

# Go deeper into Mystery with John

## David Crystal

The American poet Robert Penn Warren points us towards an understanding of John Bradburne's purpose in his poetry. *The poem is not a thing we see - it is, rather, a light by which we may see - and what we see is life.*

There has never been a poet like John Bradburne, who wrote more poems in the English language than any other poet living or dead. So what sort of life do his poems try to make us see? In a phrase: eternal life. In *Paradise Tossed Aside* he expresses the hope he has for his writing:

***...oh may this dunce's typing  
Re-stir the springs of immortality  
And may my wit benefit eternity.***

How does he stir the springs of immortality in us? In over a thousand poems he places before us three major themes.

### The nature of the Trinity

His insight into the nature of the Holy Trinity is profound, providing us with images that make this ultimate mystery amazingly accessible. The key is love. 'Thought, Word and Voice' is his favourite analogy, explored in hundreds of poems, but he is always on the look-out for others. Here is one, *Heat, Light and Sound*, written not long before his death, on Whitsunday 1979:

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

He is convinced that his primary task, as a poet, is to explicate the Trinity. Indeed, as he explains in *A Ballade of a Logosophite*, he has taken it on board as a personal responsibility. It's actually not that hard, he says in *Roma, Italia, Il Mundo*, and it's a critical message for a modern secularist world:

***I personally am intent on telling  
To Rome, to Italy and to the World  
That, since true Faith is dwindling and not swelling,  
The One in Three should freely be unfurled***

### The centrality of Mary

In several poems he affirms his total dependence on her inspiration. This is how he recounts his first encounter with her as a Muse, in *Ut Unum Sint*:

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

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

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

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

***Love of Our Lady, though, is nothing less  
Than tantamount to counting Yahweh All  
Because they share one name and one address  
And one intent of blending in their call***

(*'This above all'*)

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

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

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

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

No marriage ever produced so many children! There are over 5,000 poems in this remarkable body of work.



# Bradburne's poetry of The Trinity

## The necessity of ecumenism

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

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

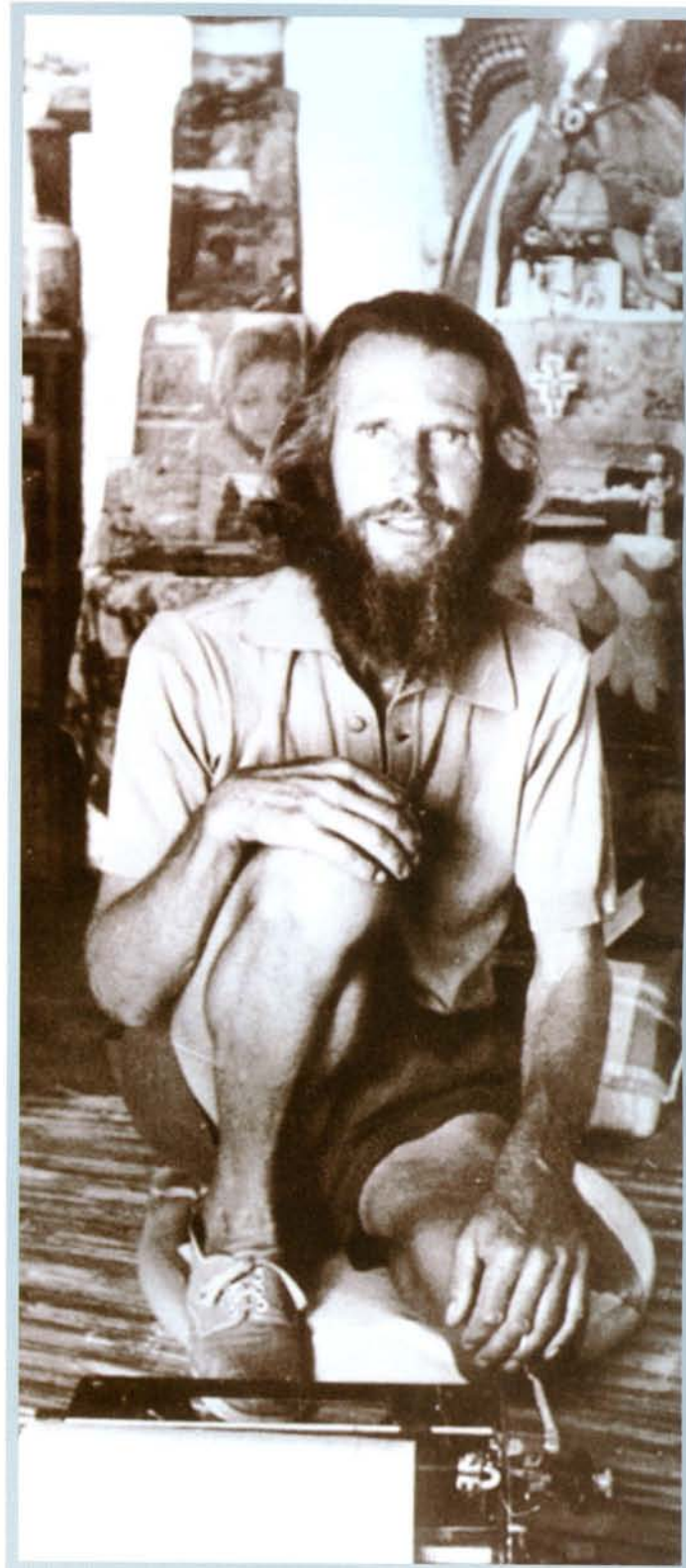
***[...] So Catholics whose hearts are true  
Are oned with Christ Our Lord the Jew -  
He who can say 'Christ lives, not I,'  
Has Jewish Nationality.***

But John Bradburne is a Jew who reads the Koran, is happy to pray in a mosque, and who ends one of his poems (*Saharah*) with the Islamic affirmation 'Allah ek akbar' (God is great). This is a Christian who repeatedly praises Buddhist mysticism and sprinkles his manuscript writing with the Hindu sacred syllable 'Om':

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

I have never read anyone who taps so deeply into so many religious traditions. The world needs a signpost pointing clearly towards the possibility of religious unity. John Bradburne provides it in a unique way. Whereas there are many examples of people from different spiritual traditions displaying a willingness to come together, he shows how it is possible to integrate these traditions into a single personality, a single vision. In a world full of Christian/Jewish/Islamic/Hindu suspicions and tensions, he is a much-needed symbol of hope.

I said at the beginning that the role of a poet is to make us see. That was John Bradburne's wish as well. That is what his poems are for: they are, in their 5,000 different ways, beacons illuminating the nature of truth.



Note: The full version of this essay and the poems used, as well as more information on John Bradburne, can be found at the website [www.johnbradburnepoems.com/](http://www.johnbradburnepoems.com/). John Bradburne was for a period Sub-sacristan at Westminster Cathedral. Prof. David Crystal is a well-known linguist, academic, author and broadcaster.