pervades the mood of the entire poem. The fields descend 'softly', the gentle light is like 'hovering laughter', the day is 'windless', and the paddocks lie 'cool' above the 'drifting waters.'

Brasch's primary purpose in 'Blueskin Bay' seems to be to paint a vivid word picture of the beauty of this Otago landscape, for it is first and foremost a descriptive piece, not moving beyond its focus on a specific location. But its implications extend further than this. The calm, untroubled atmosphere of the poem provides a striking contrast with the painful guilt underlying the poems of *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* - guilt at man's violation of the New Zealand countryside. This development seems to me to suggest two things: first, that although Brasch could not ignore the hostile or indifferent attitude of many of his fellow human beings towards the land, he could now find solace in the harmony of the natural world and focus solely on this in his poetry; and secondly, that personally, he now felt more at home in this land than ever before.

The sureness with which Brasch writes here, bringing the indigenous landscape alive more vividly now than in previous poems, implies a new sense of rootedness in New Zealand. This quite possibly relates to the fact that, by

the 1950s (the decade in which most of these poems were written), he had established himself both as a poet of recognized standing and as the respected editor of *Landfall*, thus finding a secure niche for himself in his home country. After the considerable number of poems based around foreign landscapes in *Disputed Ground*, this third volume represents a return to the countryside of New Zealand. Eleven of the eighteen short poems in *The Estate* touch in some way upon Brasch's native landscapes (and of course, the lengthy title poem revolves around them). As 'Blueskin Bay' indicates, however, these landscapes are now brought more clearly into focus than in the first two volumes, probably due to the poet's feeling of being more 'at home' in New Zealand. Most are easily recognizable by their descriptions or are identified by name in the poems' titles.

'Rain Over Mitimiti Mountains', for example, is a piece of a similar descriptive quality to 'Blueskin Bay', although it is considerably slighter, consisting of only seven lines. This poem, too, has about it the same new air of quiet calm; sky, sea, and mountains are no longer hostile or threatening:

A grey stole of weather drawn from sky to sea,  
White-furred with mist trailing on mountain ledges;  
The clouded harbour breathes lightly as rain.<sup>79</sup>

With a new assurance Brasch introduces human figures into this landscape, figures who, rather than being alien intruders, merge into the scene. Just as his physical settings are now specific locations, so too are the vague 'people' of his first volume given identities: a silent horseman, and pipi-gatherers on the gleaming wet sand. The inclusion of such figures is typical of the greater focus on the human world which *The Estate* generally displays, but even so they remain within the descriptive framework of land and seascape, and here are almost portrayed as part of the natural scenery, so unobtrusive are they.

Just as he does in 'The Estate', in several of these shorter poems Brasch links memories of a family member or friend to a specific landscape, so that a place becomes imbued with personal significance. 'Oreti Beach', for example, is dedicated to Ruth Dallas; in this poem the sunset over the sea is likened, in the symbolic way characteristic in Brasch's landscape writing, to the end of our human life, and the 'thunder of waves' compared to the 'thunder of time.'<sup>80</sup> In a similar fashion, 'Lines from Black Head' bears a dedication to another of Brasch's close friends, Bettina Hamilton (formerly Collier). *Indirections* provides an explicit explanation of why Brasch connects person and place in this poem, in the passage describing the view from the Colliers' house:

You looked along the line of waves driving, rolling in, the nearest only a few hundred yards away and perhaps one hundred and fifty feet below. You always heard the sea, loudly in rough weather; and smelt its salt. Above and behind stood Cargill's Castle and the cliffs winding south to Black Head, where the Colliers constantly walked and which I got to know with them. They belonged in this setting.<sup>81</sup>

Brasch's feeling that Bettina 'belonged in this setting', and the consequent way that returning to Black Head immediately conjures up memories of past time shared with her, is reminiscent of the earlier poem 'Waitaki Revisited', dedicated to James Bertram, where a certain place also speaks to the poet of a personal friendship. In keeping with the more personal tone of *The Estate*, however, 'Lines from Black Head' more clearly realizes the personality of whom Brasch writes. In the earlier poem, the presence of Bertram is only to be inferred from the poet's memories of his school days, but here Bettina Hamilton is directly addressed in the text, and aspects of her character recalled under the external stimulus of a familiar landscape.

Can it be your name I hear  
Sea-born today in the still air,  
Murmured over and over under  
Cold cliffs where we used to wander?  
Your face the distance tries to shape  
From calm horizon, cloudy cape?  
For, gazing seaward, I look back

Recalling, from this same sheep-track,  
 How you would gaze at the same sea,  
 In that semblance you were for me;  
 Till everything that you once knew  
 At the least prompting renders you  
 Again, and for an hour restores  
 The presence of a hundred hours  
 So airily lavished.<sup>82</sup>

One can see from these lines Brasch's acute awareness of landscape and the power it held to evoke for him not only universal but also personal meditation. The greater allegiance to specific place and personality displayed in *The Estate* seems partly explained by the first stanza of this poem. As he does so often, Brasch focuses on one occasion which for him symbolizes a wider aspect of his life; here his return to the familiar location of Black Head after many years can be seen as also representing his return to New Zealand after decades spent abroad. The feeling of this area in Otago being his 'demesne' can be extended and applied to the way that, on his return to New Zealand, he finally felt at home for the first time and claimed this country as his 'estate.' I feel that the new sense of security Brasch attained after 'discovering' himself to be a New Zealander and taking up permanent residence here enabled him to write with more confidence not only about specific locations, but also of the actual personal relationships which these locations summoned to mind. Moreover, this union of land and people in his home country, the present linking with the past, gave him a new sense of unity amidst the 'fragments we mistake / For life', as the opening verse shows:

For everyone who sails away  
 The waves are sighing night and day,  
 And tides hold their breath at turning  
 To listen, listen for that morning  
 That brings the exile home at last  
 To join his future to his past,  
 And bids time knit up its loose ends  
 In the restoration of friends.

One characteristic of Bettina's of which Brasch makes particular mention is the way that she identified with nature, just as he himself did:



. . .you seemed bred  
 To bare heights, wind-stream, ocean waste,  
 Knew every secretive plant that laced  
 The strong grass, nest of every bird,  
 And the sea's lightest riddling word;  
 The breath of the wide day was yours. . .

Such an affinity with one's surroundings is an attribute which Brasch advocates in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, but in an impersonal and somehow negative way, as he tends to focus on the estrangement from the land resulting from a lack of this affinity. Now, in this volume, the opposite approach is taken, as Brasch writes instead of sensitive individuals known to himself who do possess an appreciation for nature.

Clearly this was something he admired in others, as is displayed not only by this poem but also by the passage in 'The Estate', mentioned earlier, where the friends alluded to are those whose lives are bound to the land in some way. The rewards 'beyond all riches' promised as something attainable in the distant future in 'The Land and the People (II)', are, in this more personal context, presented as already gained by these friends of Brasch's. New Zealand is no longer a hostile or treacherous place to these people, who have established a niche for themselves without carving it out by force, and have won a reciprocal trust from the land - as Brasch writes of Bettina, 'All things wished you well.' For her patient and gradual accumulation of knowledge, she is shown as holding the power to view the fragmented chaos of human life as a 'world, a living whole.' This knowledge of natural laws also enables a quiet acceptance of one's own mortality, Brasch implies, so that 'the only death is to withstand'.

While Brasch found such qualities in many of his friends, it was his grandfather who provided him with the closest and most personally relevant example of someone able to draw strength and solace from the landscape. 'In Memory of Willi Fels 1858-1946' shows Brasch once again identifying person with place, and successfully achieving a calm objectivity in his verse because of this external focus. Despite the fact that this poem is written in memory of the man Brasch described as 'the most constant figure in my life, its rock and

centre'<sup>83</sup>, the tone of his writing is peaceful and maintains clarity, as Fels is placed in the setting of his own garden at Manono (just as Brasch's memories of Scott in 'The Estate' are best expressed when centred round the physical setting of the Dorset St. garden). As in 'The Estate' the scene of this domestic garden is portrayed as a sanctuary amidst the harsh realities of the outer world. It is a miniature world in itself, of which Fels is both the centre and the creator (and this once again reveals the extent to which Brasch has moved away from the unpeopled landscapes of his earlier poetry). Both man and setting here are clearly recognizable from *Indirections*: the quiet 'methodical man of regular habits and great energy of mind and body', and the garden cultivated over several decades which acclimatized the 'best ideas and products of older countries' (namely plants and statues) in a new land.<sup>85</sup>

Brasch commences the poem by drawing an image of this garden, and from these visual beginnings proceeds to imply that, in the same way as Fels created harmony in his garden, so too could he work towards achieving harmony in the world outside the protective walls of this refuge.

Shaping in a garden for fifty seasons  
 The strong slow lives of plants, the rare and homely,  
 Into an order sought by the imagination,  
 A precinct green and calm

Where climates, continents, civilizations mingled  
 And for a leaf-framed listening Apollo  
 The bellbird lingered over its flawless phrases  
 He watched a distracted world

And studied in all things to draw men and peoples  
 Together, that each should learn the others' ripest  
 Wisest creations, and, by beauty persuaded,  
 Cold envy, false fear forget.<sup>85</sup>

The theme of unity runs throughout this poem. Fels is attuned to his surroundings, is part of them, and thus, like Bettina Hamilton, is able to see that 'all life breathes as one.' The note of hope which this volume has introduced into Brasch's writing is clearly evident here as the poet places his

trust in Fels and like-minded people, whom he describes as the 'sturdy lineage of the reconcilers':

. . .while his kind continues, calmly  
And quietly active, earth shall not lack sweetness,  
Nor the human cause be lost.

BRASCH'S PERSONAL ESTATE

*Homestead? Nay, halting-place, accommodation  
Achieved. . . Did not that sombre regimented band  
Of firs, those gravestones, publish man's condition?  
For night, parental night, shall soon with gentle hand  
Suspend her folding arras, resume domination;  
Nature, to rest dismissed by a most high command,  
Shortly roll up this planetary decoration,  
Man having passed darkly onwards to an unknown land.*

- Ursula Bethell

The search for unity, for some overall sense of proportion amidst what Brasch describes in *Indirections* as 'the bewildering formlessness of time',<sup>86</sup> is a preoccupation not only in this poem but in many of the short pieces in *The Estate*. 'Self to Self', for example, written in the classical 'divided self' dialogue style, takes this as its main point of discussion. The poet asks himself, 'Out of this thoughtless, formless, swarming life / What can I find of form and thought to live by. . .?'<sup>87</sup> Although this poem directly addresses the problem of creating personal order amidst chaos, no solution is offered save that of confronting not only the outer but also the inner disorder - 'be at home in your own darkness,' advises one voice. Brasch's 'real life' solution is to be found in other poems than this, ones which deal with specific landscapes of personal significance: 'Autumn in Spring', 'Letter from Thurlby Domain', 'Autumn, Thurlby Domain.' These three poems suggest that the only respite from one's overwhelming sense of the chaotic arbitrariness of life is to be found by establishing one's own 'estate', whether it be a nation, a region, or simply a plot of land which becomes

refuge and shelter. The poems dedicated to Fels and Hamilton show two individuals at ease within themselves and at peace with the world, largely due to their quiet establishment in their physical surroundings. The people Brasch writes of in *The Estate* are no longer the unidentified homeless wanderers of 'The Islands', unable to escape the 'shadow of departure'<sup>88</sup>, but are instead the poet's personal friends, of fixed identity, who have found their 'estate' in New Zealand. These are the fortunate ones whose lives are offered as an example to others - those who, through their affinity with nature, 'saw life steadily and saw it whole.'<sup>89</sup>

In 'Autumn in Spring', with the stoic realism which is seldom absent from his writing, Brasch expresses the realization that the respite afforded by this vision of wholeness is only ever temporary. Uplifted by the beauty of a new season, he suggests, we may turn aside from 'loathed self-scrutiny' and the reminders of our own mortality, and snatch a 'dazzled moment' out of time, sharing the stability of the natural world:

And in the milder measures of the air  
Let pain for a season relax our strict novice,  
Granting us with the sea weed and the shell  
Drowsy lizard and dreaming wave  
Truce on these timeless shores.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, immediately following this verse, Brasch describes the desire for such an escape as an 'intolerable prayer', and stresses the fact that this feeling of release is only 'brief oblivion from the giant clock / A dream of wholeness, draught of peace.'

The very fact that he admits the possibility of this 'brief permitted morning' in his verse, however, is a significant advance from his earlier poetry. And the way, too, that he revokes his prayer for oblivion in the last stanza, stating 'I would forget nothing, escape nothing' and expressing his willingness to undergo pain as an unavoidable part of human existence, suggests that he now feels stronger and more readily able to confront the worst. It seems likely that this inner courage (and indeed, the very ability to express rather than ignore his

inner condition in his poetry) stems from a new sense of stability within his home country - in this volume, now truly a 'home' as never before. Thus, although expressing a rather pessimistic viewpoint, 'Autumn in Spring' has about it a very positive aspect, for Brasch is able to draw strength from the familiarity of his own landscape, while fully recognizing that this strength is of a temporary nature.

The calmly objective tone of the poem is characteristic of Brasch's writing, as in the way in which contemplation of the human condition is framed within passages of vivid landscape description. These passages, also typically, are included for a greater purpose than merely establishing the New Zealand setting. The slightly melancholy peacefulness of the spring landscape described in the opening stanza foreshadows the quiet acquiescence to the human condition which is to follow:

The yellow nestlings of the wattle sway  
Above the dust-dry roads in green September;  
From plum tree floating into jade and snow  
Quietly through the sparrow-chatter drifts  
On lingering, low, autumnal phrases  
The riro's burden, quick-eyed tender shadow. . .

The last three lines of the piece not only return a reader from personal contemplations to the world of tangible reality, but also conclude 'Autumn in Spring' with the contrasting note of lightness and hope which has occasionally been sounded throughout it:

The riro's note  
Crosses the ripening day  
And the spring wind laughs lighter from its shadow.

With such treatment, the description of landscape and the description of Brasch's own thoughts are not separate and unrelated elements of the poem, but, as in nearly all his work, have a reciprocal relevance. As C.K. Stead says of the shorter pieces in this volume, 'the subject is still not landscape but an inner struggle which finds its symbols in landscape.'<sup>91</sup>

The pair of poems written about Thurlby Domain reveal the same blend of new optimism and old stoicism, expressed through a contrast between man's brief world and the enduring one of nature. These works are perhaps simultaneously the most personal and the most universally relevant of the eighteen short poems in *The Estate*. For 'Letter from Thurlby Domain' and 'Autumn, Thurlby Domain', Brasch takes as his setting the farm at Speargrass Flat which belonged to Bendix Hallenstein, his great-grandfather - clearly a landscape of special significance to the poet's own private history and sense of identity. His thoughts while contemplating the 'broken house, old trees / And ruined garden' turn naturally, however, to the wider implication of these surroundings. It is in these two poems, I feel, that Brasch makes his fullest statement on the complexities of human life and its place within the larger scheme of time, while still maintaining a strong personal identity through his choice of this specific setting. Thurlby Domain brings together for him past, present and future, and the personal history which it embodies makes him aware of the minute but vital part every individual plays in life. In 'Present Company', in fact, Brasch stresses the importance of memory, and the past, in achieving a balanced outlook on the world:

...the complete man... is he who lives in the present yet does not cease to live with and relive his past too, his personal past and that of his family and his town and his country and all the greater and lesser parts that enter into these and cut across them and transcend them, all of which together go to make up the history of the world itself. The present, if it is at all secure and rich and forward-looking in its fleetingness, cannot but be steeped in the past.<sup>92</sup>

Both these poems in *The Estate* show Brasch reliving his 'personal past and that of his family' by focusing on the landscape of Thurlby Domain, but the first of the pair, 'Letter from Thurlby Domain', is the more visually striking of the two, setting the scene with admirable clarity. As is usual in his nature writing, Brasch sketches the setting swiftly and surely at the outset of the poem.

The description of hills and garden is expressed in one breath, as it were, one line running into the next in a smooth succession of colourful detail. Yet the very first line of the poem is self-contained and simple, establishing from the beginning the personal significance of the scene to follow.

I walk among my great-grandfather's trees.  
 Through poplar and pine pour the steady seas  
 Of mild mountain wind, nor'wester, in long-  
 Breathed tide and calm of voice shaking their strong  
 Rock-bedded roots; yet, below, the air is still  
 In this orchard-harbour deep embayed in the hill-  
 Terrace, where cattle graze in thick grass  
 By pear-tree, apricot, walnut, and through the ground-  
     bass  
 Of song from leaf-lost birds.<sup>93</sup>

The clearly stated personal ties to the land show how far Brasch has advanced poetically from the impersonal treatment of often unidentified landscapes in his first two volumes.

With the emphasis he places on the mark his forebears have made on the land, Brasch seems to be almost making a claim over this setting. Undoubtedly his awareness of the continuity of family history contributes to his feeling of being established in New Zealand. Yet the sense of stability he gains from this location does not blind him to the underlying fact that man's possession of any place, and the creations he laboriously builds, can only ever be temporary. The ruins of the house lying before Brasch provide him with indisputable proof of this. Now it is not the land which is silent but the decaying remains of manmade creation. The surrounding countryside is rich and fruitful, and the wind speaks in the trees; by contrast the house no longer holds any meaning, and is devoid of memories of its inhabitants:

. . . But dumb and dead  
 In this quick summer stir the old house decays,  
 Hollow, unroofed, with starting window-bays  
 And boards torn up. . .

Writing in a similar vein to that found in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*, Brasch once again portrays the 'figure of brute man breaking

in on nature, / Defiling its sanctuaries, altering rhythm and feature. . .'; the crumbling walls of Thurlby scar the land like the 'vain memorials' of the earlier poem 'Forerunners.' Yet 'Letter from Thurlby Domain' has greater immediacy and impact than the preceding works, because Brasch now focuses on a specific landscape of personal importance, thus localizing a general theme. Moreover, the theme of the relationship between conquering man and the suffering land is extended here, and a more positive resolution is shown. Brasch is no longer prophesying, as he did in his earlier poetry, that the passing of time will remedy man's wrongdoings; his own family background has now provided him with proof of this remedy. The one-time mansion of his great-grandfather now belongs to man no more; ninety years later, it is 'given back to nature', and thus the sacrilege once effected on the land is atoned for. This becomes the main theme of the second poem of the pair, 'Autumn, Thurlby Domain'.

In this piece autumn, traditionally a time of fruitfulness followed by decay, reminds Brasch forcibly of the inevitable decline of 'all civilizations, all societies.'<sup>94</sup> This season, 'the dying of the year', is seen as symbolizing 'the death of man's estate', but in the natural world, unlike the human world, there is no ugliness or pain surrounding death; the green and gold spires of the poplars make a celebration of it, with their 'brilliance so raptly and so lightly worn. . .'. Again the poet takes the sight of the broken stone walls and rambling garden as a starting-point, and uses this to illustrate his belief that even the best of man's endeavours stem from the earth and will eventually return to it:

... what has been planted and grows,  
 What has been built to stand; that now fails,  
 Having served its time,  
 And goes back ripe to the earth from which it came.

An even more positive development in this theme is to be found in 'Letter from Thurlby Domain' when Brasch implies that, although man and his creations are fundamentally possessed by earth, in some small way man can claim a part of earth as his own by working with nature rather than battling



against it. Again Brasch illustrates this in both a personal and visual manner, by describing the scene before him and drawing his philosophical conclusions from this scene. It is to the garden and the plantations he turns now, which are both of the earth's and of human creation; their life stems from nature but their existence in this particular location is owed to Bendix Hallenstein who, by planting these trees, has actually contributed to the natural beauty of New Zealand.

The way in which Brasch expresses this realization is clear evidence of his ability to always see the duality of any situation. The earth may be 'marked with the sign of axe and plough', but it is also, because of man's presence, 'watered, shaded, settled,' where once it was a harsh and implicitly barren landscape. His description of the untouched mountainous world is striking in its visual impact, but the word picture which follows, painting for us the changes that man has brought to this region, is just as evocative, as if the poet appreciates equally the beauty of both untamed and cultivated landscapes:

...For men have brought  
 Ripe gifts to soften the rigours that contort  
 This towering snow-dazzled sun-shot world  
 Of rock on rock, mountain on mountain hurled,  
 Cupping cold lakes, bare valleys curved for sleep.  
 Look, he who built here planted: road, hedge, and sweep  
 Of fields, garden and stable; this avenue  
 All summer sounding, cool in the blazing blue,  
 Its poplar-fountains soaring from some green well  
 Under the waste where there was nothing to tell  
 Of water's sweetness; and hill of twilight pine,  
 And the wind-censing gum's tattered ensign  
 Over the running grasses; ash, acacia,  
 Lime, and tall towers of wellingtonia -  
 All his; and he in Lebanon plucked the cone  
 From which that masterful cedar sprang alone;  
 He, my great-grandfather whom I did not know,  
 Who built and sowed and left his seed to grow  
 Cradling the land.

This, then, appears to be the central message of *The Estate*, and offers hope for all those who desire their own domain in life, lending them a sense of identity and spiritual security. In 'Letter from Thurlby Domain' the language is

different from the earlier poems which stress man's desire to conquer and rob the land, and the resulting hostility between the land and its inhabitants. Here the images are of a more forgiving relationship, and a more reciprocal one. Man-made creations are still portrayed as raw atrocities defiling the land, but at times, as the example of Hallenstein shows, men can bring 'ripe gifts' which actually enhance it. The seeds planted by Brasch's ancestor are left, not scarring the land, but 'cradling' it. Thus it is not grand houses or vast memorials that will remain decades later to speak of our presence, Brasch implies, but 'rich groves' and parks, creations that are ours but are still part of the land. It is these that 'marry us to this earth' and, as Brasch shows by his focus on his own family history, will extend beyond one's own lifetime to give a sense of stability, of continuity, to those who follow.

These two poems are, I feel, pivotal to *The Estate* in that they exemplify both themes and techniques which Brasch employs elsewhere in the volume with varying degrees of success. For a poet beginning to write in a more personally revealing style, the definition of one's own identity and the manner of expressing it was clearly crucial, and such poems as the Thurlby Domain pieces are evidence of Brasch gradually discovering a more personal poetic voice while still maintaining the universality of vision displayed in his earlier work. Nature and the New Zealand landscape are still at the heart of these more mature poems, but landscape imagery is now used much more frequently to express the poet's interior landscape. In 'Autumn, Thurlby Domain' he speaks of the 'elemental language of sickle and plough, / Of nursery and orchard, sun and wind', and of the 'untroubled intimacy' with which they speak to us, if we care to understand. Intimacy is not a part of Brasch's writing - even at his most personal there is a feeling of careful distance, not only between writer and reader, but also between his own emotion and the actual words he uses to express himself. His own poetic communication does not give the impression of being 'untroubled' or spontaneous; perhaps he saw the total

honesty of nature as an exemplar which human beings could admire but never emulate, either in their art or in life itself.

At Brasch's funeral in May 1973, Alan Horsman spoke of this characteristic reticence, giving the opinion that Brasch led a life 'the most intense parts of which were secret', and that only a part of this 'inward life got into his poetry.'<sup>95</sup> Yet this is not necessarily a fault, for the distance Brasch maintains (largely through his focus on external natural detail) allows him to present personal and universal themes with quiet clarity and objectivity; and, as Horsman says, trust is inspired by the impression Brasch gave of 'a hidden activity always going on, in which the man, one believed, found just where there was, and where there was not, rock beneath his feet and rock to build on.' The rock Charles Brasch found to build on in his poetry was that of nature - the absolutes of mountains, sea, and the elements, which remained constant amidst the transience of human life and the continual flux of personal identity. These satisfied his desire for stability, and the preoccupation with possessing some sort of physical and spiritual 'estate' in one's life reflects this desire.

Although the ideal of living peacefully with the land and establishing one's own domain is present in his first two volumes, it is as a vague possibility to be attained if at all in the distant future. It is not until this third volume that Brasch admits this ideal as a certainty, however temporary it may be. His most successful expression of such a theme is once again predominantly through the visual and the concrete. The vivid description at which he excels, so evident in the first two volumes, remains here as an important way of securely setting the scene before general contemplation is embarked upon, and of re-establishing the poem in tangible reality at its conclusion. However, Brasch extends his use of landscape somewhat in *The Estate* by turning to more specific scenes imbued with personal significance, a significance which he makes clear to the reader, thus adding greater immediacy and impact to his writing.

The last two stanzas of 'Letter from Thurlby Domain' seem to me to sum up the entire spirit of *The Estate*, for they show a new acceptance of the present and the realization that we must be content with whatever brief security this present can offer; the need for some ties to a certain location to maintain this security; and the sense of proportion which the vastness of nature can give to our fleeting lives.

Dead house and living trees and we that live  
 To make our peace on earth and become native  
 In place and time, in life and death: how should  
 We entertain any other goal or good  
 Than this, than here?

From Crown to Coronet  
 The sun has swung overhead, and burning yet  
 Thirsts for western waters; the wind will soon die  
 In the trees; at my foot a lizard slides among dry  
 Stalks and is gone with a flickering goodbye.

The quiet acceptance of loss coupled with the affirmation of a positive harmony with the land suggests that, with this volume, in his home country and his personal past Brasch has found his 'estate.'

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Islands, 2 (1973), 247.
- <sup>2</sup>Islands, 2 (1973), 250.
- <sup>3</sup>'Memories of Charles Brasch,' Landfall, 27 (1973), 84.
- <sup>4</sup>Islands, 2 (1973), 256.
- <sup>5</sup>Review of *Indirections*, *New Zealand Listener*, 9 Aug. 1980, p. 76.
- <sup>6</sup>*Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 171.
- <sup>7</sup>*Indirections*, p. 269.
- <sup>8</sup>*Indirections*, pp. 335-36.
- <sup>9</sup>*Indirections*, p. 335.
- <sup>10</sup>*New Zealand Listener*, 9 Aug. 1980, p. 76.
- <sup>11</sup>*Indirections*, p. 8.
- <sup>12</sup>*Indirections*, p. 256.
- <sup>13</sup>Foreword, *Indirections*.
- <sup>14</sup>In *The Universal Dance*, ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981),  
p. 42.
- <sup>15</sup>In *The Universal Dance*, p. 150.
- <sup>16</sup>In *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 6.
- <sup>17</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>18</sup>James Bertram, *Charles Brasch* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 14.
- <sup>19</sup>*Charles Brasch*, p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 32-35.
- <sup>21</sup>In *Collected Poems*, p. 15.
- <sup>22</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 35-36.
- <sup>23</sup>*Indirections*, p. 340.
- <sup>24</sup>*Indirections*, pp. 340-41.
- <sup>25</sup>*Indirections*, p. 345.
- <sup>26</sup>'In Memory of Robin Hyde,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
- <sup>27</sup>Islands, 2 (1973), 250.
- <sup>28</sup>'Man Missing,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 135-36.
- <sup>29</sup>'Cry Mercy,' *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 112.

- <sup>30</sup>‘Wartime Snow, London,’ *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 28.
- <sup>31</sup>*Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 38.
- <sup>32</sup>John Geraets, ‘‘Landfall’ Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey,’ Thesis: Ph.D.: English (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1982), pp. 158-59.
- <sup>33</sup>‘Writer and Reader,’ New Zealand Monthly Review, 53 (Feb. 1965), in *The Universal Dance*, p. 126.
- <sup>34</sup>*Indirections*, p. 139.
- <sup>35</sup>*Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 15.
- <sup>36</sup>Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 18.
- <sup>37</sup>‘The Estate,’ in *Collected Poems*, p. 66.
- <sup>38</sup>*Indirections*, p. 407.
- <sup>39</sup>*Indirections*, p. 412.
- <sup>40</sup>Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 24.
- <sup>41</sup>Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 26.
- <sup>42</sup>‘A Note on the Work of Colin McCahon,’ *Landfall*, 4 (1950), p. 338.
- <sup>43</sup>‘The Estate,’ in *Collected Poems*, p. 63.
- <sup>44</sup>‘The Estate,’ pp. 71-72.
- <sup>45</sup>‘Notes,’ *Landfall*, 1 (1947), 8.
- <sup>46</sup>Section xxxiv, ‘The Estate,’ p. 82.
- <sup>47</sup>‘The Estate,’ pp. 65-66.
- <sup>48</sup>T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker,’ *Four Quartets, Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 203.
- <sup>49</sup>From Hölderlin’s *The Death of Empedocles* (2nd version), Act I, scene 3; in ‘The Estate,’ p. 61. Trans. Alan Roddick, *Collected Poems*, p. 240.
- <sup>50</sup>Section viii, ‘The Estate,’ p. 66.
- <sup>51</sup>*Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 17.
- <sup>52</sup>‘On Mt Iron,’ from ‘Otago Landscapes,’ *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>53</sup>Section ix, ‘The Estate,’ p. 67.
- <sup>54</sup>Section vi, ‘The Estate,’ p. 65.
- <sup>55</sup>*Indirections*, p. 421.
- <sup>56</sup>Section viii, ‘The Estate,’ p. 66.
- <sup>57</sup>‘The Estate,’ p. 73.
- <sup>58</sup>‘The Estate,’ p. 76.

- <sup>59</sup>Section xi, 'The Estate,' p. 68.
- <sup>60</sup>Review of *The Estate*, Here and Now, Sept. 1957, p. 31.
- <sup>61</sup>'The Estate,' p. 67.
- <sup>62</sup>Section xxviii, 'The Estate,' p. 78.
- <sup>63</sup>Section i, 'The Estate,' p. 62.
- <sup>64</sup>James Bertram informs us that in November of the first year of *Landfall*, Brasch told Scott, 'I hope to write a poem for you'; and that Brasch worked on 'Harry's poem' throughout 1950-51. (*Charles Brasch*, p. 23).
- <sup>66</sup>'The Estate,' p. 74.
- <sup>68</sup>'The Estate,' p. 65.
- <sup>70</sup>'The Estate,' pp. 81-83.
- <sup>71</sup>Section i, 'The Estate,' p. 62.
- <sup>72</sup>'The Estate,' p. 68.
- <sup>73</sup>'The Estate,' p. 79.
- <sup>74</sup>'The Estate,' p. 64.
- <sup>75</sup>Letter to Ursula Bethell, London, Easter Sunday [1940], Bethell Papers, Manuscript 38, Correspondence, Box 1, in the University of Canterbury Library.
- <sup>76</sup>Review of *The Estate*, *Landfall*, II (1957), 259.
- <sup>77</sup>'The Land and the People' (I), *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 2.
- <sup>78</sup>In *Collected Poems*, p. 41.
- <sup>79</sup>In *Collected Poems*, p. 58.
- <sup>80</sup>In *Collected Poems*, p. 45.
- <sup>81</sup>*Indirections*, p. 177.
- <sup>82</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 55-56.
- <sup>83</sup>*Indirections*, p. 50.
- <sup>84</sup>*Indirections*, pp. 51, 52.
- <sup>85</sup>'In Memory of Willi Fels,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 42-43.
- <sup>86</sup>*Indirections*, p. 368.
- <sup>87</sup>In Collected Poems, p. 52.
- <sup>88</sup>*Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 17.
- <sup>89</sup>Matthew Arnold, 'To a Friend,' in *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 2.
- <sup>90</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>91</sup>Review of *The Estate, Landfall*, 11 (1957), 257.

<sup>92</sup>In *The Universal Dance*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>93</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>94</sup>In *Collected Poems*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>95</sup>'Words at the Funeral of Charles Brasch,' *Islands*, O.S. 2 (1973), 230.



## CHAPTER IV

### AMBULANDO, NOT FAR OFF

#### OBJECTIVITY THROUGH AN EXTERNAL FOCUS

*We could but die  
and blood through grass would seep  
as bones in earth would die,*

*No more changed landscape  
that if we had never been.  
It is enough, enough I give  
That in this moment that we live,*

*We are.*

*- Fiona Kidman*

'Getting older, I grow more personal,' states Brasch in 'Cry Mercy,' the last poem of his fourth volume 'Ambulando' (1964)<sup>1</sup>. This seems to be a significant indication of the direction which his writing takes from this point on, for both *Ambulando* and *Not Far off*, published within five years of each other, represent a new poetry which is altogether less descriptive and less formal, and which focuses on the self to an unprecedented extent. As is obvious from the boldly direct opening of this poem, Brasch has now largely discarded the impersonal mask of his earlier landscape poetry, turning instead to examine the thoughts which his external surroundings have evoked in him. This new poetry is more conversational in tone; in many of the pieces the poet uses the personal pronoun and speaks directly to a listener, whether it be a clearly recognized individual such as Brasch's own father or grandfather, or the subject of his love poems whose identity is never revealed.

The movement away from straight description of landscape, or poetry in which a focus on landscape is necessary to distance personal emotion, is one

which John Geraets notices as being a general trend within New Zealand poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. In his thesis '*Landfall* under Brasch.' he states:

While [landscape] remains a key theme throughout the period, it comes gradually to be displaced by more directly personal or social themes. Love, friendship, death, and aging, come to be seen less as extensions of nature, more as extensions of oneself.<sup>2</sup>

Brasch's poetry is not one which deals with social themes. Although he saw art as playing a crucial role in any society, he does not touch on religious or political issues at all in his poetry and, even in his mature work where he speaks more openly in his own voice, he is never didactic. It is the individual with which Brasch is predominantly concerned, and the way in which life of the individual is touched by a range of intensely personal experiences and emotions which are simultaneously universal. He states in his 'Notes' to the first issue of *Landfall* that 'although there is no subject with which the arts may not deal, this is the central theme to which they always return: human life as such.'<sup>3</sup>

To a certain extent this has always been Brasch's 'central theme,' even in his first volume, *The Land and the People*. Yet the emphasis on the New Zealand landscape and the issue of a national identity in the first two volumes tends to obscure the human element somewhat; and in *The Estate*, although themes of love and death are brought to the fore, it is still through the medium of familiar landscape. In *Ambulando* and *Not Far Off*, Brasch's writing becomes noticeably more abstract and less firmly based in the actuality of the New Zealand scene. Many more of his poems are now occasional, such as 'Seventeen April' which commemorates the birthday of his grandfather, Willi Fels, or 'Paying my Devoirs', acknowledging his debt to Auden. These meditations are far removed from the earlier work in which any philosophizing was representatively expressed through the physical features of Brasch's home country. The fact that he no longer seems to find it necessary to always

externalize an interior landscape suggests the discovery of a new conviction in his own identity, and results in work of a far greater emotional honesty.

Although in these fourth and fifth columns Brasch tends towards direct communication rather than a filtering of statements through the medium of external detail, even now he has certainly not come to dispense with this medium. Instead, he slightly alters the way in which he uses it. In many of these poems the element of landscape is still, in fact, present. Now, however, it is not the predominant subject but is included to further facilitate personal expression; the natural world becomes the means by which Brasch passes into the world of inner emotion. This, of course, is not entirely new, for as early as *Disputed Ground* there is considerable use of landscape metaphor for this purpose. Yet in the earlier work the reader is responsible for inferring from a landscape poem a general comment on the human condition, or a tribute to a personal relationship, often guided only by an oblique connection with a shadowy figure (as in 'Waianakarua,' for example). Now this responsibility is shouldered by Brasch. Instead of setting his work in the natural world and subtly infusing the location with personal significance, he now almost invariably takes the human world as his starting-point and strengthens his poetic statements on this world with landscape imagery.

Furthermore, whereas his focus on the personal has become more specific and localized, as he writes honestly about himself and those closest to him, the landscapes he uses are, on the whole, more general and metaphoric. This is not the case in all the poems by any means, for, as will become evident later in this discussion, Brasch's strong attraction for the local, so clearly displayed in the first two volumes and further strengthened by close friendship in *The Estate*, is still apparent and recurs several times. Yet in his most intensely personal work the landscapes are not specifically New Zealand ones - indeed, they are not identified at all, instead being introduced as timeless images of wind, water,

moon and sun which belong to every and no place, and serving to intensify the poet's expression of personal truths.

The title poem of *Ambulando* is one such example of Brasch using landscape metaphor to reinforce expression of a major theme: that of impinging old age.<sup>4</sup> Now in his 'middle life,' Brasch's thoughts turn often in this volume to ageing and death. His contemplation of these themes in his poetry is not marked by a tone of anguish, however, but by one of calm, stoicism as he is able to maintain some distance through his focus on external detail. The opening image of 'Ambulando' matter-of-factly describes the physical human process of ageing in terms of the natural world: 'the bone tree stiffens and its well-jointed branches / Begin to creak, to droop a little . . .'. With typical stoicism, Brasch finds some compensation in the fact that, with old age, comes relaxation of the spirit, a surrendering of the 'old impossible terms' of youth. This, too, is phrased in nature imagery which not only provides the poet with an objective viewpoint but adds a pleasing visual dimension to such metaphysical writing. The spirit is described as now being able to

. . . cry pax to its equivocal nature and stretch  
At ease with wry destiny,  
Supple as wind bowing in every reed.

There is a satisfying balance in this verse between the two contrasting images of body and soul: the physical 'bone tree' stiffens and loses the vigour of youth but the soul becomes more flexible, reconciling itself to life's paradoxes and thus achieving the harmony found amongst the elements of the natural world.

In the second verse Brasch again stresses the paradoxical process of growing old. There are Yeatsian overtures to this verse, particularly following the opening metaphor of the tree representing human life, for in a self-portrayal similar to Yeat's 'comfortable kind of old scarecrow'<sup>5</sup>, Brasch describes himself as appearing to the young as 'merely another sapless greyhead.' Yet the disregard which the 'disguise' affords him allows him a

certain anonymity, which, to such an intensely private person as himself, is no insult but a blessing; and thus he can leave behind the petty concerns of human society, 'in cool freedom to come and go / with mode and movement, wave and wind.'

Just as he here likens the independence of his mind and spirit to the unconfirmed movement of the elements, so too in the last verse does Brasch turn to the actual world for a simile to express new personal emotions. After so firmly establishing the local nature of his earlier poetry, in an attempt to define a national identity both for himself and for other New Zealanders, now he clearly feels able to dispense with specific details of location. Giving himself up to the 'unpredictable' forces of direction in life, he no longer requires the security of 'climate and cosmography,' but, with the same paradoxical outlook employed in his earlier descriptions of the permanent flux of land and sea, he finds stability in instability. Not only does he submit to being carried far from the 'tried moorings' of a national identity, but here he also comes to a new acceptance of his own constantly changing perception of himself.

In *Indirections* he comments on his growing awareness of the inevitability of chance and change, an awareness sharpened by the chaos of the war years. Quoting Rilke, he resigns himself to this:

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

Without knowing our true place,  
We act in real relationship . . .<sup>6</sup>

'At the same time', he continues, 'I had a sense of my own unfixed fluctuating identity.' Over two decades later, he expresses this poetically in 'Ambulando', and the strength to accept the ever-changing nature of this identity (which earlier he had seen as a lack of identity) is drawn this time, not from the philosophy of other writers, but from the powers of the natural world.

The image he chooses here is that of the stars - an image he has occasionally used previously to represent purity and eternity.<sup>7</sup> In 'Ambulando'

he is no longer lamenting the flux of human life but is resigned to it, and, in fact, finds something positive within his resignation. Once again it is by recourse to the natural world that he is able to transcend personal fears and prepare for the final loss of identity:

... I see myself no more  
 Under some familiar guise  
 Resting static as in a photograph,  
 Nor move as I supposed I was moving  
 From fixed point to point;  
 But rock outwards like the last stars that signal  
 At the frontiers of light,  
 Fleeing the centre without destination.

As Brasch begins to renounce his connections with the demands of human existence, so he grows even closer to nature, and his expression of this is akin to the imagery in the earlier 'The Land and the People' sequence of the earth offering companionship and a harmonious relationship not often found between men. Yet in the earlier poetry, communication with the land was something to be possibly achieved in the future; here in 'Ambulando' it is simply and naturally assumed. A state of communion with nature is seen as more easily entered into than with the human world of a new generation:

Communicate with stones, trees, water  
 If you must vent a heart too full.  
 Who will hear you now, your words falling  
 As foreign as bird - tongue  
 On ears attuned to different vibrations?  
 Trees, water, stones:  
 Let these answer a gaze contemplative  
 Of all things that flow out from them  
 And back to enter them again.

The new kind of poetry heralded by *Ambulando* is clearly not as descriptive as Brasch's earlier landscape pieces, for now the main focus is on human issues rather than on the physical aspects of the land and its bearing on mankind. Yet, as 'Ambulando' shows, Brasch continues to make frequent reference to the natural world, in order to externalize personal themes or visually clarify these themes by creating parallels with concrete detail. No

longer specifically located, but more generally symbolic, the landscape remains a source of strength both poetical and personal, for Brasch. Even in the poetry where he gives full poetic attention to an individual (which is increasingly common in his fourth and fifth volumes), he maintains objectivity by a concentration on landscape, now largely metaphorical. This is obvious in 'By that Sea', one of the two poems written in memory of his father.

The relationship between Henry and Charles Brasch was never an easy one, as *Indirections* testifies. Even in middle age, Charles felt oppressed by his father's disapproval, which had so affected him as a child:

My father's attitude towards me had not changed; it still robbed me of my status as a person in my own right, keeping me dependent, his son who existed to do him credit and usually did not succeed . . . I heard the old disapproval in his tone of voice when he asked about my friends or my work, to which I reacted involuntarily, instinctively, by closing all doors against him and finding nothing to say; his 'You must do exactly as you please' meant that nothing I might do could please him.<sup>8</sup>

The descriptions in *Indirections* of this relationship between two very different men are probably as emotionally honest, in their exposition of painful memories, as any passages in Brasch's writing. He speaks in an unusually unreserved manner of the 'deep-seated sense of guilt' born of his father's disappointment in him, which left him 'raw, heavy with shame'. Undoubtedly this relationship had far-reaching emotional consequences. It was from his father's continual criticism that Brasch traced his lifelong feeling of always being 'proved wrong in the eyes of the world,' his feeling of guilt in the presence of any external authority.<sup>9</sup> It is highly likely also that what Brasch described as 'my instinctive urge and determination to lead my own life as best I could, hidden, alone, in silence' (something which I feel greatly affected his style of writing) stemmed from this lack of support and communication.<sup>10</sup> A large part of the grief he felt after the death of his father, then, must surely have been

regret and frustration about many lost opportunities, and about the feelings of inadequacy which were his legacy from his relationship with Henry.

Yet 'By That Sea' is, surprisingly, unmarked by bitterness.<sup>11</sup> The intense emotion Brasch personally felt is carefully controlled throughout the piece by a formality of style and, once again, by a focus on landscape. Although dealing with personal subject matter, this poem has a spiritual and universal significance, for, by reference to the enduring quality of land and sea, Brasch is able to place personal loss within a larger framework and to gain solace from this. Returning to a theme strongly present in *The Land and the People*, the poet depicts one man's death as a necessary part of the continuity of life and the land, but the landscape here is not a noticeably New Zealand one, and the images are more general.

I lay you in the common grave of man  
On a bed of earth and under a blanket of stones  
To sleep man's sleep in quiet and be gone  
With him, leaving no trace among rocks and thorns  
But your seed of dust that we tread underfoot  
To rebuild the falling mountains, nourish the root.

The ocean, too, is no specified seascape, unlike those in earlier pieces such as 'Crossing the Straits' or 'Great Sea'. The same symbolic connotations remain, however, and its paradoxical nature is again stressed. In the first verse it signifies death and grief;

Cold I lay you beside that bitter sea  
Where men have laid their dead since the first flight  
From Eden and its everlasting day . . .

But later in the poem Brasch implies that within this metaphorical ocean of death lies new life, and that a certain comfort can be found in the very regularity of the forces of dissolution:

I take no leave by these waters that turn and return,  
Salving grief in their monotony  
You live with me in your death as though reborn . . .



'Ben Rudd', another of the pieces in *Ambulando*, is a poem of less personal involvement, but it deals once more with the theme of mortality by means of reference to the sea.<sup>12</sup> Brasch's human subject here is the 'Hermit of Flagstaff' who lived and farmed alone for almost forty years on the hill behind Dunedin.<sup>13</sup> The 'sombre arc of ocean' seen from his isolated property is symbolic of the death awaiting this old man, which will finally and inevitably link him to the rest of humanity:

Cold ocean, grave of waters  
And world's burial ground.

True to the tendency of this volume to focus on the human world, this poem emphasizes the unseverable connections between mankind - the way in which individuals are bound together, whether they realize it or not, by the bonds of their essential frailty and their common fate. Ben Rudd attempts to exist apart from the community of the 'smug town' beneath him, holding at bay all 'who might interfere.' They in turn fear him for being so different and mock him with their cries of 'mad old Ben Rudd.' Brasch, typically, forbears to make judgment. The suggestion that Rudd is crazed is voiced only in the taunts of the town boys ; Brasch's own image of the man is that of an individual who, although at variance with his fellow men, lives at peace with nature. The ballad style in which Brasch writes here (which suggests the possibility of Glover's influence) is new, and strikingly different from the formality of previous volumes, but the choice of this local figure for subject matter is reminiscent of *The Estate*. Once again, the poet writes of someone at home in his physical surroundings, who makes his mark on nature without violating it.

His portrayal of Rudd, then, is sympathetic rather than otherwise ; for as a 'gardener' and a 'farmer', the hermit displays an activity with the land which Brasch saw as an undeniably positive characteristic. The poem's sixth section, which describes Rudd's tending of his hillside, has the visual quality which one associates with Brasch's writing. In fact, with the return to a descriptive style

this passage seems to flow more easily and convincingly than the other colloquially written sections:

Ben Rudd,  
 Gardener making green the valley,  
 Farmer ploughing and sowing the unbroken hill,  
 Laying out fields, setting byre and barn,  
 Planting pine-belts, raising stone walls -  
 Boulders, hill stones, sage lichen-heads;  
 See them, natural boundary marks  
 Of shoulder and terrace and nestling cirque,  
 Walls that stand and run, designing  
 Field against field, life in life,  
 Expositors of time and place;  
 Dwindling over the flank of night  
 Or cloud-cape, sifted snow. . . .

In this aspect, Rudd's isolated existence fulfils one of Brasch's requirement for a worthy life. He is close to the landscape in a way that the human figures in *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* are not, and in return, rather than facing nature's hostility, he is rewarded by the companionship and protection of the land:

High above the town  
 He lodged with wind and sun  
 In a hollow of the hill  
 Whose tussock arms fell  
 About him; streams ran by  
 Low-voiced night and day.

Such harmony with one's physical environment has been one of the ideals promoted in Brasch's poetry from his earliest work onwards but communication with the world is now shown to be an equally real and vital part of existence. Although Rudd lives life as though 'none but he / Trod earth's deck,' his wish to 'start alone, end alone' is implied by Brasch to be an unrealistic one. The hermit may be at home in the natural world but he fails to realize the equal strength of the bonds which tie him to his fellow human beings. When he falls ill, it is not from nature he gains help or comfort, but from the town which receives him and nurses him ; and the metaphor Brasch chooses for the death

of Rudd characteristically blends both worlds. The old man's life is portrayed as just one leaf on the vast tree of humanity:

... death shook  
 His leaf from the bough,  
 Out of then, into now.

'The Barley Field' provides further evidence of the new preoccupation with the human world which is displayed in *Ambulando*. Although a much shorter piece than 'Ben Rudd', this poem expounds the same theme of the underlying connections between all things in life. Once again, Brasch's attention is focused on a human figure, and at first sight this 'old crooked woman' appears to be, like Ben Rudd, a misfit in society, insignificant as she stumbles towards the bus-stop. Yet although the poet brushes past her as if she is 'no-one's care, / Mine least of all,' he realizes that they are in fact joined by the common bond of their own mortal hopes and the frailty of their own existence. Such human frailty is emphasized by contrast with the vigour and enduring strength of the natural world. The barley field is full of colour and life, 'fired with poppies, housing lark and charlock', and beside it, unaware of its beauty, the old woman is a 'seed-vessel battered out of shape by time.' Yet the very metaphor Brasch chooses here subtly suggests the link existing between human beings and their physical surroundings; the woman may be indifferent to both a fellow human being and the landscape around her, but she remains a small but vital part in a vast universal pattern.

It is important to notice here that Brasch is no longer placing nature at the centre of this pattern, as he did in his earlier poems. Although the fleeting nature of human existence is still recognized and admitted in his work, the brief lives of men and woman have now become significant enough to form the basis for some of these poems. Moreover, rather than human nature being presented merely as an extension of the more enduring natural world, mankind and the landscape are seen as occupying positions of dual importance in some universal scheme, existing simultaneously for, and despite, the other. The final lines of

'The Barley Field' acknowledge Brasch's newly discovered faith in the present and in the ordinary lot of human life, represented for him by this bent old woman. As if in deference to this realization, it seems to him that the beauty of nature revolves around her, and exists because of her:

And yet I know you, I know it is for you  
 The field bears its generations of song,  
 Its oceanic streams and wind banners  
 That dazzle me to oblivion far from you;  
 For you, oblivious of the field and me.

The security which Brasch originally only found in nature, then, is now also found in human relationships - not only the close personal ties acknowledged in the poems for his father, grandfather, and friends such as playwright Alexander Guyan<sup>14</sup>, but also the common bond between an individual and every other human being, which gives meaning to life. In the earlier volumes, also, permanence was embodied by the enduring landscape, which only served to highlight the transience of human life and the homelessness of the modern soul. Now, in *Ambulando*, Brasch is able to find a sense of the same stability by observing the recurrence of generations, a development prepared for by the preceding volume *The Estate*, with its focus on family relationships and personal history. 'The Barley Field' implies the passing of generations by taking an aging woman as its subject; 'Seventeen April', commemorating Willi Fels's birthday, speaks of the endless play 'of child, grandchild, greatgrandchild' descended from this man.<sup>15</sup> It is in 'Badger's Mount', however, that I feel Brasch most memorably expresses this theme, for in this poem he balances the universal with the personal, and embodies both in the firm foundation of a landscape familiar to him. Indeed, the strength of this piece lies mainly in its visual images which admirably symbolize Brasch's theme of stability in change, of the endurance of a family line throughout the flux of human generations.

In his own notes to this poem, Brasch describes Badger's Mount as 'a small newish settlement on the edge of extensive woodland on the North Downs in Kent, barely twenty miles from central London.'<sup>16</sup> From *Indirections* we gain the further information that this 'stragglng characterless settlement' was where friends of Brasch's, Bettina and Archie Hamilton, had bought a house and lived during the war<sup>17</sup>; and the poem describes the forests and downs surrounding this village. It is interesting to note that, although Brasch is now dealing with more human-orientated themes, here he reverts to the descriptive style used in the earlier landscape poems and, as he did in *The Estate*, links person to place. Thus Brasch dedicates 'Badger's Mount' to Bettina Hamilton, just as earlier he had written 'Lines from Black Head' for her. In *Indirections* he describes her as one who was 'deeply rooted in life'<sup>18</sup>; clearly he admired her as one of those people who could establish themselves in any country simply by their love of their surroundings. The text of the poem, despite its dedication, makes no direct reference to Bettina, nor does it reveal any emotion. In fact, it is rather more impersonal than most of the poems in *Ambulando*, neither using personal pronouns, nor focusing on human figures. Yet it is from the starting-point of a familiar person and place that Brasch is able to move easily into a contemplation of the universal themes which are at the centre of his poetry, and, indeed, of all human existence.

In his review of the preceding volume *The Estate*, Kendrick Smithyman stated that Brasch is more 'noticeably a poet of landscape, better in treating his relations with a place than he is in treating with people.'<sup>19</sup> This is perhaps borne out by the success of this poem, for the scene of Badger's Mount is clearly visualized, and it is through the carefully observed details of seasonal changes on this countryside that Brasch deals with the theme of flux, rather than by an excursion into wholly abstract discussion which he occasionally attempts in less memorable poems. The drifting leaves and 'sparse fields' of this October landscape speak to Brasch of the 'dwindling year', and not

surprisingly his thoughts turn to the future. He imagines someone, presumably Bettina, walking in this countryside 'with children's children,' and sees the hills and forests as witnesses to the passing of generations:

By wooded path stile flint lane  
 Under leafy cloudy sky  
 High and thin over airy downland  
 Waves of Kentish chalk green-beeched  
 Shadowing new years with years gone  
 Faces with earlier faces thoughts  
 Early late persisting passing . . .<sup>20</sup>

His thoughts then move far from the local and the specific, to contemplate the vast patterns recurring without end in both human and natural worlds:

To winter roots warm in dark  
 To winter stars of fiery frost  
 Bridging then now and hereafter  
 Unforgotten rising and setting  
 Over wood downland ocean  
 Tropic and temperate

Bear and Cross

October and October  
 Leafing unleafing  
 Sifting

The very style of this piece is suggestive of the theme of cyclic change. Its lack of punctuation and the tumbling of one line into the next implies the unstoppable flux of life, yet at the same time it is structured from within by the balanced opposites and echoing repetitions: 'Early late', 'winter roots' and 'winter stars', 'rising and setting', 'October and October', 'leafing and unleafing.'

Such writing displays, I feel, both the significant advancement and the continuity in Brasch's writing from his earliest volume. With *Ambulando*, the considerable development of his technical skill becomes clear. The tone of this fourth volume is markedly more personal and direct, the overall style both more compressed yet more natural in its phrasing and cadence, as certain lines in 'Badger's Mount' illustrate:

By wooded path stile flint lane  
 Under leafy cloudy sky . . .

Clearly this poet has progressed a long way from the formally structured, carefully impersonal writing of earlier years. The nationalist issue, too, has ceased to become important in his poetry, or at least is no longer necessary as a vehicle for wider issues. The very title Brasch chose for this volume indicates that he was well aware of the new directions his writing was taking, for he translated *Ambulando* as 'my dog Latin for going places'<sup>21</sup> - a title with very different implications from those he selected for his first three books, all of which suggested a search for some established resting-point.

These differences aside, however, in a poem such as 'Badger's Mount' there remain considerable resemblances to the poems of *The Land and the People* or *Disputed Ground*: the observance of seasonal changes, the attention to the features of the natural world, and the inclusion of colour to intensify the visual impact of the piece. Brasch's increasing focus on the human world does not appear to have precluded his love of landscape writing. In fact, as this poem displays, the countryside is now more clearly and vividly realized than before, perhaps because the greater conciseness with which he now writes necessitates unerring selection of relevant detail. The description of a specific location is not, however, as in some of the early poems, merely intended to create a vivid word picture (although 'Badger's Mount' is certainly successful on this level alone). All the particulars of Brasch's physical surroundings now serve a dual purpose, included for reasons other than a straight portrayal of their visual aspect. The 'yellow and brown' leaves drift before the autumn wind like the passing of human lives; shadows of sun and cloud on the Kentish Downs likewise symbolize human transience; and the 'winter stars of fiery frost', far removed from human concerns, as elsewhere in Brasch's poetry represent permanence and purity. In other poems in *Ambulando* Brasch departs from the landscape tradition altogether to write in a wholly abstract and philosophical way (a tendency beginning to be indicated in *The Estate* by poems such as 'Self to Self'); but these poems seem to me to be somewhat

repetitious and directionless, their themes either ill-defined (as in 'Revolving', which deals with the problem of expressing oneself through words) or too insistently emphasized (as in 'No Reparation,' one of Brasch's first explicit attempts at love poetry).

As most critics do, Bertram notes the new style which *Ambulando* represents, the more concise structure, barer language and more personal tone: 'This is a more human voice, speaking rather dryly with its own bleak honesty.'<sup>22</sup> Yet despite the development in Brasch's writing towards a more 'human' voice, the legacy from his early landscape poetry remains one of the greatest strengths of this new work. As 'Badger's Mount' conclusively shows, even when dealing with personal and abstract themes, as is now usual in his poetry Brasch still expresses himself best through the medium of natural imagery. Clearly over the two and a half decades since the publication of his first volume, he has not lost his gift for expressing abstract thought and emotion through concrete images of the external world. To my mind, it is the poems displaying this gift which most clearly and memorably articulate the underlying themes of *Ambulando*. There is no finer example of this blend of visual and philosophical elements to be found in this volume than in 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak.'

The way in which Brasch focuses on the flight of the hawk for the structure of his poem is reminiscent of Yeats's centring on the falcon in 'The Second Coming'. Both poets make symbolic use of the bird's movement, but, whereas Yeats voices a message of dark foreboding, with the circling of the falcon representing the growing anarchy of the modern world, Brasch's conclusion is one of unquestioning acceptance of the 'savage discord' of life. His hawk, too, circles upwards, but through 'still air', not turbulent darkness; and his sun is not the 'blank and pitiless' one of Yeats' poem<sup>23</sup>, but symbolizes freedom and light. There is no human figure in the scene Brasch creates for us, no 'falconer' attempting to control the bird's flight; nor does the poet make his own presence felt. In the manner of his earlier sketches such as 'Pipikariti' or



'Blueskin Bay', there exists in this piece a clearly visualized landscape whose only inhabitants are those of the natural world. Through his observations of this world, however, Brasch is making an implicit commentary on mortal existence, allowing meditation to naturally extend from his external focus.

His theme here is what R.L.P. Jackson, in his review of *Ambulando*, describes as 'the perennial theme of poetry' - that is, 'the tension between the "ideal" and the "real", the relation between "heaven" and "earth".'<sup>24</sup> The hawk's flight away from the earth, then, becomes a symbol of human aspirations towards the 'ideal.' Soaring towards the sun, he leaves behind the 'last rank / Odours of flesh and blood' and is 'loosed from the world' of bonds and limitations:

... he casts defiant  
 Against the sun his glittering eye;  
 And circles in an arc embracing  
 A mesh of worlds,  
 And circling rests,  
 Victor borne on his shield  
 Into opening heaven . . .<sup>25</sup>

Belonging to no world, then, the hawk exists in a moment which transcends time, and which has a transforming power. The mountain ranges of Queenstown below him appear unearthly, mirroring his ascent, and anything seems possible.

Under his wings gleam, earth's last foothold,  
 Earnslaw, Aspiring, the stairway of light,  
 Whose snows hover  
 In stillness without word,  
 Wait for him to soar on, take fire, vanish  
 Upward, ascended, received on high.

The hawk's literal hovering between sky and earth represents the potential state of spirituality existing beyond the limitations of the physical, the possibility of which is included in so many twentieth-century poets' work. This is Eliot's 'awful daring of a moment's surrender'<sup>26</sup>; this, Yeats's 'Unity of Being' in which 'we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame, where there is

nothing but the state itself<sup>27</sup>; this, Brasch's own 'dazzled moment . . . dream of wholeness, draught of peace.'<sup>28</sup> The very details of the world which he selects here are those which glitter and flash, suggesting energy, power, and redemption: the sun on the snow, the shining mountains, the air like an 'ocean of light.'

Yet, just as in *The Estate* Brasch's realism constantly reasserts itself, so too does he acknowledge in 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak' the fleeting nature of such a moment. In 'Autumn in Spring', for example, he turns from his redemptive vision with a sigh, realizing that 'idling summer' is only a brief respite amidst the reality of 'a discord of winter, storm cry, beaten waters.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly here the hawk leaves the 'warm sigh of a cloud', drawn back to earth by the 'shadow unseen' of his very nature. And thus Brasch implies that, like the hawk, we are 'blood and warm marrow'; we too are part of the earth, irrevocably bound to our mortal existence. As the hawk descends and the heady vision of sun and sky fades, the focus is once more upon physicalities of the earth - 'Plain, tree and burrow / Tussock and nest' - which are the only truths this world permits us to possess. Despite the fact that the bird returns to earth, however, it remains 'undefeated.' In Brasch's description of its strength and beauty, its 'strong heart', 'broad wings', and the perfection of its flight, there is a hint of hope for human kind. In this poem there is the implicit suggestion that, despite the frailty of flesh and the bonds of our time-restricted world, we may also achieve a fleeting vision of redemption, and Brasch suggests that this joy, however transitory, may be no less real than day-to-day existence.

The descent of the hawk as it acknowledges 'Earth's brood awaiting him, / Earth waking in him' is mirrored by the closing of the day:

Look, the sun falling, the point of dusk,  
Day turning from him . . .'

Both images, in a characteristic way, externalize Brasch's interior landscape, symbolizing his unquestioning submission to the boundaries of his own

existence. Such acceptance of the limited nature of human potential is prefigured in the shorter poems of *The Estate*, where the poet begins to find security not only in the permanence of the natural world but also in his immediate surroundings and in the present, the only 'estates' one can fully claim as one's own. In 'Letter from Thurlby Domain', he stands amidst the wilderness of his great-grandfather's property and states his belief that only by knowing one's own time and place can one achieve any overall perspective on life:

Dead house and living trees and we that live  
 To make our peace on earth and become native  
 In place and time, in life and death: how should  
 We entertain any other goal or good  
 Than this, than here?

The way in which he immediately follows this assertion with carefully observed detail of the scene in front of him, from the great sunlit peaks of Crown and Coronet to the tiny lizard at his feet, indicates a familiarity with this scene which adds conviction to his claim. Now, in 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak', the physical setting of the poem is again one which he knows well and can thus clearly realize for his reader; and, although not explicitly stated this time, there is present the same implication that one must acquiesce to one's lot. Direct statement of Brasch's belief, of the necessity of a base for all living things, is simply not necessary here. The description of the hawk's movement, soaring almost 'sheer up into invisibility' yet at dusk returning to the familiar territory of his own province, symbolizes this theme as clearly as if voiced by the poet.

It is obvious that the landscape which Brasch chose to focus on here was one which he felt at home in, having spent so many of his childhood summers in the Queenstown area. Detail is sharply and meticulously observed, as if through the eyes of the hawk:

Beneath, his province he sees  
 Earth in its first likeness;  
 Out of the maze of valleys  
 The thousand mountains, shining,

Lifting their rock and snow  
 Into upper air . . .

From this aerial view Brasch typically narrows his focus. Just as he does in 'Letter from Thurbly Domain' his vision moves from the vast forms of mountains to the smallest of natural details:

Day turning from him, world calling to him  
 From rock, valley, foaming river,  
 Plain, tree, and burrow  
 Tussock and nest -

While admitting the possibility of another world in which one can momentarily discard the bonds of time and one's own limited identity, then, Brasch's writing here is very firmly based in a local landscape. His acknowledgement of the ties of place and time on all living things does not mean his poetry is devoid of hope - it is simply poetry of realism, a positive quality in itself. The way in which Brasch constantly returns his gaze to the tangible world around him is not an admission of defeat but rather a sign that, to him, this world of rock and soil represents more than human limitations: it provides security and stability, thus enabling acceptance of these limitations. The visual focus of 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak' allows Brasch to present this theme objectively and unobtrusively, hawk and landscape being both objects of actuality and symbols of a more metaphysical vision.

THE LANDSCAPE OF LOVE: 'IN YOUR PRESENCE'

*No death more urgent than that waking, yet  
In rock and thorn, night-settled dust, a land  
Watered by that one uncertain stream that's brought  
From the white religious mountain, I understand  
The choice we make binding ourselves to love:  
And know that though death breeds in love's strange bones,  
Its failing flesh lives warmer than the stones.*

- C. K. Stead

The impersonal, descriptive surface Brasch maintains in this poem is evidence of the wide range of styles contained in *Ambulando*; for also within this volume are to be found poems of a more personal and informal nature than any this poet has written previously, dealing directly with human love and sexual relationships. Vincent O'Sullivan, in his comprehensive article ' "Brief Permitted Morning": Notes on the Poetry of Charles Brasch', suggests that not until now 'does Charles Brasch successfully bring love into his verse.'<sup>30</sup> Brasch himself mildly refutes this statement in the *Landfall* interview with Milner in 1971:

... Well, I wouldn't care to dispute with a critic like Vincent O'Sullivan. You might say that love takes many forms. I thought I had always written about it.<sup>31</sup>

In a sense, Brasch has 'always written about it'; even his earliest national poetry deals in an impersonal way with the necessity for compassion for the land and for one's fellow human beings, and this compassion is surely one of the 'many forms' of love. Yet apart from the much earlier 'Tryst by Water' in *Disputed Ground*, and the somewhat effusive verses in 'The Estate' celebrating Brasch's friendship with Scott, there are no poems before *Ambulando* which directly address the topic of love between two individuals, as do four in particular here: 'No Reparation', 'Reflection', 'Break and Go', and 'In Your Presence.' The first three of these are short pieces in which the poet laments a lost love, which has been 'steered to shipwreck.'<sup>32</sup> It is the extended song cycle

'In Your Presence' which contains a celebration of love, and in which we discover the poet's most extensive statements on love.<sup>33</sup>

In the same article O'Sullivan comments on the marked technical change evident in this fourth volume: the shorter lines, the more concise statement, the greater emphasis on verbs rather than adjectives, and the sparing use of metaphor. Certainly 'In Your Presence' sees Brasch writing in a far less descriptive and less formal way, providing a sharp contrast to poems such as 'Mountain Lily', 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak', and 'Badger's Mount', all of which display the pictorial quality that one tends to associate with this poet. Here there is no vividly realized background of landscape to bind the sequence of lyrics together, or to provide an external point of reference. Each verse is linked only by the common theme of love, in all its variety of moods and implications. The opening of the first section (for the cycle is divided into four parts) shows just how far Brasch's writing has diverged from the style of his earlier work which almost invariably began with a detailed establishment of setting, and usually moved from this to a contemplation of an interior landscape. Now Brasch discards the focus on outer detail altogether, from the very beginning centring the poem on himself and his own particular relationship:

I practise to believe  
And work towards love.  
How should I see  
Until I study with your eye?

Nothing I know  
Unless you answer for me now.  
What was I made for  
Except to write with your signature?

From these opening verses it becomes clear that, where once Brasch only found certainty in the absolutes of nature - its water, rock, and sky - now human love too provides a central faith for him, something around which his fluctuating identity can revolve. This love becomes his vision, enabling him to

see life from a different perspective and so achieve, as he says later in the poem, a 'moment of waking dream.' This moment is the same spiritual revelation as is described in 'Hawk Over Bowen Peak', but is attained now through different means and expressed in a different way. Such a revelation is no longer solely confined to the intense appreciation of nature's beauty, of 'Earth in its first likeness', but is also to be discovered in emotional and physical response to another human being. Brasch describes the same apprehension of the telescoping of time, when origins and endings are united into a whole vision, but his description in 'In Your Presence' is less visual, and relies not on landscape for its focal point but on the poet's relationship with his lover:

For life? Your life and mine?  
 This moment of waking dream is all the life  
 I dare ask or imagine;  
 These words: this silence: the heart instructed:  
 And in your eyes life and death new-born.

While union with another appears to have provided Brasch with a new meaning and direction in life, and while most of 'In Your Presence' directly describes this union, however, the certainties of the natural world remain with him here. The absolutes of natural forms and the elements, so important in his earlier, more personally reticent verse as symbols of his inner emotional state, are now no longer as necessary. He appears to be more at ease with a straightforward personal mode of writing; he himself acknowledged that, with this volume, he had the 'ability to write now about subjects that [he] couldn't write about earlier.'<sup>34</sup> Yet although the impersonal mask which land and seascape provided for Brasch has now been discarded, and the focus has shifted away from visual detail in favour of a more metaphysical angle, natural imagery is still in evidence. The images of this love poem are not, perhaps, as strikingly visual as is usual in Brasch's writing, nor are they the sustained metaphors typical of the work of his first three volumes. They do, however, colour and strengthen Brasch's personal observations on love and, by their very presence,

ensure a kind of continuity between his earlier poetry and this more mature work.

Even while asserting the importance of this new world to him, described as 'the one and only one / World I am chosen to dwell in', Brasch continues to display, then, his old allegiance to the touchstones of the natural world. Human love is now his 'estate', rather than any literal domain of nation or region. Human love bestows on him the same sense of emotional security as did the physical shelter of the walled garden at Dorset St. in 'The Estate', as the opening of section II displays:

In the true-knot of your arms  
Lock me from the world's alarms;  
    To that narrow room  
    All kingdoms come.

But although his 'kingdom' is now a figurative rather than a literal one, Brasch still describes it in terms of the natural world, its sky, sea and rock. His images are general ones only, for this is no localized landscape but a metaphorical one to symbolize a universal emotion.

Following the verse quoted above, he writes, for example:

Waking, dreaming, we shall rove  
The warm lands and seas of love,  
    And fear no winter there,  
    Nor anguish on the air,

While feather winds wave us on  
Through time coming and time gone,  
    Present to us now  
    In the sealing of a vow.

In the following section, the poet again stresses the sense of stability his lover gives him amidst the flux of time, and the inevitable chaos of human life; and once again the images are those of land and sea:

I have burned my boats.  
I cannot put out again  
Onto the assembled sea  
Under crooked wind and candle stars  
For another shore, no shore.

Your pyramid point of balance  
Borne on the rearing eddy of time



Is my one terra firma;  
 Within me shudders and accuses,  
 Blindfold, a sea of no shore.

This connection between the poet's love and the sea is made in several places in 'In Your Presence.' By retaining the same symbolic implications evident in his first two volumes, here Brasch is able to achieve a similar fusion of opposites regarding the theme of love. Where once in his poetry the ocean was both life-giver and destroyer, now love (both as an abstract ideal and a personal emotion realized in the specific relationship celebrated here) becomes invested with this dual symbolism. In words reminiscent of 'The Land and the People' sequence, Brasch writes of seeming paradoxes, but this time in metaphysical terms rather than in concrete metaphor:

I turn in your day and night  
 Pivoting on one thought,  
 What we are and are not,  
 That love as evergreen mover  
 Is our always and our never,  
 Creator, destroyer, preserver.

Darkness and light, death and life, become one for him in this new world that he inhabits, which is one of human emotions yet which is somehow inextricably bound up with the vast laws of nature:

I lie down in your arms,  
 My light goes out in your light  
 To the burden of your voice  
 Sounding deep in a shell cavern  
 That holds the ocean of life.

The ocean, then, retains its curious nature of 'creator' and 'destroyer' that Brasch bestowed on it in earlier poems such as 'Genesis' or 'Great Sea', yet it is no longer the predominant focus in such metaphysical poetry as this. The poet is now expressing the central facts of his existence in human terms, and natural imagery is largely present to reinforce this expression. In earlier works such as 'Genesis', Brasch turned to the ocean as the place of all human origin; now the centre of his vision has shifted to a less visual, more personal world. Within this world he discovers his emotional and spiritual beginnings, and also a

physical awakening, within a mutual relationship of love. This relationship, too, bears those intimations of mortality which earlier he saw embodied in the ceaseless ebb and flow of the sea. His love, then, both validates his existence, bestowing on him a feeling of strength and permanence, and emphasizes his human frailty. The verse which expresses this most clearly contains the central thesis of the poem, and is repeated at the end of both section I and the fifth and final section:

In your presence my fount and dayspring  
And breath and heart's blood.

In your presence my bonded earth and heaven,  
My vows and marriage lines.

In your presence my end and my death-bed.

The double-edged nature of Brasch's comprehensive vision, so typical of his writing, is clearly evident here. In his earlier landscape poetry he saw within rock and sky 'the living and the dead inseparable'<sup>35</sup>; now in the eyes of his lover he sees 'life and death new-born.' The emotions that love arouses within him are the same ambivalent blend as those inspired by communion with nature. O'Sullivan describes the two feelings which dominate this song cycle as being 'certainty' and 'apprehension'<sup>36</sup>; even within the happiness and vitality which his love affords him, Brasch appears to be constantly aware of the frailty of such joy and the potential grief within it. The transience of human happiness, and of life itself, which has been a thread woven throughout the body of his work, has hitherto been symbolized by changes observed in the external world - by the passing of the seasons and the decay of nature's and man's creations, as in the Thurlby Domain poems or 'Autumn in Spring.' Now Brasch writes directly of the changing moods of his own interior landscape, and it is through his description of the finiteness of even the strongest of human loves, and the sadness inherent in love, that he introduces the theme never long absent from his work, that of mortality.

Thus his love is 'a dying love', and in several aspects foreshadows the final physical death of the flesh. He describes the sexual consummation of his love in similar terms to those used by the sixteenth-century metaphysical poets; lovers are described as having 'rehearsed / Death's love' through sexual union. Physical separation and the pain that it entails is also like a dying of the soul:

In the dark of dawn  
Your going lies before me like a death.

Even nightly sleep is compared to the darkness of death:

Death is a house where your voice cannot reach me.  
O love, in the stillness nightly  
I practice the deaf-mute I must play there.

The central concerns of this poetry - death, alienation, transience - remain the same as those of Brasch's earlier work, but here they are expressed in human and abstract terms rather than natural and concrete ones. There is little evidence of the vivid descriptive writing of 'Karitane' or 'Blueskin Bay' now. Physical location is not important in this metaphysical poetry, and the visual quality typical of his earlier work takes second place to a more directly personal style and subject matter. I do not, however, regard Brasch as having altogether discarded the influence of landscape which was such a vital part of his earlier writing. The emphasis of his vision has certainly shifted, to allow him to incorporate material of a new and personal significance into his writing. Yet even now, although his purpose is no longer that of a 'landscape poet', Brasch seems to instinctively turn to the world of nature as providing touchstones for his own emotions, and as helping him to poetically express these emotions.

His inclusion of land and seascape, and the seasons, is no longer in the form of the highly wrought, extended metaphors of the first three volumes. One finds instead fleeting references, imaginative connections between external and private worlds, which seem almost unconsciously made, so natural do they seem. In section II, for example, the stillness of the night and the quietness of

the two lovers become fused, in a quick interplay between natural and human characteristics:

Windless night:  
 Our pulses make no sound,  
 None the play of hand;  
 At fluttering of moth  
 Heart holds its breath.

The bitter-sweet quality of love, its 'ecstasy' and 'anguish' spoken of in the first section of the poem, is also effectively captured in the following section by the use of brief images drawn from nature. The fragrance of the buddleia, which Brasch describes as 'Honey barb stinging the dusk', is likened to the 'fume of anguish' of his love. The next image compares the piercing sweetness of love to a star, hitherto in Brasch's poetry a symbol of permanence and purity, and far removed from the mortal world:

White cold star splitting the dusk,  
 Sweetness that searches nerve and soul  
 With blade of ice, and you, descended,  
 Stabbing my heart with lightning love.

The way in which Brasch describes his love in this section as 'severing' outlines one of the main strands running throughout 'In Your Presence', the theme of separateness. With quiet resignation, he acknowledges the fact that 'two may not be / Pure unity', however close these two may come. Once again, he includes a slight visual image to clarify private feeling: the 'angry bee at the window' trying to go 'headlong, through glass' is like his own spirit attempting in vain to pass the invisible barrier between all individuals. This is no new theme, but it does provide evidence of the distance Brasch has travelled in his poetry since his first volume. Moya Smith has described in her unpublished Ph.D. thesis how one of the central notions in 'The Land and the People' sequence is the way New Zealand is characterized by separateness: physically divided within itself into two islands, geographically isolated from other countries, and spiritually split in the alienation of man from nature.<sup>37</sup> The

extensive treatment of this theme in 'The Estate' shows Brasch moving away from a solely external focus to describe his own private experience of such 'separateness', yet this description is still largely reliant on the element of landscape, with the strong identification of Harry Scott with his two literal 'estates' of garden and mountainous terrain. Now the emphasis is entirely personal, as even the frequent use of the pronouns 'I' and 'you' indicate:

I see, but also know  
 We are separate, and so  
 Taking hands, saying our lines,  
 Must follow the designs

Each heart invents alone . . .

Yet the touches of visual imagery which Brasch does include to intensify his expression of this theme are invariably from the natural world. To me, this is significant evidence that the landscape poet of *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground* has not vanished, but is rather using the craft at which he excelled in these volumes as a base from which to embark upon a type of writing he is a little less sure of. The touchstones so frequently referred to in his earlier work, moreover, remain the same - the elements of darkness and light, of rock, tree, sea and land - but are included for a different purpose. Now they are not part of any literal local scene, as symbols of national or universal concerns, but are instead more abstract elements embodying for the poet a relationship of intensely personal relevance. A seascape no longer represents the vaster world of time, as it does in 'A View of Rangitoto' for instance, but is first and foremost a reminder of a much smaller and intensely private world:

I read your signature  
 In the rose and in the rock and in the fabling sea . . .

Such writing represents, I feel, a reversal of the process which Brasch uses in his first two volumes. Rather than selecting details of landscape and symbolically extending them to embody universal truths, as he does earlier, he now takes the same sort of details, exhibiting the same talent for evoking mood

and image, yet moves inwards rather than outwards: that is, he narrows his vision, centralizing it on his own relationship rather than extending it to embrace general truths. The scent of 'a rose in the wind' becomes a metaphor for the voice of his partner over the telephone wires; 'smoke of mountain fires' causes a haze but the image of his lover remains 'clear in the drift of days'; the interaction of their speech and thoughts is likened, in an image very similar to that in the much earlier 'Tryst by Water', to the 'exulting of waters loosed.'

Land and seascape, then, hold a significance for Brasch deeper than simple visual beauty, as they always have, but they now hold a personal rather than a universal meaning. This is voiced explicitly in the final section:

The waters hold your face  
And winds your voice.

The cycles of day and night, darkness and light, which used to be invested with symbolism concerning the general destiny of man, are frequently included here but with a similar narrowing of connotation as Brasch focuses on one individual. 'I turn in your day and night,' he states; and later he describes the person to whom the poem is addressed as light on the darkest night, shining 'for your world and mine.' Their mutual love and trust is prophesied to light them 'through the rancorous dark of time', and flares so brightly that it will 'subvert every dawn.'

Such connections between natural and personal worlds are numerous in 'In Your Presence.' At times they are so slight as to be hardly noticeable: the years of the future are 'torrential', for example, and the caress of hand on face is a 'leaf-touch.' At most, the landscape or elemental images Brasch includes consist of a few lines, present more to create a mood or fleeting impression than a substantial word picture. Nonetheless, I believe these connections are significant evidence that, despite Brasch's move into the different style of writing that this poem represents, he still, consciously or not, refers back to the certainties of a tangible world which he knows and loves. It is interesting to

note that, while his poetry has become more 'localized' in a personal sense, the landscape images he includes are not specifically local ones, but are the general and age-old ones of 'the rose . . . and the rock and . . . the fabling sea', invested not only with symbolic significance by Brasch alone but carrying the connotations bestowed on them by centuries of poets from all cultures. At times, perhaps, one feels that a return to the vividly descriptive landscapes of the first volume would in fact, be a refreshing interlude in the heavily symbolic atmosphere of 'In Your Presence.' R.L.P. Jackson voices this wish in his review of *Ambulando* for *Landfall*:

I find myself asking at times for a less insistent contemplativeness, even, perhaps, for a concentration on external objects as mere 'things in themselves' quite apart from their religious and metaphysical significance.<sup>38</sup>

Although the way in which Brasch includes these 'external objects' in his poetry has changed, however, the effect they have of distancing emotion is actually very similar to that evident in his earlier volumes. For, although on one level 'In Your Presence' is an extremely personal poem (particularly when compared to the body of Brasch's work up to this point), it remains on another level enigmatic, and not particularly emotionally revealing. Perhaps, as Bertram suggests when speaking of this love poetry, Brasch is 'more truly a poet of the affections and the imagination, than of passion'<sup>39</sup>; certainly this poem has a careful, almost intellectualized feel about it, rather than being a spontaneous celebration of a personal relationship. The identity and personality of the 'you' to whom the poem is addressed is never clarified, despite the fact that this person is included in every section, and this distancing is undoubtedly deliberate. Although Brasch has moved into a more personal mode, at the same time one gains the impression that behind this poem exists the same intensely private and reserved writer of three decades earlier. The protective smokescreen he raises around the two central personalities in the poem is largely created by the heavily symbolic emphasis throughout the poem and the

images drawn from the natural world, which I feel are intended to divert attention away from the poet himself. Ostensibly personal lines such as 'The waters hold your face / And the winds your voice' in fact reveal little about either the speaker or listener. In this respect the poem is very much a paradox, personal yet impersonal, honest yet peculiarly indirect in its adherence to external rather than interior detail.

OLD IMAGERY AND A NEW STYLE; NOT FAR OFF

*You speak always  
In that same even tone  
Learned from earth itself. . .*

- Charles Brasch

The successor to *Ambulando* was *Not Far Off*, published in 1969. This fifth volume of Brasch's represents an even greater variety of styles than the fourth, for in its four sections one finds tributes to friends and other poets, pieces enlarging on the themes of sexual and emotional love, and death, and, surprisingly, a series of what Bertram calls 'travel impressions'<sup>40</sup> which mark a reversion to the descriptive landscape writing one associates with an earlier Brasch. The words addressed to Iain Lonie in 'Born and Made' might equally well be applied to Brasch himself, considering the wide range of tone and techniques employed throughout the volume:

I lose you among words and rhythms, lose  
The man and find the poet more than man,  
Groundswell of voices speaking in your one  
Voice . . .<sup>41</sup>

Once again, as in *Ambulando*, we do 'lose the man' to a certain extent, and in several poems Brasch deals with the question of the 'missing' identity of the poet, Keats's elusive 'poetical Character' which 'has no self - it is everything and nothing . . .'<sup>42</sup>. Brasch makes his own extensive statement on the problem



of the 'Chameleon Poet' in the poems of the second section of *Not Far Off*: 'Man Missing', 'Ergo Sum', 'Open the Heart', 'At Pistol Point', 'Bonnet and Plume.' These poems deal directly with the difficulty of being true to oneself when one writes; of maintaining a 'fixed' personality long enough to create a unified, centralized work; of knowing just how far to expose the 'whole quivering self' to a reader. These poems seem to be a natural progression from the first section in which, as Bertram says, Brasch 'records his debts and obligation' to fellow writers: W.H. Auden, R.A.K. Mason, Fleur Adcock, Iain Lonie, James Courage, Denis Glover, and the German poet Johannes Bobrowski. Amongst the medley of pieces which make up the fourth section are further tributes - to fellow Oxford graduate Louis MacNeice, to Russian poet Yosif Brodsky, and to John Hamilton, son of Brasch's personal friend Bettina.

There is little room here to discuss such poems, fine as many of them are. *Not Far Off* is the largest of the six collections of verse published by Brasch, and as such perhaps best portrays the diversity of his poetic trends at this stage. The comment Bertram makes about the fourth section, that it is a 'kaleidoscope of the later poetic styles', could well be applied to the volume as a whole.<sup>43</sup> Brasch seems to be giving expression to the wide range of 'mood-modes' and to the 'calendar of roles' which he speaks of in 'Ergo Sum'<sup>44</sup>, as he experiments with conversational tone and occasional poetry far removed from his more formal descriptive work. Yet even amidst these poems are to be found occasional natural images which are reminiscent of an earlier Brasch. The image which seems to occur most often is not that of the mountains, nor of the sea (two images which dominate the earlier work) but that of the tree. In this volume the tree becomes invested with a symbolism which is three-fold, representing one's own identity, the relationship between two individuals, and life itself.

In 'Ergo Sum', for example, Brasch asks in the final stanza, 'Who am I to command / A self and its leaf-selves . . . ?', and death is described as 'the last leaf-burning.' The short piece 'In the Wind', one of the four under the heading of 'Apostrophes', also employs this natural metaphor. Speaking of the parting of two lovers, the poet laments:

Somewhere among each other's roots we still grow,  
 But our leaves and branches no longer touch or nod  
 In the wind, which makes different music in them now.  
 And the roots are blind, and do not know.<sup>45</sup>

This trend is also noticeable in the lengthier 'Towards Leafbreak', a difficult and, at times, obscure poem (dismissed by O'Sullivan as a 'casualty' in the 'running battle' of the control of words<sup>46</sup>) which attempts to deal with the nature of love and its inevitable division in death.<sup>47</sup> Here Brasch uses not only images of trees and growth (love is described as trying to prove itself 'root-fast / Amid day's ravage') but also those of water and rock and light. Almost the entire third section of this piece, in fact, is comprised of writing focusing on natural phenomena.

Rivers that run under  
 Ground or cease to run,  
 Compose the ocean swell  
 And the moon's welling . . .

The emphasis Brasch places on such phenomena is highly symbolic, rather than descriptive and visual as in his earlier poetry; but there is, I feel, a continuity to be found in the way that he uses the natural world to convey recurrent themes. The paradoxical nature of the land, its stability tempered by constant change, which is a major theme in *The Land and the People*, is returned to here: 'Cry in the rocks' fleeting / Concretion.' And the acute awareness of the brevity of life, which has been a constant undercurrent throughout Brasch's work, is no less evident now, typically phrased in a metaphor of land and seascape:

. . . flood waters drumming

Annihilation on  
 All landmarks, lives fostered,  
 Atom by atom;

We too atom and storm  
 And now the livelong breaking  
 Of leaf upon leaf faded  
 From uniform.

Such examples of landscape imagery in *Not Far Off* are infrequent, and may seem slight when compared to the densely woven visual surfaces of Brasch's earlier work, which so vividly evoked certain scenes for the reader. Nonetheless, they are proof enough that, for Brasch, nature was still at the centre of his world, although more personal concerns may have diverted his poetic attention away from landscape writing; their presence suggests that this poet's old habit of thinking in terms of natural images persisted even while he was involved in experimentation with new styles of writing. The poem 'Ode in Grey', which is written in memory of the German poet Johannes Bobrowski<sup>48</sup>, provides further evidence that Brasch, although now writing far more directly about the sphere of personal fears and ambitions, had far from turned his back on the vast backdrop to such human drama. Clearly even in this, his fifth volume, he maintained a steadfast belief in the deep and unseverable relationship between the transient world of mortal existence and the enduring one of nature. As the poem to Bobrowski conclusively shows, the absolutes of sea, sky, and earth remain the only certainties amidst the atrocities man commits in his universe: 'the death of peoples, annihilation, / . . . life trodden, beaten down . . .'.

Bobrowski emerges from this tribute as a poet who does not attempt to ignore the wrongs of mankind, yet who is able to place these in the wider perspectives of nature and time, and in this way, in fact, he seems similar to Brasch himself. The German poet is described as being the 'Heart-voice of human kind, / Gong, echo, time-bell / Of one man and all men . . .'. Brasch, too, with his increased focus on the intrinsic problems of human existence

evident in his fourth and fifth volumes can be seen as speaking for all 'human kind.' Yet for both poets a love of nature is at the very heart of their lives and their poetry, and Brasch's acknowledgement of the calm objectivity that this bestows on Bobrowski's vision is equally applicable to himself:

You speak always  
 In that same even tone  
 Learned from earth itself, from  
 Its braiding mists, ore veins silently working,  
 Listener tense-still,  
 You toll-tell your world,  
 Wind rivers, plains of starlight, forest, snow,  
 Ground voices of waters,  
 Crack of frozen branches  
 And men timelessly bearing, breaking,  
 The plough-work of the years,  
 The slow teeming earth  
 That mothers birds, animals, men:  
 So you weave again the wounded  
 Web of living.

The European landscape Brasch sketches here is a very different one from his own native country; this is no land of bush and rugged seashores and harsh sunlight, but one of forests and snow and frozen rivers. But this passage once again indicates Brasch's universality of vision, for here he is voicing the recognition that 'the slow teeming earth' is the source of all life, and that the artistic creations of all men, regardless of their nationality, emulate the processes of the natural world (suggested by his metaphor of weaving a 'web of living' with one's poetry). The first three lines of this verse echo the central creed of 'The Land and the People' sequence, in which Brasch advocates the wisdom of learning from the land. In the earlier New Zealand poems, it is the necessity for the newcomer to live by his country's 'redeeming rule' which is dealt with; 'Ode in Grey', in keeping with this volume's general exploration of the poet's role, focuses more specifically on the gifts a writer can receive from the earth. In both, however, the Wordsworthian image of nature as a teacher and a guide is a pivotal one. Furthermore, the same 'even tone / Learned from

earth itself' with which Brasch credits Bobrowski in the later piece, is one of the outstanding merits of the New Zealand poet's own earlier landscape writing.

The conclusion of 'Ode in Grey' reminds me forcibly of another piece written considerably earlier by Brasch. 'Lines from Black Head', a poem dedicated to Bettina Hamilton in *The Estate*, describes this personal friend of Brasch's as having an enviable knowledge of the laws of nature, and as being rewarded for this: 'all things wished you well.'<sup>49</sup>

Now, over a decade later, Brasch reveals the same admiration for this quality in a person. The fact that Bobrowski is also a poet suggests that a rapport with nature is something Brasch saw as desirable not only in everyday life but also in artistic creation. In tribute to this fellow poet he writes:

Waters under the ice  
 Witness to you, the bird that seals  
 Its flight with one last call,  
 The young leaf raising its arms  
 To light, the grey leaf  
 Coiling into dust -  
 All, all are your kin,  
 All speak your tongue.

#### A SENSE OF CONTINUITY

*We, visitors or inhabitants, pass through.  
 Splendour remains, indifferent to what we do.  
 Peak, ridge and pilgrim water still remote, untamed;  
 Charted but all intractable, anonymous though named.*

- Basil Dowling

The fact that cross references can be made between poems written decades apart suggests that, despite the distance Brasch has travelled poetically in the course of five volumes of work, his predilection for nature poetry so evident in his early writing remains. If the echoes between early and later work are noticed by the reader, then the third section of *Not Far Off* seems less

inconsistent with the rest of this volume than otherwise; for the poems in this section are straight descriptive pieces of various settings, and represent a return to the type of writing found in Brasch's very first volume. The personal focus has now shifted back to a complete concentration on external objects; and the symbolic significance of these objects is even less than in the earlier work, for Brasch's primary purpose here is to simply present a series of 'travel impressions.'<sup>50</sup> Thus we find a succession of short but vivid descriptions of the landscapes of many different countries, as the titles indicate.

Brasch's own country is represented in poems such as 'Down Ferry Road' (and this suggests a new familiarity with Christchurch gained from his years here as editor of *Landfall*), 'Dead Tree Castle', 'Green Bay Below', and 'Heathcote Estuary', all of which are redolent with the very essence of the New Zealand countryside. There is none of the repetition or obscurity which occasionally mars some of his more personal writing. Despite the fact that Brasch has not employed this simple descriptive style for a considerable number of years, his vision is as sharp as ever, and details as clearly realized. Colourful passages summon up the New Zealand scene as strongly as any found in *The Land and the People* or *Disputed Ground*, such as the opening of 'Dead Tree Castle':

Watchful, the black shag  
Nests above the current  
On his eerie branches  
Polished bone-pale . . . <sup>51</sup>

or the slight but beautifully evocative 'Heathcote Estuary':

Last sound at night  
From the unlit estuary  
A single cluster of cries,  
Air-voices high, thin, casting  
Their lines far out,  
The oyster-catchers  
Net me for sleep.<sup>52</sup>

The pictures of foreign locations are equally well-drawn, reminding the reader once again of the extensive travel Brasch undertook during his lifetime.

There is a sequence entitled 'Days of Skye', consisting of the three short pieces 'Moorland Sheep', 'Peat Loch', and 'Outer Isles'; a poem called 'Above the Java Sea'; and two others dealing with Brasch's visual impressions of Dieppe and Delhi. The similarity between these poems and those of Brasch's first two volumes is more than one of subject matter and style; there is also a marked return to the absolutes of mountain, sky and sea which feature so prominently in the earlier poetry. Verses such as the opening ones of 'Outer Isles', for example, could certainly have been written by Brasch several decades earlier:

Shapes the sea can scarcely lift  
 Out of brimming sleep  
 Dream of stone, of cloud  
 Afloat on a shifting web of waters.

Stone sleep, wind sleep, gull cry.  
 Cloud-form poising, mooring on the tide,  
 Drifting, dissolving,  
 Flurries of light, shadow mountains.<sup>53</sup>

'Above the Java Sea' shows a similar emphasis on the elements, despite the fact that it describes a vastly different scene from the cold grey moors and lochs of the Hebrides.

Bell-towers of light, cloud gods  
 Dreaming erect, afloat  
 They tread the snow peaks idly  
 Underfoot, soaring shapes  
 That dazzle the cobalt waters  
 Far below, the dense  
 Flame-green smouldering islands.<sup>54</sup>

Such writing represents Brasch at his most confident; he sketches these scenes with a sureness of line and an ease which is lacking in some of his rather overwrought abstract writing. It is almost as if, with the return to his old style of landscape writing in this third section, he found some solid ground amidst the vacillation of personal thoughts represented by the more introspective poems in this volume. Although the poems in this section are first and foremost landscape sketches, beneath their descriptive surfaces the themes which have been central in Brasch's poetry since *The Land and the People*

remain as an undercurrent, surfacing occasionally in the quiet, almost understated way typical of this poet's writing. In the Scottish sequence, for example, following the vividly descriptive opening of 'Outer Isles', the archetypal theme of the passage of time, reflected in the changes of nature, is unobtrusively introduced. The observation of the effect of wind and wave on rock holds echoes of the much earlier piece 'The Iconoclasts', where Brasch describes the 'frowning mountains' of his native country as being worn down by the elements.<sup>55</sup> Here, revealing his ability to see the universal aspect behind the superficial differences of nationality and physical location, he beholds the same process:

Constant the wind's hand,  
Its moulding weight, pressure  
Never relaxed, folding  
And refolding the giant rock;

Smoothing over, ruffling and crackling  
The sea's face, endlessly crumbling  
Time, distance, difference;  
Intoning and intoning.<sup>56</sup>

The repetitive effect of these two verses is perfectly in keeping with the theme of ongoing change, made tangible in a natural scene, and is far removed from the tortuous turning and re-turning in the introspective sections of 'The Estate', for example.

The way in which Brasch's vision is able to span and transcend geographical differences is perhaps most obvious in the way he collects four poems of varied settings together under the title 'On the Wing.' In this sequence the reader gains a sweeping view of different landscapes, as if seen from a high vantage point: first, the bays and islands of New Zealand, next the houses of Dieppe, then a view of Delhi bathed in evening light, and finally Christchurch's Heathcote Estuary. The very fact that Brasch has included these pieces within one framework indicates the universal nature of his poetry; although in many pieces he is clearly a New Zealand poet, he is not restricted



to observation of his native territory, and he sees the inherent truths of human and natural worlds as overriding national boundaries.

Thus in the first poem of the four, 'Green Bay Below', Brasch describes the 'dead charred trunks' and the 'cloud on the summits' of the New Zealand scene before him, and proceeds from this familiar starting-point to trace the connections between himself as an individual, his physical environment, and the world beyond his immediate surroundings. His use of native place names is natural and convincing, and the picture he draws unmistakably indigenous but, like his earlier work, this is more than poetry of a nationalist bent, as he touches on the themes of unity and wholeness.

I scan the maze of it all  
 Myself part of the maze;  
 From the rock of Kahikatea  
 Trenching sound and channel  
 Sheer among winding ridges,  
 Spreading the wings of islands  
 From Arapawa to D'Urville  
 I gather all in mind,  
 Holding all mind, all world.<sup>57</sup>

This sequence does reflect Brasch's ability to gather together 'all in mind', as he moves swiftly from this setting to Dieppe to describe, with a characteristic overlapping of human and inanimate qualities, the houses of this town:

Each separately lounging  
 Towards dangerous independence,  
 Creatures about to take off  
 To all points of the compass.<sup>58</sup>

One could perhaps read this as an implied statement on the mixture of elation and fear Brasch felt at laying bare his emotions through the new type of poetry his fourth and fifth volumes represent. In exposing his individuality he, like these houses, stands alone, and the image of these buildings being anchored to the ground only by 'heavy-bodied inertia' holds, for me, echoes of the title poem of *Ambulando*, where it is only the 'familiar guise' of Brasch's own perception of himself that restricts him from 'fleeing the centre without destination.'<sup>59</sup>

Before returning full circle to New Zealand, with 'Heathcote Estuary' (quoted earlier in this study), the poet's imaginative flight takes him to Delhi. The scene of the dusty roads and warm starlit evening in this third piece is sketched with as much deftness and accuracy as Brasch displays in descriptions of his home country. While on one level this is merely another vivid 'travel impression', as always in this poet's work, even this highly descriptive surface masks deeper thought. This landscape, too, speaks to Brasch of constant flux and movement which is somehow resolved by the vast cycles of time into fixed stability. Although the predominant mood of the piece is one of quiet serenity, and the natural scene undisturbed by a human element, there is continual movement throughout it. The sky 'flowing eastward / Sails into night'; the rainclouds, too, are borne east by the light wind; and rivers are 'turbulent.' But beyond this is a vision of the stillness of eternity, reflected by the eventual falling of 'soft night':

And dust in dream settles  
And time's frenzied lavas  
Cool into shape.<sup>60</sup>

Brasch's preoccupation with time is also made evident in the final poem of the entire third section, appropriately entitled 'Temporal.' The simplicity of the poem makes it almost haiku-like in appearance; many lines consist of only one or two words, as the poet describes the fall of petals like 'unfailing snow' from a blossom tree. Such brevity is far removed from the lengthy formality of Brasch's carefully crafted work of several decades earlier. Yet despite stylistic differences, I feel that this slight poem, perhaps more than any other in this section, emphasizes the thread of continuity I see existing throughout the entire corpus of Brasch's poetry, from *The Land and the People* onwards. 'Temporal' typifies all this poetry in that the more it is read, the more depth is revealed beneath its deceptively straightforward surface. The fleeting images are seemingly as insubstantial as the blossom itself, but in each is held an implicit

statement on the universal issues relevant to every time and place. Metaphors are, moreover, drawn from nature - proof once again of the way that, in Brasch's vision, human existence is steadily placed in the larger perspective of a more enduring natural world.

Thus the slow drift of flowers and the 'leaf harvest' becomes symbolic of the passing of human lives, phrased by Brasch as the 'Rain of years.' The deft coupling of words such as 'Star-sand' not only conjures up the image of scattered white petals on the ground but also suggests a link between sky and land, eternity and earth-bound mortal existence. And inherent in the line 'One root / One blossoming' is the acknowledgement of the common origins of all men, and the bond existing between them, however diverse their lives may be.<sup>61</sup>

In his manuscript notes on Brasch's work, John Weir comments on this third section of *Not Far Off*, first noting the obvious similarity between these poems and those written decades earlier, and then continuing:

These are for the greater part careful delineations of the natural world, and despite the carefulness of their phrasing and the sharpness of language they do not have any form of compulsion.<sup>62</sup>

Amidst the generally abstract dimension which marks Brasch's fourth and fifth volumes, perhaps these descriptive landscape pieces do appear to be a step backwards, away from the 'urgency' which Weir finds in the more personal poems which deal with the poet's own ambitions, both in love and in his career, towards altogether safer ground. Certainly they are more in the style of Brasch's early reticent writing, where poetic attention is firmly focused on the external and the concrete, rather than any interior landscape.

Yet rather than regarding these pieces either as a return to a former and entirely different mode of writing, or as a lyrical 'interlude' which is how Bertram interprets this section<sup>63</sup>, it is perhaps more profitable to view them as a relevant part of the entire body of Brasch's work. In an overview of the five volumes Charles Brasch had completed to this point, his decision to write once

again in an objective and predominantly descriptive way may best be seen, not as an absolute return to an earlier mode, nor as a regrettable departure from the new self-revelatory style, but instead as a part of his ongoing development as a poet. O'Sullivan describes the personal writing in *Ambulando* and *Not Far Off* as 'grave poetry, and courageous' which 'exposes [Brasch], raw'<sup>64</sup>; and the decision to write such poetry was clearly consciously made by Brasch, as so many of his poems in these volumes are centred around the role of the poet, and his or her duty to create both 'public and personal speech-song.'<sup>65</sup> I feel sure that the way he chose to place a descriptive section between two of a more metaphysical nature was equally deliberate. His landscape poems, although contrasting in style and (superficially at least) in subject matter with his more subjective poems, also in some way validate them. In the remainder of earlier volumes that they evoke, they provide a reader with a sense of continuity and perspective; for in Brasch's landscape writing are to be found the origins of a much more inward-looking poetry. It is as if, in his observation of the natural world, he found the confidence, both emotional and poetic, to gradually turn in towards himself; and the emergence of his own personality into his poetry at first relied on metaphors drawn from this natural world for expression.

Now, in these fourth and fifth volumes, it appears that Brasch no longer requires the prop of landscape metaphor to deal poetically with his own emotions. Yet, although such imagery is no longer necessary, the predilection for external reference remains. Not only the third section of *Not Far Off*, but also the multitude of images drawn from nature which occur in even the most intensely personal of the other poems, are evidence that Charles Brasch is still very much a poet who turns to the landscape for inspiration and for strength. In Brasch's own terms, the natural world is like solid rock upon which he can build, compared to the shifting and unstable ground of personal and public identities.

The inclusion of references to an external and tangible world, moreover, is reassuring not only to the poet himself but also to his readers. Although this new Brasch is one whom Bertram describes as 'wearing as never before [his] heart on [his] sleeve'<sup>66</sup>, we are frequently reminded of the continuing existence of the earlier poet, a man to whom mountain, sea and sky have always been, and will remain, personal and poetic touchstones. The sense of security that this bestows on a reader enhances the enjoyment of this later work. The cross-section of styles represented in both *Ambulando* and *Not Far Off* ceases to become disconcerting if viewed in the light that Brasch is not discarding his most successful mode of writing for uncharted ground, but is merely developing hitherto undeveloped facets of his role as poet.

In his tribute to Auden entitled 'Paying my Devoirs', Brasch speaks again on the theme of the role of a poet. Here he expresses his admiration for the English poet's ability to remain true to his personal and private voice, while at the same time creating a poetry of universal significance:

So you revived, renewed  
The drooping role of poet,  
Making for private faces  
A sounding place, a public place . . . <sup>67</sup>

In the concluding stanza Brasch makes his own pledge to follow in the footsteps of this master, by attempting to discover his own individuality and define this poetically:

I promise if I can  
Respecting your example  
So far as nature grants  
- Paying, again, my devoirs -  
To try to do differently,  
To speak in my own voice.

The last two lines hold the hint of a suggestion that, up to this point, Brasch has not spoken in his 'own voice' as often or as openly as he would have liked; there is implicit self-criticism here, as if the protective anonymity of his earlier, solely descriptive poetry is no longer enough to satisfy Brasch. Yet it

seems to me that, despite the stark honesty achieved in *Ambulando* and *Not Far Off*, the best of this 'new' poetry seems to be that which incorporates elements of the old - that in which the direct examination of personal issues, at times threatening to become overly subjective or a trifle repetitive, is combined with the visual clarity and tangible images of acutely observed land and seascapes. The landscape poet of three decades earlier is still undeniably present, although the predominant emphasis may have shifted from the concrete to the metaphysical. Here, one feels, is a man who sees 'heart, face, the whole quivering self' as 'No more than a puff of wind'<sup>68</sup>, and so turns to nature as the one enduring reality. With his fourth and fifth volumes, Brasch has found the courage to 'speak out' and to 'open the heart'<sup>69</sup>; but the voice he has discovered is not wholly new, and the solid foundations laid by his landscape poetry are still in effect. These volumes reveal a complex personality with an unprecedented frankness. But when Brasch is 'worn down by treadmill thoughts' and is 'torn by the harrow / And heartburn of becoming'<sup>70</sup>, he retains the ability to turn aside from himself, and to find solace and objectivity in observation of the natural world.

## NOTES

1. In *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 112.
2. 'Landfall Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey,' Thesis: Ph.D.: English (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1982), p. 143.
3. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 1 (1947), 3.
4. 'Ambulando,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 85-86.
5. W.B. Yeats, 'Among School Children,' *The Tower*, in *Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan London Ltd., 1962; Pan Books Ltd., 1974), p. 128.
6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets I*, xii, cit. in *Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 368; trans. Brasch, 'Present Company,' in *The Universal Dance*, ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), p. 45.
7. In 'Waitaki Revisted,' for example, Brasch finds temporary remission from the darkness of human life through his observance of 'the wintry, perpetual / Flashing of violent stars.' *Disputed Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
8. *Indirections*, p. 411.
9. *Indirections*, p. 88.
10. *Indirections*, p. 89.
11. *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 107-8.
12. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 89-92.
13. Alan Roddick, ed., Note in *Collected Poems*, pp. 240-41.
14. 'An Urban Shepherd: To Alexander Guyan,' *Ambulando*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 93-4.
15. In *Collected Poems*, p. 107.
16. Compiled for *Introduction for New Zealand Poets: School Series*, ed. John Weir; cit. by J.E. Weir, Papers, Manuscript 37, Box 9, in the University of Canterbury Library.
17. *Indirections*, p. 341.
18. *Indirections*, p. 341.
19. Review of *The Estate, Here and Now*, Sept. 1957, p. 31.
20. In *Collected Poems*, p. 106.
21. Alan Roddick, *Poetry*, Radio New Zealand Programme, 1975; cit. by James Bertram, *Charles Brasch* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 36.
22. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 36.
23. 'The Second Coming,' *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, in *Selected Poetry*, pp. 99-100.
24. Review of *Ambulando*, *Landfall*, 19 (1965), 86.

- <sup>25</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 87-8.
- <sup>26</sup>. 'V. What the Thunder Said,' *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1963), p. 78, l. 403.
- <sup>27</sup>. Notes for revised version of *A Vision* (1928); cit. by Georgio Melchiori, 'The Moment of Moments,' *Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John E. Unterecker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963), p. 33.
- <sup>28</sup>. 'Autumn in Spring,' *The Estate*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 47.
- <sup>29</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 47.
- <sup>30</sup>. O'Sullivan, *Landfall*, 23 (1969), 345.
- <sup>31</sup>. Ian Milner, 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 368.
- <sup>32</sup>. 'Break and Go,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 105.
- <sup>33</sup>. 'In Your Presence,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 94-103.
- <sup>34</sup>. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' p. 368.
- <sup>35</sup>. 'The Land and the People (III),' *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 8.
- <sup>36</sup>. O'Sullivan, "Brief Permitted Morning", p. 346.
- <sup>37</sup>. Moya Smith, Ms. section 2. 'The New Zealand Poems,' p. 20.
- <sup>38</sup>. Review of *Ambulando*, *Landfall*, 19 (1965), 88-9.
- <sup>39</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 40.
- <sup>40</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 43.
- <sup>41</sup>. *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 128.
- <sup>42</sup>. Keats's letter to Woodhouse of 27 October 1818, in Notes to *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), p. 607.
- <sup>43</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 43.
- <sup>44</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 136-37.
- <sup>45</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 133.
- <sup>46</sup>. O'Sullivan, "Brief Permitted Morning", p. 348.
- <sup>47</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 117-20.
- <sup>48</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 124-26.
- <sup>49</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 56.
- <sup>50</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 43.
- <sup>51</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 142.
- <sup>52</sup>. From 'On the Wing,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 148.
- <sup>53</sup>. From 'Days of Skye,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 144-45.



54. In *Collected Poems*, p. 146.
55. *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 7.
56. 'Outer Isles,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 145.
57. From 'On the Wing,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 147.
58. 'Dieppe,' from 'On the Wing,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 147-48.
59. 'Ambulando,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 86.
60. 'Evening Over Delhi,' from 'On the Wing,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 148.
61. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 149-50.
62. J.E. Weir, Papers, Manuscript 37, Box 22, p. 16.
63. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 43.
64. O'Sullivan, p. 353.
65. 'Paying my Devoirs,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 129.
66. 'To Charles Brasch at Sixty,' 'Charles Brasch: Last Landfall,' *New Zealand Listener*, 11 June 1973, p. 13.
67. *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 131.
68. 'Open the Heart,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 137.
69. 'Open the Heart,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 137.
70. 'Ergo Sum,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 136-37.

## CHAPTER V

### HOME GROUND

#### A RETICENT POET

*I name names - rocks, flowers, fish:  
knowing this place I learn to know myself.  
I survive. The land becomes  
my meat and tallow.*

*- Peter Bland*

Charles Brasch's last volume, *Home Ground*, consists of poems written in the years leading up to his death in May of 1973. Published posthumously under the direction of Alan Roddick, *Home Ground* represents the many different faces of Brasch which have gradually emerged throughout his five earlier volumes: landscape poet, art collector and critic, historian, friend, lover. The cross-section of styles displayed here is like a condensed overview of Brasch's poetic development to this point; and his varied collection, which the poet described as his 'litter'<sup>1</sup>, is given coherence by Roddick's choice of a tripartite structure which is nicely in keeping with preceding volumes.

The first group of poems reinforces the impression given throughout the body of Brasch's work of the great value he laid on human companionship and love. In a similar way to the first part of *Not Far Off*, this section is largely made up of short personal pieces, several of which are dedicated to friends, colleagues, or relations; there are poems written for writer Frank Sargeson, for lecturer Nicholas Zissermann, for Katie Scott (daughter of Margaret and Harry), and for Brasch's god-daughter Caroline. The middle section, too, points backwards to areas which have been of importance to Brasch in the past and which clearly continue to figure largely in his life. His absorption in visual

art, stemming from his childhood days, once again becomes apparent in the way that he focuses on the work of Toss Woollaston and Doris Lusk. This section also contains the title sequence 'Home Ground', a piece stating, more clearly than any written previously except perhaps 'The Estate', Brasch's belief in the need for every person to have some physical and spiritual domain in life.

The third section is simply entitled 'Last Poems' and draws together work from the manuscript books Brasch left behind after his death - works which mainly deal with his battle against cancer and his emotional response to imminent death. Bertram has written of *Home Ground*: 'It is the most moving of all his books, and the one in which that elusive personal and poetic character we have been concerned with emerges most clearly.'<sup>2</sup> Although this statement is obviously intended to apply to the volume as a whole, I feel that it is perhaps only strictly true of this final section, and then perhaps only because these poems were left in a state which Brasch would almost certainly have revised had he lived longer. In the *Collected Poems*, Roddick provides us with an explanatory note on the origin of the poems of Section III:

After his death in May 1973 Brasch left a number of manuscript books in which he had been working during his last months. These contain jottings and poems, some possibly completed, but the majority unfinished, only a few reaching the stage of a second draft, and none reaching typescript.<sup>3</sup>

These poems are undoubtedly the most 'moving' and self-revelatory of any of Brasch's poems from four and a half decades of writing. Yet one wonders whether they would have remained so had Brasch reworked them to a state he considered suitable for publication. For, to my mind, this final volume typifies, as much as any of its predecessors, that curious blend of subjective and objective writing which characterizes Brasch as a poet.

Once again one gains the impression of strong emotion lying just beneath the calm surface of this rather formal poetry, yet the essentially private nature of Brasch seems to prevail even to this point. When compared to such work as

is displayed in *The Land and the People*, where the 'I' behind the poems is scarcely ever in evidence, these mature pieces undoubtedly hold more human interest; the vigilance against self-revelation is relaxed somewhat to permit the inclusion of personal detail.

In 'Complementaries', for example, Brasch muses on the differences in human nature, and takes as a particular example himself and his god-daughter. The poem begins on a lighthearted and casual note unsounded in his earlier poetry:

Wrapped in my giant crayfish  
 Towel, I remember who  
 Gave it to me one Christmas,  
 Kindest of god-daughters,  
Caroline.<sup>4</sup>

Yet although this poem is ostensibly about the opposing yet reciprocal natures of Caroline and Brasch (the 'you' and the 'I' around which the piece revolves) little is in fact given away about the character of the poet himself. A reader's attention is, typically, directed away from the identity of Brasch towards those of others connected with his life. He is present as observer and commentator rather than participator, a feature of his work which says as much about his private character as it does about his professional one. Almost invariably in the first section of this volume, poems dedicated to those important in some way to Brasch, for their companionship or their work, are character studies rather than examinations of these people's interaction with the poet.

'Semblances', for example, is in two parts, the first of which presumably describes James Bertram<sup>5</sup>, and the second Frank Sargeson. Both men have clearly had a profound influence on Brasch's development, poetically and otherwise, (a study of *Indirections* provides further evidence of this), yet these pieces remain objective sketches in which personal emotion has little part. In both the visual aspect is prominent; Brasch describes Bertram's 'ruffled head',

and poised hand holding a book and a cigarette, and uses as a metaphor for Sargeson's initial anonymity the easily visualized image of clothing:

I knew you first in that uniform of the rejected,  
A work-tried, rain-coloured macintosh  
In which you walked, invisible . . .<sup>6</sup>

Although the subject matter of these poems is ostensibly personal, by a focus on the external and visual aspects of those close to him, Brasch is afforded a self-preserving barrier which is as secure as ever. He praises Sargeson for the courageousness of his mature writing, for his ability to express his own identity through words which he makes his own: 'It seems now an emperor's new clothes / To show you naked as yourself, salt man.'

Yet one feels that, despite his admiration for such a gift in others' writing, this is no longer what Brasch is trying to achieve in his own poetry; now, perhaps, more than ever before it becomes evident that, to the end of his life, he preferred 'walking invisible', personally and poetically. Although in a way this volume can be seen as the culmination of Brasch's career - as proof of the extent to which his writing has changed and developed - I see it also, paradoxically, as confirmation that much of the earlier Brasch remains. The impersonal facade deliberately constructed by the writer of *The Land and the People* has largely been discarded, which is surely a natural development over four and a half or five decades during which Brasch's skill and confidence as a poet increased. Yet although he now adopts a personal stance in the majority of his poems, that essential reserve, so apparent in his earlier work, remains. This is commented on by Ian Wedde in his article 'Captivating Invitation':

For a man of Brasch's discretion a surprisingly large proportion of his poems were written in the first person, about personal subjects. It's often difficult, however, to find the 'I' behind the 'I-am'. The 'merely personal', to borrow Yeats' phrase, was something Brasch not only avoided but also wrote about avoiding . . .<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in the preceding volume *Not Far Off*, the problem of to what extent one's identity should be revealed to others (let alone the difficulty of

defining and encapsulating this identity in words) appears to have been one with which Brasch was greatly preoccupied at the time. 'To speak out is more desperate than to keep silence, / To open the heart is to bleed to death surely,' he states in 'Open the Heart'<sup>8</sup>; and in other poems such as 'Man Missing' and 'Ergo Sum', one sees just how difficult he found it to pin down 'a self and its leaf-selves' in his writing, and what an ordeal recreating a true image of himself was for someone so intensely private:

Sieved and sea-changed through  
The calendar of roles,  
Disguises, feints, black-outs,  
Worn down by treadmill thoughts,  
Torn by the harrow  
And heartburn of becoming.<sup>9</sup>

Following the anguish reflected in such poems, intently focused as they are on the self, *Home Ground* is surprisingly pervaded by an atmosphere of calm acceptance. The difficulties of both writing and simply living day-to-day are not ignored but are submitted to without the distress so evident in the previous volume. In 'Before Day', which opens this final collection, the 'Dire / Necessity' of meeting and overcoming such difficulties becomes a kind of salvation in its very inevitability:

Rule me also  
Straitener  
In light  
In darkness  
Root  
Of my tree.

The imagery here is of a significance belied by the slightness of the poem. For here one can see Brasch turning again to metaphors of nature, and it is through a return to these that he now indirectly conveys his innermost thoughts. Themes which have invariably been important to him throughout the preceding volumes remain central, but are dealt with, not by the direct self-questioning employed in *Not Far Off* but indirectly, with imagery curiously reminiscent of his earlier work.

The role of the poet is the subject of 'Hauntings', in the form of a supplication to that 'great shade' in true Yeatsian style. But despite its very obvious personal relevance, the poem is one in which emotion is kept at arm's length by visual images, the romantic tone of which are very like such an early piece as 'Waitaki Revisited':

So I shall breathe freely your magnanimity of mind  
And plumb your harsh responsibilities,  
Still know the vibrant pulse of your phrases  
In the flashing of stars over the night sky  
And the long sea waves' implacable ecstatic tread.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the poet here asks his Muse to 'subdue or distance' its hold over him, so too does Brasch now appear to desire a similar waning of intensity between poet and reader. It is as if, after three volumes of an increasingly self-revelatory nature, he wishes to return to a more objective, less directly involved, way of writing. And this he does by turning outwards, as has been seen already in 'Semblances', by focusing on the literal rather than the figurative, the visual and concrete rather than the abstract. In this quality, and particularly in the way much of the imagery is drawn from the natural world, *Home Ground* has much in common with Brasch's two earliest volumes - as if Brasch in his sixties was able to look back at the work written in his twenties and thirties, and recognize that this held the key to a style with which he felt comfortable, and in which he achieved poetry of the greatest assurance and clarity.

Although this most mature poetry seldom embraces passages of straight description, it displays as clearly as ever Brasch's predilection for landscape imagery, and his use of it to encapsulate human truths. Thus in 'World Without End', he blends his own memories of the end of World War II with thoughts on the inescapable, never-ending cycle of human life, and phrases both personal and universal in terms of external conditions.

The end for each is no ending at all;  
World persists, turning with us, in us,  
Turned by us in all our weathers,  
Intolerable to each, our common country.<sup>11</sup>

'Shoriken' is the poem of all those in this first section which I see as best embodying the complex poetic voice of Brasch - that curious blend of heartfelt personal comment and coolly objective observation, of intensity tempered by remoteness. In a way, the balance Brasch typically maintains between intimacy and formality is particularly appropriate here, for the theme of this sequence of short lyrics is the very one of balance, outlining the necessity of looking both forwards and back in order to live safely in the present.

To remember yesterday and the day before  
 To look for tomorrow  
 To walk the invisible bridge of the world  
 As a tightrope, a sword edge.<sup>12</sup>

With his usual comprehensive vision, Brasch reveals the paradoxical nature of the world in which we live, simultaneously a 'world of lions' and a 'world of doves'. To illustrate this duality, he turns again to the archetypal Romantic images of the natural elements which he has used since his earliest writings, and which have become so unmistakably a part of his own authentic voice.

Familiar themes, then, recur in this poem in the shape of short lyrics describing natural phenomena, which are transmuted by Brasch's imaginative vision. In the ninth section, appearances are shown to be deceptive and cruelty is found in the same place as beauty and light. The visual metaphor the poet creates sums up this idea succinctly and vividly:

The bluntest stones on the road will be singing  
 If you listen closely  
 Like lilies or larks  
 Those that may stone you to death after.<sup>13</sup>

In the following verse, Brasch again illustrates the similar yet essentially opposing nature of all things, this time selecting for his image that of the stars (an image used as far back as *Disputed Ground* to symbolize purity, and a power beyond the cycle of mortal life):

Rising and setting stars  
 Burn with the same intensity  
 But one glows for the world's dark



One whitens into tedious day.

Elsewhere, in the manner of a work such as 'In Your Presence', natural metaphors are included as brief touches of colour, lending a sharp edge to Brasch's expression of universal truths. In the third section, prefiguring the theme of the ninth, harshness and compassion are shown to spring from the same source: the 'merciless' are described as having 'as many faces as the clouds', and the 'fountains of their mercy' never run dry.<sup>14</sup> Later in the poem, Brasch reiterates an image present in his early New Zealand poems, when he states of man, 'He is earth, dying to earth'; and this death is portrayed as 'The desert sand / That dries all tears.'<sup>15</sup>

The predominant image in this poem is also one which Brasch has effectively used time and again, particularly in his earlier volumes - that of the sea. Based on a painting by Japanese artist Motonobu, of a Taoist immortal crossing the sea 'balanced on the edge of his sword'<sup>16</sup>, 'Shoriken' begins and ends with images of the ocean which are invested with the same ambiguous symbolism contained in such poems as the much earlier 'Genesis' or 'Great Sea'. The perilous crossing of the sea obviously represents the journey through life, the blade of the sword offering both a 'pillow loving to your head' and a bridge to 'cross the malevolent sea'.<sup>17</sup>

Yet although the sea is a threatening force, it is necessary to embark upon the journey across it, as Brasch shows us at the poem's conclusion; and once its power is submitted to, he implies, it is no longer hostile:

To cross the sea is to submit to the sea  
Once venture out and you belong to it  
All you know are the sea  
All you are the sea  
And that sword edge itself a wave-crest of the sea.<sup>18</sup>

Although Brasch's symbolic use of the natural world here is far removed from the descriptions of real landscapes in his earliest work, it fulfils two of the same important functions. First, his focus on the external and the visual bestows on his writing a clarity and direction which is simply not evident in his

purely subjective poetry. The tortuous personal reflections of certain passages in 'The Estate', for example, would almost certainly benefit from reference to some point outside the poet's own mind<sup>19</sup>, and the occasional obscurity of this abstract writing could be avoided. Such verses as the ninth and tenth sections of 'Shoriken', quoted above, stand in sharp contrast to Brasch's solely subjective writing, for they swiftly yet vividly convey the poet's central themes.

In *Indirections*, Brasch speaks about Motonobu's 'Shoriken Crossing the Sea on a Sword' and the other Japanese paintings held in the British Museum, commenting on their 'sharply personal style' and continuing '. . . these I loved, but they were intimate work, hardly public like Renaissance art.'<sup>20</sup> (This latter, particularly that of Italy, was for Brasch the paragon of art.) He himself, although taking this 'intimate' work as his source, turns his poem into something open to a wider interpretation, beyond the defined boundaries of century or place, rather in the way of the 'thoroughly social' aspect of Chinese art, which he greatly admires<sup>21</sup>. This he achieves through his choice of the age-old poetic images of rock, sea, and wind. Because the language he uses here is the universal one of the natural world rather than the code of his own private sphere, his writing is more readily accessible and a sense of perspective is maintained.

Secondly, and in what seems a paradox, although Brasch's use of landscape imagery admits one to his work, at the same time it has the effect of raising a kind of barrier between poet and reader. For the more universal the perspective, the more it becomes possible for the man behind the words to preserve his anonymity. Once again, I sense this to be a part deliberate, part instinctive, action on Brasch's part. The reticence of his nature had perhaps lessened with age, as shown by the noticeably more human voice of *The Estate*, *Ambulando*, and *Not Far Off*; but as Bertram commented in his review of *Home Ground*, while Brasch had become an 'assured and vatic poet', he remained a 'shy and modest man'.<sup>22</sup>

His constant 'abnegation of personal identity'<sup>23</sup>, and the way external images are used as a kind of smokescreen to divert attention from himself, is very evident in the twelfth section of 'Shoriken'. Here, and nowhere else in this poem, we hear Brasch's own voice speaking directly to us, as he muses on the problem of originality in art and in life itself - that problem which has so preoccupied him in *Not Far Off*. In *Indirections* he speaks of this problem as one which has troubled him throughout his entire career:

It was to be my greatest difficulty to conceive and write poems that were mine and no one else's, to find my own voice, live my own life - which is a question not of originality, nor of sincerity, but of *authenticity*. I have found and lost that voice, that life, many times; now in my sixties I still discover again and again, too late, that I have been attempting poems which are not for me. How I am to tell at the beginning I do not know.<sup>24</sup>

The first two verses of the twelfth section of 'Shoriken', then, are the heartfelt sentiments of a man who strove to create a distinct identity for himself through his writing, and who, at times, found it extremely difficult to express this identity, which he felt to be constantly changing. Yet this rare glimpse of Brasch is short-lived; in his own, earlier, words, 'the man writing this now / Is gone as he makes his bow'.<sup>25</sup> With the third verse, the unguarded moment slips almost imperceptibly into the safer territory of natural imagery.

To speak in your own voice-  
How easy it sounds and how hard it is  
When nothing that is yours is yours alone

To walk singly yourself who are thousands  
Through all that made and makes you day by day  
To be and to be nothing, not to own

Not owned, but lightly on the sword edge keep  
A dancer's figure - that is the wind's art  
With you who are blood and water, wind and stone.<sup>26</sup>

With the final lines of this section Brasch suggests that one's truest self is found only by keeping a balanced perspective in all areas of life, including writing; yet he implies, too, that this is almost impossible to achieve, for this is

the 'wind's art' and is seldom to be found in the natural world. As late as this work is in his career, there is still a touch of the early Romantic influence to be detected, as the natural harmony of the elements is held up as an exemplar for living. Although there is a hint of despair here at the difficulties to be overcome, the poem's final image of the sea can only be seen as positive. In this concluding section (quoted earlier), Brasch's image of life as a sea, and living the perilous crossing of it, conveys the belief that the difficulties one encounters in an individual life, if submitted to and accepted, become absorbed into a larger scheme of things:

All you know is the sea  
All you are the sea  
And that sword edge itself a wave-crest of the sea.

Both the note of yearning in the twelfth section and that of hope in this final verse, however, are somewhat muted. The emotions, undoubtedly strongly felt, are diluted and depersonalized by their expression through natural imagery. The result of such a distancing technique is an atmosphere of a gentle remoteness which permeates the entire poem. Indeed, this is the quality which I find to be most consistently present throughout the entire body of Brasch's work, and most typical of the private character behind the work. For one for whom reticence was such an inherent part of his nature, the images of the natural world around him afforded both a means of expression when this became difficult, and a way of deliberately constructing a protective barrier around himself.

Such an indirect method of self-expression may undoubtedly be seen as being adopted at the expense of intensity, for Brasch keeps us almost always at a metaphoric arm's length, and consequently his writing loses some immediacy and vitality. But it seems that, by this stage of his career, Brasch had realized that he was most at ease - indeed, wrote his best - in a less directly personal mode than that with which he had experimented previously. A sacrifice of

intensity is, I feel, amply compensated for by meticulous expression, by the sense of a universal perspective, and by the visual clarity and beauty of image attained in his later writing. The theme of balance in 'Shoriken' is one which is particularly relevant, then, to this final volume of Brasch's, for he has succeeded in his mature work to secure the very balance which was his ideal in art by blending the personal and the impersonal, the subjective and the objective, through the images of the natural world.

THE INSPIRATION OF VISUAL ART

*Here the whole range of earth's colours  
sprawl on paddock, stone wall and crumpled sea.*

*- Brian Turner*

With the second section of *Home Ground*, Brasch shows an even more marked tendency to revert to the landscape writing of his earlier days. Indeed, in a sense his writing can be seen to have come full circle, for in this section there is a noticeable shift away from general native imagery, back to the local landscapes of *The Land and the People* and *Disputed Ground*. The three major poems of this section all display the way in which Brasch, in his old age, turned again to his home country for subject matter; and with this return he once more begins to write in a descriptive style reminiscent of his earlier work.

Yet there is a noticeable change of attitude towards New Zealand in these mature poems, which is summarized by Brasch's very choice of title for this volume. What was once 'disputed ground' is now 'home ground', and a sense of security, if not exactly contentment, replaces the one of uneasiness which pervaded his first two volumes. Furthermore, the national emphasis has been discarded as if this issue has been at least partially solved over the interim of three or more decades, and it is the universal human facts of friendship and

love, life and death, which are dealt with within the local framework. The beginnings of such writing - using specific and local subject matter as a vehicle for wider themes - can in fact be detected in poems as far back as 'Waianakarua' or 'Waitaki Revisited'. Yet with 'Huinga September', 'Six Water-colours', and the title sequence 'Home Ground', Brasch now writes with the experience of five volumes behind him. While displaying the same strikingly visual surface as their forerunners, these are poems of far more complexity and a greater stylistic assurance. Clearly Brasch has found his home ground not only literally but also figuratively, in his chosen craft.

Like 'Shoriken', the first two of these poems, 'Huinga September' and 'Six Water-colours' take as their inspiration another form of art - that of painting. Brasch's absorption in the visual arts was one dating back to his childhood, and was strengthened by his extensive overseas travel and the art of many countries he immersed himself in during these years. His interest in New Zealand painting in particular is clearly evident from the space given to discussion of such art in *Landfall*, in both his own editorial notes and various articles promoting the work of painters who were to become some of this country's foremost artists: Frances Hodgkins, Colin McCahon, Toss Woollaston. Certain public offices which Brasch held in his later years, once he had returned to New Zealand to live, provide further proof of his active promotion of the visual arts here; amongst other positions, he was Chairman of the Hocken Library Pictures Sub-Committee, a member of the Visual Arts Committee of the Arts Council, and widely recognized (although not officially so) as being responsible for the establishment of the Hodgkins Fellowship at Otago University.<sup>27</sup>

With his constant pursuit of unity in all things, Brasch's ideal form of art would have been one which appealed not to one but to all senses, and this becomes clear in his essay 'Present Company'. Here, he defines the main role of all mediums as primarily being that of communicators, drawing individuals out of their inevitable separateness into 'the living world'; he stresses that all

works of art, whatever form - music, plays and poems, painting and sculpture - 'both re-present and form part of the universal dance'<sup>28</sup>. Any literal fusion being, of course, impossible, Brasch nonetheless strove to constantly maintain a vision which united visual, aural, and literary arts. One of the most noticeable features of his commentaries on various art works in *Indirections* is the way he frequently makes cross references between the different mediums.

He describes, for instance, the work of Italian painter Masaccio as having a 'musical rhythm' and as being 'architectural in its power'<sup>29</sup>, and he speaks of Michelangelo's poems as spelling out 'what the sculptures, paintings and drawings state visually.'<sup>30</sup> Later in the autobiography he stresses more clearly the importance of an all-embracing artistic vision. In fact, he presents such a comprehensive outlook as a requirement for experiencing life to the full, and for making the vital connection between the world of art and the everyday world:

I did not know, I cannot tell yet, on which count works of art are more precious to me; rather, I cannot separate the two aspects, because works of art are to me whole and single, living beings and strongly wrought works in one. Country and painted landscape, people and portraits, figure paintings, music and architecture and states of mind, belong to the same reality: the world is rich, and must be known in its fulness, not thinned out by analysis.<sup>31</sup>

By writing poems which took as their starting-point visual works of art, Brasch was combining the two artistic mediums in which he was most absorbed to make his own unique comment on the world 'in its fulness'. His decision to focus on painters who took the New Zealand landscape for their own subject matter seems entirely appropriate, considering his love of nature, and in keeping with his theories on art appealing to all the senses, for this country, he felt, engaged the whole of his being as no other could. His expression of this in *Indirections* typically yokes together both visual and literary spheres in one

metaphor; he writes that New Zealand was 'part of myself as I was part of it, the world I breathed and wore from birth, my seeing and my language.'<sup>32</sup>

His interest in an indigenous culture can perhaps be seen as an extension of his deep love for the natural country of New Zealand. Undoubtedly he believed that all great works of art found their source in the natural world, and that artistic creation was an emulation of the processes of nature. This belief was one he repeatedly expressed throughout his lifetime: in his poetry, where he pays tribute to writers who speak in voices 'learned from earth itself'<sup>33</sup>, and in his prose writings, where he attributes the 'rightness and inevitability' of art works to the fact that they fit into a mold prepared for them in nature.<sup>34</sup> By a natural extension of this belief, art for Brasch took on certain qualities of the natural world which it reflected. In a lecture given at Dunedin University in 1950, he spoke of art works as 'finished lives' and stated:

They are thus presented to us as facts, having the status of objects in nature, hills and trees and rocks, rather than of human lives; they're part of the world, part of our environment, and like it permanent, more permanent than any single human life; they help to form the physical and spiritual climate in which we live.<sup>35</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Brasch, expressing throughout his life the existence of such a vital connection between art and nature, became one of the first writers to sensitively interpret the New Zealand landscape, and no less surprising that the artists he chose to write about were those such as Lusk and Woollaston, who portrayed the true nature of the New Zealand countryside in their painting in the same way as Brasch and his contemporaries had in their poetry. Writing in 1941, Brasch spoke of the need for born New Zealanders to paint a recognizable vision of this new country undistorted by excessive European influence; 'Until some good painter fixes it all,' he continued, 'all our seeing must be temporary.'<sup>36</sup>

Clearly he saw such artists as Hodgkins, McCahon, Woollaston and Lusk, all of whom made the New Zealand landscape an integral part of their work, as



creating an art which was permanent, capturing something of the endurance of bush and mountains and sea. The space in *Landfall* devoted to these painters, who 'understood with Braque that if one loses contact with nature one inevitably ends in decoration'<sup>37</sup>, is proof of Brasch's belief in the immense importance of these landscape painters to the establishment of an indigenous culture. The passage in 'The Estate' which alludes to Colin McCahon, and these two major poems 'Hu inga September' and 'Six Water-colours', stand as his poetic tribute to those whom he saw as visually 'fixing' the beauty of his country for their fellow New Zealanders.

Unlike the poem dedicated to Woollaston, 'Six Water-colours' is actually based on specific works by Doris Lusk, each of the six sections outlining one of a series of paintings. Consequently Brasch's writing here is largely descriptive, similar to an early sequence such as 'Otago Landscapes'. With swift and sure strokes, he sketches his own impression of Lusk's water-colours (five of which, Roddick informs us, depict scenes near Takaka, in the Nelson district<sup>38</sup>). The titles Brasch chooses for his pieces, too, are reminiscent of work from his earlier volumes, specifically locating the settings of the artist's works. Except for 'Dark Stream', the pieces all unselfconsciously include New Zealand place names: 'Wharf at Onekaka', 'Onekaka Beach', 'Rocks at Oaro', 'Coast at Tarakohe', 'Trees at Totaranui'.

Despite these similarities to writing of previous decades, however, 'Six Water-colours' is a series which very obviously belongs to Brasch's more mature work. Speaking to Milner in an interview for *Landfall* in December of 1971, he expressed a relatively new preference for succinctness in poetry: 'Density is one of the things that I admire most in poetry . . . one of the qualities that to me seems supreme . . .'.<sup>39</sup> His style in these short poems is certainly more dense than his earlier work, with each word vital to the overall visual impact. His vision is as detailed as ever, but the details are now more compressed, crowding one after the other to paint a word picture as vivid as any literal painting.

The alliterative opening of 'Onekaka Beach' (a subject which features frequently in the last twenty-five years of Lusk's career) is a striking example of Brasch's more concise style, which nonetheless succeeds in remaining remarkably evocative:

Long sand low lit  
 Storm veil lurid violet  
 Steely sea frenzied running  
 Under flashed blades of lightning . . .<sup>40</sup>

Colour is a primary feature here, reminding us continually of the physical origins, the blend of paints on paper, which prompted this writing. In 'Wharf at Onekaka' the pier stretches 'black into storm'<sup>41</sup>. This colour is emphasized by repetition in 'Rocks at Oaro' (situated on the Canterbury coast near Kaikoura) and is effectively followed by a contrasting lighter hue:

Black in the pale water  
 A sea legion  
 Of rocks nesting  
 Black in sleep  
 Far low on horizon  
 Hill haze dissolves  
 In sulphurus lemon.<sup>42</sup>

A similar use of repetition ensues in 'Dark Stream', this time evoking the shadowed mystery of trees reflected in the water:

In the green dark  
 Still green  
 Stilled flowing  
 Dark held stream.<sup>43</sup>

Far from being a merely descriptive surface, however, Brasch's interpretations of Lusk's work have an added depth due to his imaginative vision. One finds metaphors which, in true Brasch style, transform the everyday landscapes he describes. In 'Wharf at Onekaka', 'Feathers of darkness twitch a sea', and the broken pier 'stumbles' into the distance; in 'Rocks at Oaro' the boulders are portrayed as nesting birds and, with a similar metaphor, in 'Coast at Tarakohe' the islets are 'sleeping / sea-birds[s]'rocked in the swell of the ocean.<sup>44</sup> 'Dark Stream' and 'Trees at Totaranui' carry Brasch's imprint more

obviously still, for in these two final pieces it is as if he is unable to resist reading into Lusk's work one of his own favourite themes - that of the essentially secretive quality of the natural world - which adds to the dark atmosphere prevailing throughout the series.

His description of the 'dark held stream' contains clues of his earlier 'Henley on Taieri'. This is no friendly, chattering brook but a silent, unreflecting 'mirror flow,' guarding its own mysteries from the eyes of man. In 'Trees at Totaranui' the branches overhead, under which man must walk alone, are 'guarded', the air is 'watching' and the storm is 'uprooting'.<sup>45</sup> Yet into this scene of implicit hostility, Brasch introduces the same note of hope which is present as far back as *The Land and the People*. If time is taken to learn nature's secrets, he once again implies, there is the possibility of reward:

Promise dwells in the root  
Only, in the rooted heart,  
In fast rooted trees  
Whose arms meet overhead . . .

Brasch's vision, no doubt influenced by first-hand experience of these South Island scenes, is thus superimposed on Lusk's. The result is a blend of the two interpretations, visual and literary, which not only brilliantly evokes a very 'New Zealand' landscape, but also successfully brings together two artistic mediums. One feels that Brasch would have been delighted had he known that, in 1990, New Zealand-born composer Lyell Cresswell's 'Voices of Ocean Winds' was to receive its première performance in Wellington; based on 'Six Water-colours'; this five movement choral and orchestral composition adds yet another dimension, and another artist's interpretation, to Brasch's dual-edged work of nearly three decades earlier.

The question as to how accurately Brasch has captured in words Lusk's visual presentations rests, of course, entirely on personal opinion. Bertram states that 'the affinity between word and pigment could hardly be closer'.<sup>46</sup> Reviewer Oliver Riddell, however, commenting on Cresswell's work, sees the

visions of painter and poet as some what disparate: '[Lusk's] work has always seemed pretty innocuous to me, but Brasch invests it with menace and this menace is the common theme Cresswell uses.'<sup>47</sup> I myself feel that this is only true of the two Onekaka pieces (and perhaps also of 'Dark Stream'); for the scenes portrayed here do strongly reflect Brasch's own belief in the inherently hostile forces of nature and, as such, perhaps magnify the presence of possible 'menace' in Lusk's paintings. Yet this is of course Brasch's prerogative, for, although prompted by the visual inspiration of one artist, 'Six Water-colours' creates its own unique pictorial impressions in a reader's mind; it is a work in its own right and must be judged and enjoyed as such. Both poet and painter, furthermore, ultimately achieve the same end in that their works present images of human and natural worlds within the framework of an unmistakably local landscape.

This ability to look at New Zealand through a New Zealander's eyes, rather than portraying it as a 'poster-country'<sup>48</sup>, was one of the qualities Brasch admired most not only in Lusk's work but also in that of Toss Woollaston. In his autobiography, Brasch describes Woollaston, whom he had met through poet Ursula Bethell, a mutual friend: 'Toss . . . was rooted in [New Zealand], part of it - yes, he *was* New Zealand, I saw now, the New Zealand that was coming to be.'<sup>49</sup> The section in *Indirections* which outlines the writer's growing friendship with Toss and Edith Woollaston speaks of Toss's belief that local landscapes 'offered enough for a lifetime' of painting.<sup>50</sup> Clearly identifying them with the land, Brasch even describes the Woollastons in related terms: 'Toss and Edith were as quiet as the landscape . . .'<sup>51</sup>. 'Huinga September' pays tribute to both the friendship between Brasch and Woollaston, and the latter's ability as a painter. Unlike the Lusk poem, it is not centred on specific art works, but it has about it the same visual quality and celebrates the same talent for portraying a recognizably indigenous landscape.

In a way which has become familiar in his last few volumes, Brasch divides 'Huinga September' into six parts. The first two are primarily descriptive, etching with assured lines the Taranaki countryside where Woollaston lived as a child, and where he first started painting. The predominant colour in the first section, which describes the 'countless unnamed small hills' of Huinga in spring, is green.

... Jewel-green upon the sky  
Their foil and setting,

Laid-paper-coiled with the fine net  
Of sheep-track terracings

In winding horizontals  
That bind their small shape

In the green rain and barbed sunlight.<sup>52</sup>

Brasch plays on the contrast between the cool freshness of these paddocks and the burning core of the earth beneath to suggest again the power of natural forces. His images are an effective blend of an everyday pastoral world and a more enduring one of rock and fire provided by his mind's eye:

Green of the underworld, glow-worm green,  
Flame hills deep-burning  
Feeding their flocks with fire-grass.  
Flicker of the world.

In the second section of the poem, he raises his eyes from the green hills to the snowy peak of Mount Egmont. Once again it is as if he is seeing with the eyes of a painter rather than a poet; the colour which characterizes this mountain for Brasch is white, and he centres on this visual feature, contrasting the 'white cone' with the verdancy of the pastures in the previous section. This mountain, clad in its surrounding mist, is 'Whiter that sheep / and snow-still even when it seems to swim / Through smoke of cloud'<sup>53</sup>.

The skilfully chosen metaphors remain in keeping with the rural setting of the poem: the mountain is 'A tall gardener' and 'a shepherd counting his flock.' Yet, despite such prosaic images, once again the mysterious power of the

natural world is hinted at. The mountain becomes a symbol of this power and, god-like, it presides over the valley and determines its events:

Never one to meddle  
That snowhead  
Will not stir from place,  
Yet if asleep in air  
Dream-prompts what is passing . . .

From the concrete beginnings of actuality, Brasch passes on to contemplation of now familiar themes: the role of memory in one's life, the complex nature of one's identity, and the vital importance of friendship and love. Unlike 'The Estate' and other poems of its period, however, 'Huinga September' does not venture onto abstract ground. The poet's reflections are instead specifically based on his own friendship with Woollaston, and the landscape in which this friend spent his earliest years. The third and fourth sections emphasize the value of human memory, the way that it provides a sense of permanence in a world where nothing remains the same and even one's own identity is constantly changing. It is our familiar, day-to-day surroundings, Brasch stresses, which must be remembered, so that even when one has inevitably moved on, these scenes have become a part of oneself, providing a core of stability amidst a myriad of impressions. He uses, as illustration of this, old haunts of Woolleston's childhood, thus bestowing a sense of reality, and indeed permanence, on his own work:

Commit to memory only  
    Those answered shapes  
Children of the family stream  
Naked unwillowed Makuri -  
    Far-away Hills,  
    Bayly's, Hussive's  
Learned, remembered, made and remade-  
    Record, commit.<sup>54</sup>

Wisely limiting his writing to easily visualized images of the physical world, he describes the rest of the mind's 'detritus' (this word in itself suggesting a natural phenomenon) as a 'thousand hills of sheep and cattle' and

as 'Pebbles or leaves washed and fretted / Earthward . . .'. In the fourth section Brasch's writing has a similar pictorial quality. 'Memory' is personified, and the terms in which its human attributes are described all relate to nature; Brasch is clearly implying that, despite the fact that it is a function of the human brain, memory is 'log-hardy' and endures like the elements.

Tree-age, earth-old  
Pine-gnarled,  
Eyes water-flashing  
Tongue dancing  
Or as water; quiet  
Memory has its weather  
Also . . .<sup>55</sup>

The following section provides evidence, I feel, of the way that Brasch's writing deteriorates when moving from the visual to the abstract. Introducing a more personal note, the poet describes fire-lit nights spent talking with Woollaston. As he strays from an objective focus on real or imagined landscape to express the importance of this relationship to him, his writing shows a tendency to become convoluted, and the clarity of image and line is lost just as it is in certain parts of 'The Estate'. One finds lines such as 'I drink largely / Your long-brewed love-mead flowing peaty-pungent'; or 'you follow then / The convolutions of my inward-outward / Shadow coursing to no terminus.'<sup>56</sup>

As soon as personal emotion is distanced again, in the final section, Brasch's writing recovers its usual lucidity. Depth of thought is no less evident here, but by returning once more to the assured forms of an external landscape, the poet is able to objectively convey the feelings which, when expressed more directly, tend to blur his usually incisive vision. The 'madonna mountain' of Taranaki becomes a many-sided symbol, standing simultaneously for human love, purity, truth, and death; yet it is presented to us first and foremost as a representation of the 'real', physical object. Once again Brasch

produces some of his best writing when outlining details of nature; his description of the mountain is colourful and evocative.

Madonna mountain  
Born of the heart-fire of earth  
Red root beneath you,  
Drawing fields, forests and snows  
Round you for blanket  
Of bird-wing colour, frost line . . .<sup>57</sup>

Effective in its simplicity, this writing is vastly different from the convoluted style Brasch adopts when focusing solely on emotional and abstract subjects. Having thus established the actual physical setting, he is able to centre his writing around this external landscape. As elsewhere in his poetry, the mountain is invested with a mysterious and serene power, so that it not only seems to dominate the landscape but it also represents the larger questions of existence beyond day-to-day trivialities.

You are the question  
Echoing above our lives,  
The love we beseech  
That will one day destroy both  
Itself and us, calm  
As a frozen wave breaking.<sup>58</sup>

The scene here is no longer particularly indigenous, for in this section, despite the visual approach, Brasch's reasons for including the mountain here are largely symbolic. Yet the universal aspect of this poem has its roots in the local and the personal. The remote, mist-clad form in the last section is, after all, one of the 'assured shapes' of the Taranaki region; the love which it represents in the poet's mind is only a more sublime form of the friendship Brasch and Woollaston share.

The reciprocal relationship of universal and local elements which Brasch achieves here was one of the qualities which he particularly admired in the work of Lusk, McCahon, and Woollaston himself. Of McCahon, for example, he wrote:



[he] employs a universal...language to express a particular local truth, and that local truth is thereby deepened and made universal.... He expresses the local nature of his truth by setting his figures in a New Zealand landscape.<sup>59</sup>

If one can compare two such different artistic mediums, 'Huinga September' appears to me to be a poetic version of one of the paintings by Woollaston or McCahon which Brasch so admired. It is a complex work which blends the indigenous and the universal, the personal and the general, and the more often one reads it, the more meaning it divulges - just as one gains more from a visual work of art the longer one contemplates it. Yet understanding of this poem, just as with a painting, grows initially out of the concrete and the visual. It is Brasch's faithful recreation of a familiar landscape, in all its ordinary detail, which provides solid beginnings for the symbolic suggestions contained within the poem.

#### THE RETURN TO 'HOME GROUND'

*... This is my holy land  
Of childhood. Trying to comprehend  
And learn it like the features of a friend. ...*

*- Basil Dowling*

In both 'Huinga September' and 'Six Water-colours', as discussed, Brasch shows a tendency to return to specific New Zealand scenes, voicing through the indigenous imaginary themes which transcend the borders of nationality. As tributes to other artists, however, both focus on landscapes favoured by these artists, rather than those of particular significance to Brasch himself. In 'Home Ground', the third major poem of this section, and in the final section 'Last Poems', in what seems a fitting end to his career, he returns to the Otago countryside, the region most familiar to him and best-loved.

An early passage in *Indirections* expresses how much the countryside around Dunedin came to mean to him, from his childhood onwards:

It impressed itself on me so strongly that it seemed to accompany me always, becoming an interior landscape of my mind and imagination, unchanging, archetypal, the setting of what I read about as well as of all the life of the present. The shapes, textures, scents, sounds of all its landscapes grew into me and grew with me.<sup>60</sup>

The title poem of *Home Ground* deals explicitly with this countryside, and, as such, has almost more in common with the last two pieces of the volume, 'Queenstown Park' and 'The Clear', than it does with those of the second section, with which it is grouped. However, it is similar to 'Huinga September' and 'Six Water-colours' in its form, for it, too, is divided into a number of sections, some of a descriptive and others of a more symbolic nature.

Ian Wedde had described Brasch's 'Home Ground' as the 'final and finest achievement of his career.'<sup>61</sup> Certainly this is complex and sophisticated poetry. In much the same way as 'The Estate', the poem covers a wide range of themes by means of allegory, dialogue, and description; unlike the earlier work, however, the many strands of 'Home Ground' are drawn together by the central core of a recognizable identity (the poet himself) in one familiar setting. Man's 'estate' is no longer an ideal to be found only in the abstract values of human love and friendship. Brasch now claims for himself a physical territory and, for better or worse, accepts this as his own.

The first seven sections of the poem play an important role in the poem, for they establish its 'real' setting, describing Dunedin in a wealth of local detail. The opening of the poem places this city in a wider context of time and the elements:

Between the waves of sea and mountain  
A drift of tide-wrack, mound of shells.

Blown about by winds. Buried in dust. Rain-sodden.  
Baked by summers of sun.<sup>62</sup>

This human settlement, 'self-begotten' and 'man-made', is not the idyllic garden which was Brasch's domain in 'The Estate'. His vision is no longer one of 'sunlit havens', now sparing no mundane detail. In this he undoubtedly fulfils

his own maxim, stated in a lecture which he gave in 1949, that a poet can use 'mundane everyday subjects' and, with the right treatment, can 'make sublimity out of the everyday, even out of the sordid'.<sup>63</sup> The city he portrays here is one of stark contrasts: the beauty of cloud and sky masked by 'smoking chimneys', and the 'blossoming plum' flanked by hospitals and petrol stations.

The implications of the contrast between man's creations and nature's are extended further than this visual facade, however. Despite the 'frailties' of this man-made community, at the same time it provides its inhabitants with some stability amidst the vast forces of the elements.

City of nothing. Set under sky, beside waters,  
Hill hollow. While tides move it lies unmoving  
While stones rise and fall, wood dries to powder . . .

Floats on the void edge. Past the sentry beat  
Of breakers, beyond White Island, last step into nothing.  
There in cavernous mists of dusk, icebergs prowl  
The bottom sea, towering out of the night watches,  
Warders of nothingness . . .<sup>64</sup>

This is an interesting development in Brasch's later poetry, for he now portrays the natural world, used almost invariably in his work as a symbol of endurance, as also being in a state of flux; flimsy human constructions are shown to be, for a time, static. It is this, I feel, which suggests most forcibly that Brasch has found a sense of belonging to a place which until now has been lacking in his life. In the *Landfall* interview with Milner in 1971, he speaks of his 'one criticism of life' as being a 'growing sense of chaos and lack of form in actual life'.<sup>65</sup> This is reflected clearly in 'Home Ground', where not only an individual's existence but the universe itself is a place of disorder. The fragmentary, hesitant style Brasch chooses to write in here is admirably suited to the subject matter:

Nowhere. Strewn over sea and sky. Torn in the gales.  
Voices. Paper. Dust. Everywhere mingled, woven  
Into the fabric, the seamless garment that all put on  
At birth, that looses them dying. Everywhere. Of the  
fabric.  
Here. World dreaming, suspiring. Nowhere but here.<sup>66</sup>

Joost Daalder, in his article 'Charles Brasch and the Betrayal of Romanticism', presumably alludes to this passage when he states that everything in this poem reveals that Brasch "doesn't feel at home" in the city of Dunedin, or indeed our earthly world, which the city is partly a model for.<sup>67</sup> He continues on to speak of Brasch's 'Shelleyan dissatisfaction with earthly life', and of the poet's lack of the consolation of another, eternal world because of his atheism:

Instead of looking for such another world, Brasch painfully declares Dunedin to be 'here / Which is everywhere'. His horizon has shrunk - if he still has some awareness of a realm beyond Dunedin, as appears to be the case, then such a realm is absorbed into his closed vision rather than that he expand outward from it into an enlarged one.<sup>68</sup>

Daalder's claim seems to me, in fact, to be refutable on the grounds of the very line which he has quoted. Quite apart from the evidence which the very title of the poem (and of the volume) provides, Brasch clearly seems to have accepted his home town, virtues and flaws alike, as a necessary centre for his world. His declaration that Dunedin is 'here / Which is everywhere', I see not as a 'painful' admission that the problems of existence are inescapable, but rather as a realistic recognition of the similarities of life the world over, and the solace one gains from claiming a small part of this world as one's own. In a way, the five preceding volumes can be seen as leading up to this work, for the search for an 'estate', both physical and spiritual, has been a major theme throughout Brasch's writing, nationalist and otherwise. Now the 'disputed ground' of his earlier work has become his home territory.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Brasch's horizon may have 'shrunk', this does not necessarily make his vision 'closed' or limited in any way. Brasch is here expressing his belief that one need look no further than one's familiar everyday surroundings to recognize the central facts of human existence - pain, happiness, love, death - which are the same everywhere. 'All is, all here', he

states in the final section quoted above. Yet this deliberate narrowing of focus is no admission of defeat; rather it is a typically stoical acceptance of the present and the close at hand which adds a positive tone to this later work. Accepting the limitations of his home town (and, by implication, of life in general) has been a life-long process, and one which still takes courage and determination: 'I tramp my streets into recognition,' he confesses.

This undoubtedly represents a significant advance in his outlook, for he no longer feels the need to look to other, more ancient, landscapes for reassurance amidst the overwhelming uncertainties of human existence. Like Eliot's Fisher King in *The Waste Land*, the poet repossesses his territory and, in so doing, gains some consolation, some 'fragments' to shore against the 'ruins' of a human wasteland.<sup>69</sup> The streets of Dunedin which Brasch names with assurance - 'Great King, Filleul, London, Albany Steps' - are now like conspirators, strengthening his sense of identity and, made of enduring stone, offering at least an appearance of stability:

They know me now and make no sign, they keep  
 Silence for my step  
 Giving nothing away, but poker-faced  
 Enact their numbers  
 Dependable under sun and moon.<sup>70</sup>

Brasch's sense of belonging to this city was undoubtedly strengthened by the personal ties it represented for him. Several times, in his commentary on 'Home Ground', Bertram compares this poem to 'The Estate'<sup>71</sup>, and indeed, in their celebration of friendship, the two works are similar. In the later poem, however, Brasch does not attempt an abstract and emotional treatment of this subject, preferring instead to remain within the objective, slightly distant, style in which he writes most easily. Private feelings are implied rather than directly exposed, and this the poet achieves by investing familiar Dunedin landscapes with personal significance.

The linking of person and place is a technique Brasch has used time and again: in early poems such as 'Waianakarua' and 'Waitaki Revisited', lengthy works such as 'The Estate', and now in his most mature work. Here in 'Home Ground' personal content is inextricably bound up with visual detail. In section vii, for instance, he describes a view of Dunedin and its harbour. The scene is meticulously detailed, the poet's gaze moving from the 'smoking chimneys' of the town to the 'grey glaze' of the harbour,<sup>72</sup> and little emotion is expressed. Yet the whole of the section is addressed to another person, who at the end is described as 'detached', an adjective implying a calm and objective personality; the view Roddick informs us, is from the 'high window' of Harry Thornton, a lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Otago and a friend of Brasch's<sup>73</sup>.

Later in the poem, in section xx, Brasch writes of a more sublime version of friendship, addressing the 'dream of love'<sup>74</sup>. Although there is no extra-textual explanation to fill in autobiographical detail, the poet clearly has in mind a specific relationship rather than an abstract ideal, for again he links his thoughts with a real landscape which clearly held for him a lasting significance.

I look today at your final haunt, across  
Crisp waters lightly stirring, and wonder,  
Drowsily wonder beside the cabbage tree,  
Grateful for everything, how I could have  
Lived without you . . .

In *Indirections*, Brasch speaks of the way that he came to love the countryside around Sevenoaks, on the North Downs of England, where his close friend Bettina Hamilton lived, 'both for itself and because it was hers and her children's.'<sup>75</sup> His appreciation of the Dunedin countryside in 'Home Ground' seems to be for the same blend of reasons: he loves it not only for the natural beauty of its harbour and hills, but also for the way local places had become irrevocably connected with the memory of personal relationships. In this way the relationship between the visual and personal elements in the poem is a reciprocal one. Through a focus on the details of local landscape, Brasch is

able to voice personal thoughts clearly and objectively, thus avoiding the lapses into obscurity or effusion which tend to occur when his full poetic attention is given to private relationships. At the same time, the great importance of personal relationships to Brasch intensifies the visual element in his poetry by familiarizing him further with the scenes he describes and imbuing them with meaning.

Section xii clearly expresses this, as Brasch suggests that human lives can alter and animate the otherwise expressionless face of the natural world:

What other eyes have loved  
Is dearer for their love,  
Earth that cannot love  
Even to return our love;  
Tree and flower and stone  
Silent to us as stone  
Yet wear a face of love  
To us who know them loved.<sup>76</sup>

The feeling that in 'Home Ground' emotional and visual responses are mutually dependent adds a depth and maturity to the work. This is more than either a celebration of a familiar landscape or of old friendships; it is a satisfying and balanced tribute to both.

Brasch's decision to return to a small-scale, local landscape as the basis for this poem by no means precludes his usual universality of vision. In fact, in what seems a paradox, the stronger the local element in his work, the more universal its perspective becomes. His response to surveying his home ground not only moves him to contemplate on what this particular place and its inhabitants mean to him, but also prompts him to write of the wider issues which are never far from his mind: the brevity of life, and the domination of nature over man. His descriptions of the grey city set amongst the hills create a poem of an unobtrusive but unmistakably local flavour. Yet the work also has about it a suggestion of inescapable mortality behind the more tangible reality of sea and mountain; and combatting this despair, the consolation of an enduring strength outlasting all human existence, also found in the features of

this familiar landscape. Thus the convincingly established Otago setting is important for creating a strong local atmosphere, but is equally important as a necessary starting-point for reflection on themes relevant to any time and any nation. By ostensibly narrowing his vision, Brasch also finds the means for expanding and objectifying this vision.

In section x, for example, with a few deft phrases he describes the streets of Dunedin by night:

Street lamps glowing clear flame-red by day  
Coagulate in the dark to fat hot clotted yellow,  
Run yellow avenues across the town,  
Loop yellow over hills humped in the dark . . .<sup>77</sup>

From here he immediately progresses to an imaginative reworking of this visual aspect, connecting the colour of the street lights, and the sordidness of the reality before him, with disease and death. His grim and horrifying images are characteristically pictorial, putting a face to fear rather than actually describing the emotion itself:

Night yellow, fever yellow  
Devouring flesh of faces to the bone,  
Eyes hung luminous in empty sockets,  
Lips bared from yellow teeth  
In horror of darkness grinning yellow fear.

Although the endurance of sickness and old age are undoubtedly drawn from personal experience, there is no personal emotion evident in these reflections on man's fate. It is as if, by use of familiar and local subject matter as a framework, Brasch is able to stand aside from man's condition, and to observe quite impassively the ugliness which is an inevitable part of this condition.

Although for Brasch the squalor of the cityscape symbolizes the darker side of life, in section vi he warns, 'Do not judge by appearances.'<sup>78</sup> Throughout 'Home Ground' one sees his constant awareness of the backdrop of sea and sky behind the grey facade of streets and buildings. The beauty of the New Zealand countryside, he implies, is as real a part of life here as the surrounding city.



When the street lights go out  
and dawn bleaches out the stars

When all the birds sing together  
So that you hear all and none

Listen, beneath, for the low sea  
Wind-scourged, sullenly heaving

Sounding where every street ends  
And every voice falls silent . . .<sup>79</sup>

In fact, the cycles of nature, represented in this landscape by the movement of the tides and the rising of the sun, may be seen as the ultimate reality, for it is these which endure. Every day begins with 'unhurrying assurance', regardless of human heartbreak, and in every spring without fail 'leaves unlock from grey branches.'

Thus Brasch uses his local scene allegorically with a confidence due both to decades of poetic experience and to the familiarity of his subject matter. His descriptions do not spare his 'home ground' in any way, but neither does he lose sight of the beauty inherent in this microcosm. The harshness of his vision in the tenth section, for example, is counteracted by the beauty of such a verse as section xiii. Here the theme of death is reintroduced once again through description of a real landscape, but this time his treatment of the subject is gentler. Death is symbolized by the setting of the sun, and the surrounding countryside both mourns and blesses human death.

Before the light of evening can go out  
The mountains have their features to compose,  
The sea will commence its orisons . . .<sup>80</sup>

The poet describes a journey through a maze of streets, representing the tortuous journey through old age; he travels 'past the shifty eyes of window-panes' to a clear patch of ground. Here, 'out of the traffic's ear', he can prepare for death, drawing courage from the wind and the stars. (Mention of the 'Pointers' adds a particularly indigenous flavour to the poem.) This section displays a blend of the universal and the local, of the figurative and the literal, which is remarkable, especially for writing of such apparent simplicity.

In the second-to-last section of the poem there is a similar allegorical use of a real and detailed landscape. Brasch describes a plover amidst the 'drab derelict marsh near the madhouse', and at first concentrates solely on the visual aspect of the scene: the 'swamp-pools and the reeds', the 'scorching traffic' on a nearby road, the bird's 'callow nest.'<sup>81</sup> After establishing the setting with a few deft phrases, however, he turns to the symbolic connotations of this setting. The bird's life, subject as it is to the weather and the turning of the seasons, typifies the existence of all wildlife, and this is described in images of his own flight:

Habit-hovering in a stream of lives  
Bent to the arc-flight of the seasons.

The 'spur-winged' plover itself becomes a complex symbol. Living and dying by instinct alone, he provides evidence that the cycles of life go on, regardless of whether we rail against our fate or submit to it:

Necessity, consent, slip through our fingers  
That touch and lost the pulse of time.  
It is he sustains the world outside our care.

In such a way as this, then, Brasch succeeds in maintaining a balanced and objective tone throughout 'Home Ground.' His blend of real and symbolic landscapes provides him with a means for expressing personal feelings about old age and death, while sufficiently distancing the emotion so that it does not blur the clarity of line and thought. The usual formality of style, of course, helps him to sustain the calmness of his vision, but his use of local subject matter as a framework for universal themes is even more vital. By focusing on the features of a landscape well-known and loved, it is as if Brasch is able to distance and control themes which might otherwise become overwhelming or inexpressible, particularly for a poet reticent by nature. In fact, the more intense concentration on local landscape throughout *Home Ground* as a whole enables him to achieve this greater objectivity in most of the poems in this volume.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL: 'LAST POEMS'

*... taking nothing for granted  
but keeping the faith  
somehow*

*'here'*

*- Ian Wedde*

The majority of poems in the last section of *Home Ground* are far removed from the remote style of Brasch's landscape work. These are pieces written during the course of his illness after a diagnosis of cancer in 1972, and they directly expose the pain and cares of this time, as he learnt again the 'hard grammar of dependence.'<sup>82</sup> The writing is honest and courageous; the poet's innermost emotion is now voiced more openly than ever before. The 'lifelong habit of reserve', which Brasch speaks of in 'A Word to Peter Olds'<sup>83</sup>, is discarded in these manuscript writings. 'I betray myself,' he states in 'Night Cries, Wakari Hospital', admitting, 'I have no blood / But fear.'<sup>84</sup> His anguished questioning is, for once, not muted through allegory nor implied through visual detail, but is blunt and heartfelt:

Why did you leave me, life,  
Empty, cold, without hope, almost content . . . ?<sup>85</sup>

Yet despite the impression that these are spontaneous utterances, relatively unworked compared to the careful formality usual in Brasch's writing, even here one finds evidence of the poet who so often looked to the landscape for inspiration and solace. At times such a reminder is no more than a brief line - 'It is the earth's, as I am'<sup>86</sup> - which echoes Brasch's lifelong assertion that human life is of the earth and returns to it. There are, also, three sections in 'Back from Death' in which he steps aside from the 'world of pain' in which he is enclosed, and turns to the natural world for reassurance and strength.

Section 4, which is dedicated to Janet Frame, is a restatement of the lifelong affinity which Brasch has always felt with the land, and through which, in some way, he will continue to live.

I am there, under the waters,  
In the winds, in the leaf that sighs.

I am there, sleeping in the rocks,  
Under the houses, below the promontories.

I am the sea, I am the wind,  
Everything and nothing, with you.<sup>87</sup>

Objectivity is found in a similar way in the seventh and eighth poems. The former is a simple description of blackbirds, silent as 'raindrops shining on the leaves', and the picture Brasch conveys in a few lines is as vivid as ever. Yet the visual surface is given symbolic depth in a way also typical of this poet's writing. These birds are like harbingers of winter, and, by implication, of death. The end they foretell, however, is characterized not by grief and pain, but by a peaceful silence:

They are bearing the year into winter  
Laying their stillness on our lips.<sup>88</sup>

The eighth poem is even slighter, but displays the same sense of comfort found in the quiet indifference of the natural world.

Beloved trees, that long outgrow us,  
Mountain heads too far to know us

Bless you for your lives, my meat  
Unfailing and my winding-sheet.<sup>89</sup>

His focus on landscape is thus not a means of escaping the fear of mortality, but rather of coming to terms with it, and thereby transcending it. From the calm tone of these sections it becomes clear that, rather than drawing on religion or other systems of belief for the strength to face his own death, Brasch finds his faith in the enduring forms of nature - as, indeed, has been his inclination from his earliest poetry. As early as 1940, in an extract from his

diary, he expresses this: 'Jung and Freud between them have taken away my belief in a traditional God; but the powers we worshipped under his name remain and are as potent as ever.'<sup>90</sup> It is, moreover, as shown in 'Home Ground', the landscapes most familiar and closest to hand which provide this strength for Brasch. In poem 4 he addresses his remarks to 'Whangaparaoa' so that the waters and rocks with which he merges his identity are those of a particular locality; and the mountains and trees of poem 8 are similarly given recognizable faces by the title 'In the Rangitata Gorge.' The fact that Brasch was able to claim some 'home ground' at the end of his life - was able to centralize the absolutes of nature in the features of his own familiar territory - must be seen as something which provided him with still greater courage in the face of death.

Considering this, it seems entirely appropriate that Roddick should have chosen two 'local' poems with which to conclude this volume. In 'Queenstown Park' and 'The Clear', there is a marked move away from the subjectivity of the other 'Last Poems.' Brasch's identity, so noticeably present before, is effaced, and his attention solely focused on the details of these two different landscapes. His selection of these two locations for subject matter is significant. In 'Queenstown Park', as Bertram notes, we are returned to a 'starting-point'<sup>91</sup>; for it was here that Brasch first made the decision to give up the business career which his father wanted him to pursue and to become a writer. 'The Clear', which is the final piece of this last volume, describes a setting equally close to Brasch's heart - that of Prospect Park in Dunedin. Both typify the carefully structured, somewhat distant writing to which he frequently returns. If it is at all possible to generalize about a poet who wrote for several decades and wrote in many idioms, these pieces can be seen as representing characteristics which speak clearly of Charles Brasch. Landscape pieces both, they reveal a striking clarity of visual detail, yet are more than straightforward word pictures; both

are of an unmistakably 'New Zealand' flavour, established firmly in local settings, yet at the same time 'reach / The heart's universal speech.'<sup>92</sup>

Although the theme of death as a personal issue has been left behind, the positive faith found in the natural world remains. Early in *Indirections*, when Brasch describes the inspiration afforded him by the winds and waters of Queenstown Park, he speaks of the feeling that 'a particle, not of their strength, but of their power to endure, had entered into me.'<sup>93</sup> The Wordsworthian decision made at this point, to take natural objects, 'patient, wholly themselves, enduring', as his exemplars is one which must be seen as having influenced the entire course of his poetic career; for the steadfast belief in the endurance of the natural world is one which has been reintroduced time and again in his poetry, nationalist and otherwise. In 'Queenstown Park', a poem of fine precision, this belief is outlined for a final time in the vivid images of the park and the lake, and Brasch implies his indebtedness to the natural world for the stability and reassurance it has provided him with.

The small waves beat their heads out on the stones.  
Crystal waters, starry shore,  
Murmuring your bright and dark lore  
Beside me in the mountain air,  
Beneath the grave peaks on their throne.

I hear you year by year  
And still I hear,  
As if it were my life's blood  
One voice of countless voices calling,  
Your ardent music fill my ear.<sup>94</sup>

The tribute to the natural world inherent in this poem seems a fitting culmination to the career of a poet who has based so much of his writing around land and seascape. 'Trees and stones are the world's pride,' he states here; and he issues a warning to all those who do not respect their environment:

He who murders trees and stones  
Shall hear their roots crack in his bones.

There are echoes here of the same foreboding tone found in 'The Land and the People (II)' where Brasch implies that insensitivity to the land will result only in a backlash upon one's self: the land, he says, 'will laugh / Upon our conquerors with like charm, / Quickly earthing our bones . . .'.<sup>95</sup> At this early point in his career, however, Brasch was largely focusing on the need for, specifically, New Zealanders to forge a relationship with their new country; whereas in this much later work the implications are far more general. The importance he places on the preservation of nature, and the way he sees the desecration of a landscape in terms of human death, is his poetical statement of a belief maintained all his life. The words in which he voices this belief in fact closely mirror the sentiments of his editorial notes for the September 1963 issue of *Landfall*:

. . . if men are to respect themselves, they must respect the earth they live on, which is an extension of their own bodies. . . . To prey upon the land, to treat it as a mere commodity to be exploited at will, ravaged, sold, is a kind of self-violation. To despoil great works of natural beauty is close to murder, as great a crime as to destroy great works of art and historical monuments. If we care for one we must care for all. To betray either is to betray our own essential humanity.<sup>96</sup>

To find such similar thoughts voiced in both poetry and prose, at different times throughout Brasch's career, strengthens the feeling that 'Queenstown Park', as one of his final poems, represents a restatement of themes which have been of lifelong importance to him. The vital three-way connection between art, nature and human life was one which he never failed to acknowledge, and this, too, is touched upon now. The concluding section of 'Queenstown Park', in which this theme is emphasized, displays the balanced precision which is frequently achieved in Brasch's mature work.

Beginning the section by creating a brilliant visual surface, Brasch describes the park, set on a peninsula extending into the lake:

Jewel-leaf water-drop  
All-but island emerald  
Anchored on azure-dark . . .

Maintaining the same compressed style, he progresses to describe the sound of wind and waves in the pine-trees:

Sinking, sighing,  
Fondled in tree-fold  
Shade-slumbered,  
To leaf-voice, life-voice . . .

The very words he has chosen here capture the sound he describes, but his expression has a greater significance than simply adding to the evocative atmosphere he is creating; in the one brief line 'leaf-voice, life-voice', he suggests that nature is at the very heart of all existence.

The final lines of the poem exhibit a similarly skilful linking of words which at first seem to merely create fleeting mood-impressions, but which in fact contain a wealth of implications, belying their simplicity. Here again Brasch draws attention, for the final time, to the unseverable connection between manmade creation and natural creation; and the peace he finds within art and nature perhaps foreshadows the peace he hopes to find in death:

Lambent leaf-pen  
Heart-still haven,  
Pointing, still.

The same feeling of peacefulness pervades 'The Clear', the very last poem in this volume. The calm tone of this poem provides a notable contrast with the anguish of the works dealing directly with Brasch's illness. His 'heart-still haven' here is Dunedin's Prospect Park (which is, as Roddick informs us in an explanatory note, 'a reserve with a view to the hills north of the city.'<sup>97</sup>). Again, the contemplation of a scene known since childhood seems to provide the poet with both comfort and strength. In the vastness of surrounding sea and sky and mountains, he is able to transcend personal fear and to see mortality as part of a larger and continuous cycle.

It is all the sky  
Looks down on this one spot,  
All the mountains that gather  
In these rough bleak small hills  
To blow their great breath on me,



And the sea that glances in  
With shining eyes from his epic southern prairies;  
Working together  
Time-long  
World's way.<sup>98</sup>

There is a feeling of resolution about this simple poem which indicates exactly how far Brasch has progressed, personally and poetically, since his first New Zealand poems. The focus has shifted from a relationship with a hostile country, to this easy familiarity with a benevolent landscape. Furthermore, the faceless and nameless 'people' of Brasch's first volume have been replaced by the presence of the poet himself, unobtrusively introduced into this picture of his 'home ground.' The deliberate self-effacement which led to the strictly impersonal tone of his earlier poetry has become less determinedly sought-after; the landscapes which he so vividly describes are not used so much as a mask which wholly conceals his identity, but simply as a means of objectifying personal and universal concerns. Brasch's mature vision remains an all-embracing one - his interest in the human absolutes of love, separation, and death is as deep as ever - but with his later poetry, in a sense, his world has narrowed. The centre of his universe is his 'home ground', and the landscapes of Otago have become, for him, both a vehicle for expressing his comprehensive views on life, and the way to acceptance of his own mortality.

NOTES

1. James Bertram, *Charles Brasch* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 50.
2. Bertram, p. 50.
3. Alan Roddick (ed.), 'Notes,' *Collected Poems* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 241.
4. In *Collected Poems*, p. 175.
5. 'Notes,' *Collected Poems*, p. 241.
6. 'Semblances' 2, in *Collected Poems*, p. 174.
7. 'Captivating Invitation: Getting on to Charles Brasch's "Home Ground,"' *Islands* OS 4 (1975), 323-24.
8. *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 137.
9. 'Ergo Sum,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 136-37.
10. *Home Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 178.
11. *Home Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 171.
12. 'Shoriken,' *Home Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 171.
13. 'Shoriken,' p. 171.
14. 'Shoriken,' p. 170.
15. 'Shoriken,' p. 14.
16. 'Notes,' *Collected Poems*, p. 241.
17. 'Shoriken,' p. 169.
18. 'Shoriken,' pp. 172-73.
19. These passages in 'The Estate' are more fully discussed in the third chapter of this study.
20. *Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 241.
21. *Indirections*, p. 241.
22. James Bertram, 'A poet's testament' - Review of 'Home Ground,' *New Zealand Listener*, 8 March 1975, p. 33.
23. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 42.
24. *Indirections*, p. 192.
25. 'Man Missing,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 135.
26. 'Shoriken,' p. 172.
27. John Geraets, '*Landfall Under Brasch: The Humanizing Journey*,' Thesis: Ph.D.: English (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1982), p. 50.

28. 'Present Company,' in *The Universal Dance*, ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), pp. 39-40.
29. *Indirections*, p. 159.
30. *Indirections*, p. 159.
31. *Indirections*, p. 252.
32. *Indirections*, p. 360.
33. 'Ode in Grey,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 125.
34. Geraets, p. 350.
35. 'Conditions for Literature,' in *The Universal Dance*, p. 147.
36. 'New Zealand, Man and Nature,' *The Geographical Magazine*, Mar. 1941, p. 342.
37. Brasch, 'Frances Hodgkins at One Hundred,' *Landfall*, 8 (1954), 268.
38. 'Notes,' *Collected Poems*, p. 242.
39. Ian Milner, 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 371.
40. In *Collected Poems*, p. 183.
41. In *Collected Poems*, p. 183.
42. In *Collected Poems*, p. 184.
43. In *Collected Poems*, p. 184.
44. In *Collected Poems*, p. 184.
45. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 184-85.
46. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 52.
47. *The Christchurch Press*, 26 March 1990.
48. *Indirections*, p. 310.
49. *Indirections*, p. 311.
50. *Indirections*, p. 306.
51. *Indirections*, p. 308.
52. In *Collected Poems*, p. 180.
53. In *Collected Poems*, p. 180.
54. In *Collected Poems*, p. 181.
55. In *Collected Poems*, p. 181.
56. In *Collected Poems*, p. 182.
57. In *Collected Poems*, p. 182.
58. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 182-83.

- <sup>59</sup>. 'A Note on the Work of Colin McCahon,' *Landfall*, 4 (1950), 337-38.
- <sup>60</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 20.
- <sup>61</sup>. 'Captivating Invitation,' p. 323.
- <sup>62</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 186.
- <sup>63</sup>. 'Modern Poetry,' in *The Universal Dance*, pp. 71-72.
- <sup>64</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 187.
- <sup>65</sup>. 'Conversation with Charles Brasch,' p. 370.
- <sup>66</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 187.
- <sup>67</sup>. In *The Pacific Quarterly*, 3 (Jan. 1978), 81.
- <sup>68</sup>. Daalder, p. 81.
- <sup>69</sup>. T.S. Eliot, 'What the Thunder Said,' *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909 - 1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.79.
- <sup>70</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 188.
- <sup>71</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, pp. 52-53.
- <sup>72</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 190.
- <sup>73</sup>. 'Notes,' *Collected Poems*, p. 195.
- <sup>74</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 195.
- <sup>75</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 252.
- <sup>76</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 192.
- <sup>77</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 191.
- <sup>78</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 189.
- <sup>79</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 189-90.
- <sup>80</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 192-93.
- <sup>81</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 197.
- <sup>82</sup>. 'Tempora Mutantur,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 199.
- <sup>83</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 202.
- <sup>84</sup>. In *Collected Poems*, p. 199.
- <sup>85</sup>. 'Why?' in *Collected Poems*, p. 203.
- <sup>86</sup>. 'The Mine,' from 'Back from Death,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 205.
- <sup>87</sup>. 'With You,' from 'Back from Death,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 204.
- <sup>88</sup>. From 'Back from Death,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 205.
- <sup>89</sup>. 'In the Rangitata Gorge,' from 'Back from Death,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 205.

- <sup>90</sup>. 'One January,' in *Islands*, OS 2 (1973), 256.
- <sup>91</sup>. Bertram, *Charles Brasch*, p. 54.
- <sup>92</sup>. 'To Vladimir Holan,' *Home Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 207.
- <sup>93</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 178.
- <sup>94</sup>. 'Queenstown Park,' in *Collected Poems*, pp. 206-7.
- <sup>95</sup>. *The Land and the People*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 2.
- <sup>96</sup>. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 17 (1963), 220.
- <sup>97</sup>. 'Notes,' *Collected Poems*, p. 242.
- <sup>98</sup>. 'The Clear,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 207.

## CONCLUSION

In the poem entitled 'To J.B. at Forty,' published in his third volume *The Estate*, Charles Brasch speaks of himself as being one who seems 'more shadow than substance.' He states here that his only real identity is to be found in his 'friends' love' and in his own creative writing, which he describes in characteristically diffident terms:

A handful of verse uncertain in shape and style  
The only evidence for his existence . . .<sup>1</sup>

If the verse published up to this point is 'uncertain in shape and style', then Brasch's poetry becomes even more diverse with his last three volumes, and still more difficult to define as one 'type' of poetry. Yet, as I hope to have shown in this study, when viewed as a whole the six volumes take on a cyclic aspect, with certain qualities in the poetry of the last volume closely resembling that of the first, while at the same time exhibiting a new maturity of vision. If Brasch's use of nature imagery is traced throughout his writing of several decades, there emerges a clear pattern of progression which gives a unifying perspective to this substantial body of work. To greatly simplify the progression of this imagery, it could be described as moving from concrete and local landscapes to more general and symbolic ones, and then returning to the 'real' scenes of Brasch's home region. The very titles chosen for the volumes reflect this movement, and suggest the poet's preoccupation with establishing one's own physical and spiritual domain: *The Land and the People*, *Disputed Ground*, *The Estate*, *Ambulando*, *Not Far Off*, and *Home Ground*.

The majority of poems in the first two volumes tend to revolve around indigenous landscapes (although the inclusion of foreign settings in some pieces indicates that, even at this early stage, Brasch's concerns were more than national ones). However, as he stated in the December 1954 issue of *Landfall*,

'If artists begin by exploring, in the narrowest sense, place, time, and identity, it is because they have to be sure of firm ground under their feet to start with.'<sup>2</sup> This is what Brasch achieves with these first two collections of verse. The underlying themes of transience and endurance are ones which recur throughout his work, but by basing his writing in the actuality of the present-day New Zealand landscape, he is thus establishing the 'firm ground' of time and place to which, much later, he returns. The 'identity' which he explores in this earlier writing can only be a national one, for his detailed descriptions of landscape preclude any revelation of personal identity. (As I have suggested earlier, this appears to be partly deliberate and partly instinctive.)

In the same *Landfall* article, Brasch states that, from this narrow focus, artists can 'go on, reaching out towards the general and universal where imagination has greater scope . . .'. With his third, fourth and fifth volumes he does just this, moving from a poetry which many see as one of solely national concerns to one of a much more personal and universal nature, and from specifically located landscape settings to imaginative symbolic ones. I see this as a natural and necessary development in a poet with Brasch's depth of vision and feeling, and the result is work of a much greater human interest, and a more direct emotional honesty, than before.

The middle volumes of Brasch's work, in fact, seem to represent a search for some established poetic self and, as an extension of this, a definition of personal identity. I see as highly significant the fact that almost all the pieces dedicated to Brasch's fellow writers include tributes to the way these writers speak in their own authentic voices: Auden's 'personal speech-song'<sup>3</sup>, Iain Lurie's 'Groundswell of voices speaking in [his] one / Voice'<sup>4</sup>, Fleur Adcock's 'detached, distinct / Voice that is [hers] alone'<sup>5</sup>, Johannes Bobrowski's 'same even tone'<sup>6</sup>, Louis MacNeice's 'assured voice / Like no other, salty, himself.'<sup>7</sup> The 'uncertainty' of style which Brasch speaks of in 'To J.B. at Forty' may well

be due to his experimentation with different modes in order to fulfil that pledge made to Auden in the final lines of 'Paying my Devoirs':

I promise if I can  
Respecting your example . . .  
To try to do differently,  
To speak in my own voice.<sup>8</sup>

Brasch describes the struggle of this search as a life-long one, in *Indirections*:

It was to be my greatest difficulty to conceive and write poems that were mine and nobody else's, to find my own voice, live my own life. . . . I have found and lost that voice, that life, many times. . . .<sup>9</sup>

At times his attempts to write in his 'own voice' end in obscurity. The pieces in which he concentrates solely on describing the vacillations of his mind are the least successful of his 'new' poetry, for in these he tends to move into a wholly abstract style of writing and, as he discards the visual imagery which was one of the greatest strengths of his earlier work, his poetry becomes overly subjective and loses clarity. The most accessible poems, and the most universally relevant, remain those which include some external touchstone, whether it be in the form of the clearly visualized landscapes of *The Estate*, or the more general and timeless images of *Ambulando* and *Not Far Off*.

It seems likely that Brasch himself came to realize this, for even in some of his most intensely personal poetry, nature imagery remains an important feature. In *Indirections* he quietly admits his own limitations as a poet, stating that his gift is 'very slight', and that 'to attempt subjects or treatment uncongenial to that gift is to ensure failure.'<sup>10</sup> Perhaps his most mature writing is best seen as a recognition of the limited nature of this 'gift'; for in the third section of *Not Far Off* and in many of the poems of *Home Ground* Brasch returns to the descriptive writing at which he excels. This is certainly no admission of defeat, however, for the impact of his final work could never have been achieved without the exploration of a wider 'time, place, and identity' in the preceding three volumes. In his mature writing, then, it seems that Brasch has at last found that 'authenticity' of poetic voice which he had sought for so



long. Accepting himself as a poet who wrote best in a visual and descriptive way, he reverts to basing his poems in vivid local settings; now, however, landscape detail is no longer a mask for personal identity but a way of objectively expressing the inner self. With self-expression facilitated by the medium of landscape description, at his best he achieves that tone of 'untroubled intimacy' which he saw as being the 'elemental language' of the natural world<sup>11</sup>, rare for a man of such reserve. This mature poetry is one of both visual clarity and implicit personal truth, in which Brasch maintains a balanced blend of exterior and interior landscapes.

Just as his observation of natural detail helps Brasch to express his inner self, so too does it make his poetry more readily accessible. Upon reading his poetry, we can momentarily enter the miniature worlds of land and seascape which he creates, and in these worlds we discover that the thoughts and feelings of this private man are also our own. In such a way, this poetry fulfils the role of 'communicator' which Brasch defines as the primary function of all art: it draws individuals out of their inevitable separateness into the 'living world' so that each of us becomes conscious of the 'maze of threads which link us to other people and to everything living.'<sup>12</sup>

Through a symbolic use of landscape, then, Brasch extends his own private world so that it becomes part of our experience, broadening our lives; and thus even his most 'local' poetry becomes one relevant to any time and place, thereby achieving the same quality of permanence that Brasch saw exemplified in nature. This poetry, because of the objective and universal vision attained through a focus on the external absolutes of natural forms and the elements, will endure, regardless of (yet also because of) the passing of generations, as Brasch suggests in 'Bonnet and Plume':

I am going to survive you all.  
Yes, I am going to be a survival . . .

I shall live in a different world;  
It will be mine still, but not yours.

It will have survived you and gone on living,  
You will be part of it without knowing,

You will have made it and stopped making,  
I shall be making it until I drop

And leave it for others to leave for others  
Until it survives them all, bone-naked.

Art joins nature, then, to provide for Brasch an enduring centre in an otherwise transient world; and so it seems entirely appropriate that his own poetic art should revolve so greatly around the natural world, and should largely achieve its timeless quality through its reference to this world. Despite the success of his descriptive pieces, and the visual clarity and beauty which natural imagery bestows on his work, Brasch is much more than a landscape poet, just as he is more than a 'regional' one. His poetry is one which, through its portrayal of the details of the natural world, speaks of the central and unchanging facts of human experience, and affirms 'the heart's universal speech.'<sup>13</sup>

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>. 'To J.B. at Forty,' in *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Roddick (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 45-46.
- <sup>2</sup>. 'Notes,' *Landfall*, 8 (1954), 249.
- <sup>3</sup>. 'Paying my Devoirs,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 129-31.
- <sup>4</sup>. 'Born and Made,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 128.
- <sup>5</sup>. 'Saying a World,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 132.
- <sup>6</sup>. 'Ode in Grey,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 125.
- <sup>7</sup>. 'Discord for Louis MacNeice,' *Not Far Off*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 164.
- <sup>8</sup>. 'Paying my Devoirs,' p. 131.
- <sup>9</sup>. *Indirections* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 192.
- <sup>10</sup>. *Indirections*, p. 192.
- <sup>11</sup>. 'Autumn, Thurlby Domain,' *The Estate*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 51.
- <sup>12</sup>. 'Present Company,' in *The Universal Dance*, ed. J.L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), pp. 40-41.
- <sup>13</sup>. 'To Vladimir Holan,' *Home Ground*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 207.

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