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JOHN SHAW NEILSON AND THE FLORAL METAPHOR

The *femme fatale* was a fascinating figure of art in Victorian times. Mario Praz, in his well-known book, *The Romantic Agony*, has described her manifestations in several European literatures, including English. In Australia too, "la belle dame sans merci," the beautiful woman, imperious, fascinating and cruel, appears in various forms in the poetry of Christopher Brennan, Kenneth Slessor, A.D. Hope and others. Norman Lindsay has painted her image. The *femme fatale* is a striking creation, threatening pain, castration, delusion and death, but also suggesting the possibility of ecstatic union. She is of both heaven and hell, is sought among the stars and in the underworld, is Lilith, Persephone, Circe, a Siren or heartless cocotte; she promises immortality or obsession and ruin.

Nevertheless, the *femme fatale* is not the only distinctive projection of femininity to be found in Australian poetry. Inherently less striking, but complementary in its displacement from everyday reality is the figure of the fragile girl, the delicate child-woman, a tender and transient flower, a beautiful ideal doomed to wither before the crude demands of life. John Shaw Neilson is the supreme representative of this figure in Australian poetry. In Neilson, the *femme fragile*, as she will be called here, rather than the *femme enfant*, is typically presented as a girl, who "innocent/in the whistling Spring," will not survive into Summer. She is "the tenderest of pale girls."¹ She grows ill and must die. The theme was popular in Neilson's time. Edgar Allen Poe wrote that "The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."² If, for "beautiful woman," we substitute "young girl" or occasionally "young boy," this statement becomes quite applicable to Neilson also. A complex network of cross-reference and influence could be shown for European writers and artists on this theme, around the turn of the century. The present writer has pursued this aspect of Neilson elsewhere, in its relation to the Victorian cult of the child.³ Here, it is intended to concentrate on an accompanying aspect of the *femme fragile* in Neilson, namely the poet's use of flower metaphors, as a way of showing that this apparently simple poet has surprisingly more in common with the international European culture of this time than is generally supposed.

It is a common impression that Neilson is the most native of

Australian poets because of his limited education, because of his simple rural life of itinerant labour, and not least because of his poor eyesight. Professor A.R. Chisholm refers to the "truly great artist hidden in this quiet Australian poet" whose genius was "flowering, humble and uncultivated, in the Wimmera."⁴ Despite his poor eyesight, or perhaps because of it, Neilson is thought to have responded to the Wimmera landscape with a freshness and accuracy unequalled by other poets. The question of whether his particular eye defect affected his registration of the near or far view, his preference for distant masses or near details, is hardly raised. Nancy Keesing's introduction to *The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson*, with its views of an ophthalmic surgeon, is an exception here. Nevertheless, the question of *what* Neilson looked at and *how* he looked at it, seems to be taken for granted. That is, he is thought to have looked at the "water bird," at the "orange tree," at all kinds of natural particulars in his world, and written of them in a uniquely perceptive way. Judith Wright's remarks on Neilson's adjectives, in her essay "The Unshielded Eye" appear to strongly support this view.⁵ Nevertheless, when we come to look closely at Neilson's descriptions, we must also come to see the justice of Professor Chisholm's remark, about Neilson exemplifying the Mallarmean doctrine of expressing mood by "suppressing all description."⁶ The paradox suggested here, of Neilson as a poet who both accurately describes while also suppressing description, is resolved when we discover that, instead of giving the kind of description that enables us to specify clearly what kind of water-bird or variety of orange the poet is looking at, he uses Nature in a contemporary European way to evoke subjective life. Neilson's references to Nature, to cite Professor Chisholm again, "communicate not a picture of mind, but the strange flux of mind's intimate secrets and nostalgias and aspirations. . ."⁷ It is surely the need to project this "strange flux" that constitutes Neilson's particular sensitivity, that heightens his awareness to a point where he is able to respond uniquely not only to a Nature directly perceived, but also to a Nature mediated by the signs of human culture about him. His intuition about culture apparently was sufficiently acute to compensate in part for a defective education. Professor Chisholm has expressed astonishment at Neilson's seemingly unconscious knowledge of French Symbolism: ". . . it is one of the miracles of poetry that a simple Australian bushman and manual worker like Shaw Neilson should often achieve, without knowing it, some of the effects which French Symbolists achieved by years of patient thought and by elaboration of an extremely subtle technique."⁸ Professor Chisholm finds that Neilson, "in his strange, instinctive way. . . sensed. . . some of the poetic and philosophical problems that pre-occupied European poets from the German Romantic period to

the period of the French Symbolists.”⁹

An instance of the kind of cultural sensitivity meant here is provided not only by Professor Chisholm’s remarks just quoted, and by his allusions to Thomas Hood and Oscar Wilde, but more graphically by Hugh Anderson, L.J. Blake and Clifford Hanna who have drawn attention to Neilson’s “great admiration for Botticelli.”¹⁰ As James McAuley noted, “the affinity is one that one might have guessed.”¹¹ Neilson’s well-attested familiarity with the work of a Florentine painter of the Quattrocento is less surprising when it is recalled that toward the end of the last century Sandro Botticelli was rediscovered by English Aestheticism, that is by Ruskin, Pater and the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Dante Gabriele Rossetti and Burne-Jones. Neilson, it is remembered, was born in 1872. “Botticelli’s wonderful picture ‘Spring’ [Allegoria della Primavera, c. 1478], as Neilson called it, is set in an orange grove, and Clifford Hanna accordingly relates the picture to Neilson’s poem, “The Orange Tree”.

While Hanna’s interpretation of the “Primavera” is suggestive, it is not the only one. The painting has been restored recently so that its floral details are now much more legible than previously. The latest view, which is also suggestive in relation to Neilson, is that the picture accurately depicts the reign of Venus according to the poem *Stanze per la giostra*, 1475 (stanzas for the tournament) by the poet Angiolo Poliziano. Here, the blue-draped Zephyr (Neilson’s boy “borne to the blue?”) at the right of the picture pursues the nymph Clori, who transforms herself into Flora, so that Venus, the goddess of Spring, can start with a gesture the round of the three Graces, Beauty, Chastity and Love. Here, Cupid aims an enflamed dart at Chastity, who in turn looks at Mercury standing on the left, raising his rod to the nubile Graces. Astrologically, the picture is said to depict the breath of Zephyr warming the earth in March, causing it to germinate so that in April it flowers under the sign of Venus, while in May, Maya, the mother of Mercury, prepares for her son’s reign over the twins, Castor and Pollux, and for his dismissal of the last of the Graces. Mercury’s garment is scattered with asters and spangled with small flames, some of which fall from the blue heaven above, others of which course upward to the heights; the celestial lover is loved of the heavens. The whole allegory is set in an orange grove, which has several levels of meaning: it is the garden of the Hesperides where the fruits of hermetic knowledge are gathered; it is the setting for a marriage (the orange-blossom at this time supplanting holly as a symbol); it represents the heraldic fruit of the Medici family (said to be based on the pun “citrus medica”).



However, the application of this suggestive material to Neilson's "Orange Tree", in the manner of Clifford Hanna, will not be pursued here. Instead, the "Primavera" will be taken simply as a stimulus to a more general inquiry into Neilson's use of the floral metaphor, after which "The Orange Tree" will be returned to again and a new interpretation offered.

In the Primavera's depiction of women, there is a virtual absence of jewellery, of the hardness and glittering of precious stones. In place of these, there is an abundance of floral motifs, an overflowing of foliage, flowers and soft, decorative features, enhancing the orange grove as a place of ideal and perennial femininity and youthfulness. Among the foliage of the orange trees, both flowers and ripening fruit can be found at the same time; Clori, pursued by Zephyr, trails flowers from her mouth; transformed by Zephyr, she becomes covered with





flowers and is casting still more from her lap; Venus, heart of Spring, swelling below the waist, suggests fruition; the other figures stand amid and under flowers and fruit. Unlike the jewelled imagery associated with the *femme fatale*, that is the hard, crystalline and ice-like, we find here a floral softness, a flowing, yielding quality that is repeated in the lines of fabrics, hair and postures. Likewise, the *femme fragile* of Neilson's poems is associated with a wealth of floral imag-

ery. Neilson's typical young girl is a flower girl, a "Daisy," a "little blue flower," a "lady of dazzling flowers."

The comparison between a girl and a flower is of course a traditional component of poetry, in which the common element is the brevity of beauty. With Neilson, transitory beauty and tenderness are further underlined by the fragile and ephemeral nature of the girl, by her blossoming into death. We find not only an imagery of flowering but of fading and withering as well. The delicate girl typically fades with the passivity of a plant. The association of flowers with a sick and beautiful girl was popular in Neilson's time. The last two decades of the previous century saw the triumph of Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt in "La Dame aux Camelias," based on Alexander Dumas' novel. Bernhardt, herself a delicate representative of the Belle Epoque, had a rich repertoire of death scenes. She could be seen depicted in theatrical posters with flowers, with white lilies in the so-called Lily-Look, in the style of *art nouveau*. Also Verdi's opera "La Traviata," 1854, with a theme derived from "La Dame aux Camelias," had a great and continuing success with its consumptive heroine fading from life amid flowers and music. White was a favourite colour for these flowers, a preference to be found in Neilson also, matching the pale cheeks of his "white rose" or "little white maiden."¹² The flower motif was also taken up in much of the fiction of the women's movement at the time, and is still reflected in many of the cover illustrations of the present-day series of Virago Classics. Also the figure of Ophelia exercised a great fascination on *fin-de-siècle* consciousness. Sarah Bernhardt attempted to render Ophelia in stone. The Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais provided a well-known image of Ophelia, as did Rimbaud in his poem "Ophelie," 1870, in both of which the pale girl fades amid flowers. Of the many versions of Ophelia then, most have her dressed in white.

If what is suggested here is correct, namely that Neilson's poetry exhibits general features markedly consonant with European *fin-de-siècle* culture, it would not be surprising if this were borne out by his own particular choice of flowers and by his poetic use of them. The notion of Neilson as the most unreservedly native of our poets suggests that his attention would be given to native Australian flora. His sensitivity to this flora is suggested by an anecdote, according to which he was given a job to cut down trees for a sawmill in the Otway Ranges, but "spent his time talking to the trees, and could not bring himself to attacking them."¹³ But this sensitivity to the Bush is not reflected in his poetry. When we look at Neilson's preference for particular types of flower, it is not a list of native flora that emerges but one made up of imported flowers of the Old World. Taking *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*, edited by Professor Chisholm, as a represen-



Sir John Millais: Little Speedwell's Darling Blue

tative sample of Neilson's work, we find a total of approximately 164 mentions of flowers. Of this number, there are 93 non-specific mentions of flowers, that is the type of flower is not indicated; instead, we find expressions such as "blossoms white and fair,"¹⁴ or "all the flowers that grow."¹⁵ At times, one is not sure whether flowers are properly mentioned at all, as in the expression, "bloom most delicate,"

describing a girl.¹⁶ Adjectives describing unidentified flowers are, typically, blue, white, red, sweet, little, drowsy, dazzling, unblemished, happy. Of the remaining 71 mentions of flowers, the specific types, in descending order of frequency of mention are, are:

Roses:	12	Dandelion	1
Cherry:	11	Kurrajong:	1
Orange:	9	Lavender:	1
Lilies:	8	Lemon:	1
Daisies:	6	Lilac:	1
Buttercups:	5	Peach:	1
Plum:	4	Rosemary:	1
Violet:	4	Thistledown:	1
Almond:	2	Tulip:	1
Apricot:	1	TOTAL =	71

Here, there are 19 specific types of flower. Four types (that is roses, cherry, orange and lilies) account for 40 mentions, or for more than half of the total. If, to these, we add daisies, buttercups, plum and violet, we would have more than eighty percent of the total. The only properly Australian native flower, the kurrajong, is indicated obliquely (cf. "Under the Kurrajong") if at all, and once only.¹⁷ Among the unspecified flowers, it is interesting that the one mention of a "wild-flower," in the poem "The Ways of the Wildflower," alludes to an outcast of the "berry clan."¹⁸ This flower is presented as a refugee from a cultivated garden and not properly an Australian native plant; it is clearly functional as a metaphor. As such, it needs no further botanical description than is given. The flower is anthropomorphised: "In the sweet garden it will make the moan;/It will be crying and crying to go out alone." It apparently represents the "wild thing" in the "heart of man." What is remarkable in Neilson, given his virtually life-long contact with the Bush, is his almost complete literary neglect of its flora, in favour of a poetic repertoire of flower imagery common to the *fin-de-siècle*.

When we look in detail at the use to which Neilson puts his floral imagery, we are struck by his introversion, that is by the dominance of "the strange flux of mind's intimate secrets."¹⁹ Neilson's focus is on his inner life, not on the natural world without. He is a part, even if unwittingly so, of the anti-naturalist movement in Australian poetry, along with Brennan, McCrae, Slessor and others. Of Neilson's poems, it could be said, as of *The Flower Book* (1905) by the Pre-Raphaelite, Edward Burne-Jones, that: "The pictures in this book are not of flowers themselves but of subjects suggested by their names. The first meaning of many of these has long been forgotten and new meanings are here found for them in the imagination of the artist."²⁰ It is interesting that Burne-Jones "At first. . .thought that any romantic or

lovely name would lend itself to his purpose, but soon found it was not so, and that comparatively few were of use. Neilson, likewise, appears to have been limited in his choice of flowers. He rejected not only those Australian natives devoid of traditional poetic resonance, but also those English flowers too marked by tradition to fit with his inner project. Hence those flowers of the English calendar tradition, revived with religious emphasis since John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), are plainly absent: that is, snowdrops (February), daffodils (March), primrose (April), hawthorne (May). Also the more luxurious or exotic blooms mentioned by the late-Victorian poets, such as cyclamens, camelias and orchids, are absent from Neilson, as are the English equivalents of Australian wildflowers, say the woodspurge, bloodwort and heartsease of Rossetti fame, or the sundew and marsh-flower, both present in English poetry at this time. Rather, Neilson's flowers are both English and commonplace; are both traditional and thoroughly naturalised in Australia. They are also flowers of the garden, park, orchard or paddock, that is flowers of civilisation, even if some, like the buttercup, thistle and dandelion, are not as a rule specifically cultivated.

It appears that Neilson's choice of familiar flowers has several functions: it saves the poet the task of presenting naturalistic detail to the reader; it enables him to evoke an emblematic tradition; and last but by no means least, it provides him with the elements of an expressive symbolism by which he can body forth in original form the "mind's intimate secrets." Neilson's flowers have already from the start a traditional emblematic significance, but this is then often overlaid by a new meaning conferred by their context, so that they lose part of their traditional correspondence and come to symbolise the poet's own psychology.

Neilson's use of the rose, for instance, bears some affinities to the late-romantic spirituality of Victorian poets, such as Yeats, Symons and Johnson among others. Yet it also exhibits a characteristic association with his overriding theme of the *femme fragile*. It is not the cruel aspect of the rose (such as Symon's thorn or "poison 'neath the petals") that attracts Neilson, rather it is its delicacy and transience; it is "The roses in the rainy time,/The frail sweet family of flowers."²¹ The clearest expression of this significance is found perhaps in his poem "Roses Three"²²:

What is a rose — a white, white rose?
A sweetheart sweetening in the Spring:
Shyly she lives, and shyly grows,
Mourner and mystic — blossoming.

What is a rose — a red, red rose?
A woman proud, in a proud hour:
Scented of love, she overflows —
It is the ripening of the flower.

What is a rose, a yellow rose?
A woman grave, in the pale gold;
Braver than all — she smiles and knows
It is the quiet'ning for the cold.

Here, the sequence of colours, white, red and yellow, corresponds to the sequence of blossoming, ripening and quietening, which could also be put as Spring, Summer and Autumn, or again as youth, maturity and dying. In any case, the rose is metaphorical of woman.

It is not surprising then to find this metaphor and colour scheme enacted in other poems. In "The Girl with the Black Hair,"²³ we are told that the poet is "impelled by the white moon," that it is Spring, and that "Her breath was the breath of roses,/White roses clean and clear." In "The Lover Sings,"²⁴ the lover is presented: "Down a green shadowy path he goes/And in his hand he bears a rose,/still singing that his heart is true." In an atmosphere of gathering gloom, the bearer of the rose is faithful to love alone, not to "red-lip kisses three days gone." Ominously, the lover is the "Singer of Summer uncontrolled." The changing rose becomes a symbol of the perennial death of "the buds, the bloom." The poem concludes with an historical perspective of "mourners" crying for "long light on our journeyings" while "Star follows star in the dull grey" and the lover who bears the rose sings "for very love of God" while darkness "drinks the day." This sombre and disconcerting poem makes of the rose a symbol of a perennially doomed attempt by youthful love to "cheer" a brown earth faced by utter darkness. In the gathering gloom, the love is the "chief messenger" to whom the young girl clings: "My lily love hath rosy worth!/Like to a happy flower she clings." "You and Yellow Air,"²⁵ the time is October, that is mid-way through Spring, when "It was a reign of roses. . .under a white sky." For the young girl of the poem, it was a time when "every lad with lad's eyes/made summer love to you." For the poet, it is all past; the girl has receded into the poet's dream of "the dim place of cherry-trees,/Of you and yellow air," which in the context of Neilson's poetry generally suggests fruition and, by means of the colour yellow, aging and death. In "Dear Little Cottage,"²⁶ we learn of "A rosy girl raising her face to be kissed." But the rosy girl is dead. In a "spell," the poet hears her still speaking: "The lips (oh, the cold lips) are speaking." The rosy girl has bloomed in a cottage which is now "a temple enshrouded in mist." A



verbal picture in Liberty or Art-Nouveau style is suggested here by “white lilies and tall,” the “lilt of winds,” “birds o’er the water” and mist. A similar theme is found in “Love the Player,”²⁷ where love teaches the “red lads” and “the white girls at milking time:” “Gladly he spoke of a white rose. . .” The white rose again is suggested as the symbol of something perennially offered but doomed to fade.

In this poem there are hints of medieval religiosity as well as pictorial motives suggestive of the Pre-Raphaelites: the wandering

Singer, Love, goes "Offering the manna to the monk,/Holding the honey to the nun." One is reminded here that the cult of the medieval underwent a new singular diffusion in English culture from the middle of the last century onwards, when Macpherson, Horace Walpole, Percy, Chatterton, among others were rediscovered. They served a renewed passion for the medieval, composed of an original aesthetic prospect: the myth of the popular Poet, the inspired Bard, who gives vitalistic and spontaneous expression to sentiments of Nature and Man, as part of an integral culture, in which there is no schism between myth and history, culture and Nature.

In Neilson's poetry generally, there is a sense of process. In "Love the Player" for instance, there are dull poets "journeying;" Love is "offering," "holding," "working," "weaving," "giving," "taking;" there is "blowing" and "boiling." These active verbs are supported in their effect by the sense of times and seasons, by "milking time," the "saffron corn," and by the final word, "centuries." In all this change, the rose represents the change that is most poignant and vital, from the bud to the pure, white promise, and then to ripeness and decay; from the fragile ideal of girlhood to death or adult betrayal.

It would be possible to look at Neilson's use of say cherries or lilies, with similar results to those just given for roses. For instance, the change in colour of cherries, from "pale" to red, is equated in the poems with the passing of Spring, and with the coming of death. In "The heart of September," "all the cherries are pale."²⁸ Or, "jubilant Spring" is "the time when cherries lose their green."²⁹ But in "The Child We Lost,"³⁰ when "Summer seemed not far away," the "cherry-trees were red and green." This is the time when "Summer-time makes love to Spring," when "our child came not from the town." The lost "child" of the poem is a sixteen-year old girl. Likewise, the lilies of Neilson's poems associate with the *femme fragile*. Love comes "Quietly as lilies."³¹ But "Lilies fear the heat,"³² "Violets perish, lilies are few;"³³ "the rank grass outlives the lilies."³⁴

Instead of pursuing these particular images further, some attention will be given, as previously mentioned, to Neilson's image of the orange tree, in the hope of enhancing perspective on his famous if still enigmatic poem, "The Orange Tree." In "Sweets for a Boy,"³⁵ the poet cries "Give me of oranges," to comfort a pure and ailing boy, whom he fears to lose. However, the image typically evoked by the poet is not of oranges simply as detached fruit, but of the tree together with its fruit. Thus the fruit is found in this poem to associate with fear of death, even though it is offered as a counter to this fear.

Elsewhere too, ripe oranges associate with death, or at least with the passing of a season of life. In "The Man Who Prayed,"³⁶ the poem

opens with the words "Twas in the time when oranges surrender their green for gold," and goes on to tell us "Twas in this time my love fell ill." The poet cries to God "So leave my little love to me." Finally, in *fin-de-siecle* fashion, the poet asks his dear love, "What is it aileth thee?" She whispers, "All the air is dark," and then dies. Another instance of this association, though not so straight-forward, is found in "Julie Callaway."³⁷ In this poem, it is November, approaching the end of Spring. We are told of Death "waiting with a watchful eye. . . /On every tree there comes a flower." Julie Callaway dreams of "A little home not far away. . ." The image of the flower "on every tree" is then taken up again when we are told "Twas in the bloom of bride's array/She died, upon her wedding day." This suggestion of the orange tree in "bride's array" is brought out expressly at the end of the poem: "She pure-hearted, beautiful . . . /In orange bloom, in bride's array, /Death found her on her wedding day." Elsewhere, an interesting image of the orange tree is given in the poem "Tis the White Plum Tree."³⁸ Here two trees, the plum and the orange, are presented as complementary symbols. The "white Plum Tree" is presented: "Seven days fair/As a bride goes combing/Her joy of hair." The orange tree is then presented in the striking image of a peacock: "As a peacock dowered/With golden eyes/Ten paces over/The Orange lies." The poem hints of something impending: "The birds run outward,/The birds are low." Nevertheless, the poem concludes with a repetition of the bridal image. There is a suggestion that the orange tree and the peacock will prove fateful for the bride in her fragile, white array. Another variation on this theme is provided by the poem, "May."³⁹ This poem opens with what might be construed as phallic imagery, "the silver-hatted mushrooms make/soft entrance through," and ends with oranges: "Delightful in grave greenery they rise, /Red oranges in May." The season is late Autumn, when "The world would seem/Faint as a widow mourning. . ." Here, the association of the orange with death is found again, but the poet nevertheless gladly accepts the fruit.

THE ORANGE TREE

The young girl stood beside me. I
 Saw not what her young eyes could see:
 — A light, she said, not of the sky
 Lives somewhere in the Orange Tree.

— Is it, I said, of east or west?
 The heartbeat of a luminous boy
 Who with his faltering flute confessed
 Only the edges of his joy?

Was he, I said, borne to the blue
In a mad escapade of Spring
Ere he could make a fond adieu
To his love in the blossoming?

— Listen! the young girl said. There calls
No voice, no music beats on me;
But it is almost sound: it falls
This evening on the Orange Tree.

— Does he, I said, so fear the Spring
Ere the white sap too far can climb?
See in the full gold evening
All happenings of the olden time?

Is he so goaded by the green?
Does the compulsion of the dew
Make him unknowable but keen
Asking with beauty of the blue?

— Listen! the young girl said. For all
Your hapless talk you fail to see
There is a light, a step, a call
This evening on the Orange Tree.

— Is it, I said, a waste of love
Imperishably old in pain
Moving as an affrighted dove
Under the sunlight or the rain?

Is it a fluttering heart that gave
Too willingly and was reviled?
Is it the stammering at a grave.
The last word of a little child?

— Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,
Why will you talk to weary me?
Plague me no longer now, for I
Am listening like the Orange Tree

In contrast to the poems just mentioned, “The Orange Tree” poem, perhaps suprisingly, makes no mention of the fruit. The tree itself is the subject. But it is not a still-life that is presented. Rather, the tree, or the “Orange Tree” as the poem repeatedly capitalises it, is presented as a process. It is located in a changing world, in Spring, at

evening; there is a suggestion that it is blossoming, that sap rises in it, that it is listening to a call. A light lives in it. The tree is anthropomorphised or at least has a 'soul.' The use of capitals for the "Orange Tree" corresponds to other instances in Neilson's poetry where a plant is personified, as in the "Plum Tree," the "Vine," or the "Mulberry." Furthermore, the poem suggests an historical perspective, and a potential for repetition of "happenings of the olden time." In this regard, it is like the poems, "The Lover Sings" and "Love the Player," already mentioned above, where the theme is of love's message, symbolised by a rose perennially offered, but also perennially doomed to fade. The two aspects of this theme, that is the innocent rising of the "white girl" to love, and the knowledge of the ever-repeated death of this love, are represented separately by the two protagonists of "The Orange Tree": the young girl and her first-person interlocutor. In Victorian times, there was an extraordinary spate of poems in the first person, and in many of these poems doubts and hesitancy are illustrated by an allegorical splitting of the personality, producing a dialogue of the "I" with a voice which is really the poet's other self. In *The Orange Tree*, the poet confronts again the finality of fruition for the flowering of life. The orange tree is a personified process, an analogue of the "young girl"; the poet is witness to the girl and the tree is succeeded by night; he loses her as she likens herself to the tree, to its process of fruition; there is nothing he can do about it; "Orange Tree" is an implacable and final fact.

The definite article and singular of the title, "The Orange Tree," lead us to expect a precise and concrete description. This expectation contrasts with our subsequent surprise at the spiritualised presentation of the tree. Structurally, the title prepares us for its own repetition, the first and subsequent repetitions being emphasized by upper-case initials. The title also promotes the closed character of the poem both by its repetition at equally spaced intervals and by its use as the final words of the poem. Furthermore, the title in its four-fold repetition marks the end of the four sections of the poem. The first section, stanza one, is divided in half by the colon; the first half contains a direct statement by the poet, the second half contains a statement imputed to the girl who "stood beside me." This alternation of speaker, from poet to young girl, is repeated in the following sections, each made up of three stanzas. Two of these stanzas, each time, are given over to questions by the poet, followed by one stanza of reply by the girl, which ends in each case with the title words of the poem. As mentioned, these words also constitute the end of the poem. Each time, it is the young girl alone who utters them. It is she who bears the message of the orange tree, who brings the poem back to its beginning and its end. The young girl is the poem, for she and the personified

Orange Tree are one and the same process of response to a call to blossom and bear. And that is all. It is a finality that sunders the poet from the young girl. Elsewhere, the poet may declare "Away with the homage to Reason!/We live by the folly of Spring,"⁴⁰ but in this poem he confronts the fact that he who lives by Spring must inevitably face its end in Summer. The poet is fixated on Spring and on the flower, not on the fruit. But the young girl must respond to Love, who is the "Singer of Summer uncontrolled." The poet is again confronted, or rather confronts himself, with the finality of his sacrifice, the loss of the young girl. At the end of the poem, she is not listening to him.

In a poem called, "The Sacrifice,"⁴¹ the girl "white for the grave," with the glory of a flower spoiled, is "Lost! Lost!" The poet writes: ". . . still in the dark/Love looks for light, the old hope climbs and clings/Up through all fears. . . In the black gloom and pain/My torn heart cries, Give me my love again,/O, God of pity!" The poet in "The Sacrifice" is separated from "the glory of a flower" by the grave. But from "The Orange Tree" and other poems we see that it is the sexual maturation process that separates the poet from the girl. She cannot deny the "light" and the "call" that are on both the Orange Tree and herself; these claim her attention and take her from the poet. The "I" of the poem cannot perceive the "call," let alone respond to it; the "I" can only note the girl's response, that she is rapt in something beyond him, that she, in her own words, is "listening like the Orange Tree." The girl's last response is one of irritation at her interlocutor and a command of "Silence!" to him. His interventions are unwelcome. Clifford Hanna states of the girl's last lines that their "statement of alienation is the major theme around which 'The Orange Tree' revolves."⁴² But this alienation is not merely a matter of implied dissimilarity of age, as Hanna suggests. In "The Orange Tree," the poet, under the impress of what is clearly a central and recurrent problem to him, has projected the terms of this problem onto two figures engaged in dramatic dialogue and has achieved a clarification, not in discursive terms, but symbolically by the breaking off of dialogue. The break is due to a process represented by the Orange Tree, that is the normal life process of growth and maturation. The poem ends with the recognition of a disjunction, which is implicitly in the poet himself: he is unable to maintain individual relationship with a young girl when she is called to sexual maturity beyond the point of her early "white" flowering. Instead, the poet is fixated on the "Spring" phase of life, imprisoned by it. Neither in his poetry, nor in his life can the poet celebrate a personal, continuing relationship with a woman, beyond pre-pubescence, into sexual maturity.

What is of interest for the general theme of Neilson's use of floral imagery, is that "The Orange Tree," in common with other of his

poems does not in fact present us with naturalistic detail. In much of the flower poetry around the turn of the century, as in the two Rossettis, in Allingham, Thompson, Swinburne or Yeats, there is a tension between realistic description and symbolism. But in Neilson, it is almost as if the poet had never actually seen the flower to which he refers. It is not the flower itself but the poet's dreamlike apprehension of it that is his suggestive, symbolic means of communication. In general, the flower for Neilson is a symbolic means of communicating about the poet's overriding concern, namely the little girl, or as she is called here the *femme fragile*. W.B. Yeats, himself a symbolist and describer of flowers, wrote of William Blake in a way that could well be applied to Neilson: "True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalysed imaginative essence. False art is not expressive, but mimetic, not from experience but from observation. . ." In these terms, Neilson is a "true artist." Unlike the Naturalists, and in keeping with the spirit of Botticelli and Renaissance art generally, he has pursued a form of art whose value cannot be measured by its relation to "reality" but rather by its relation to its creator.

Notes

- ¹ *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*, edited with an introduction by A.R. Chisholm, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1965, "Old Nell Dickerson", p. 155.
- ² Edgar Allen Poe: *Complete Poems and Stories*, ed. A. H. Quinn and E.H. O'Neill, New York 1951, p. 201.
- ³ Noel Macainsh: John Shaw Neilson and the Cult of the Child, *Quadrant*, September 1978, pp. 18-23.
- ⁴ Introduction to the *Poems*, p. 61.
- ⁵ Judith Wright: The Unshielded Eye: The Paradox of John Shaw Neilson, *Quadrant* III, 4 (1958-9) pp. 61-75, reprinted in *Australian Literary Criticism*, ed. Grahame Johnson, O.U.P., Melbourne 1962, pp. 54-68.
- ⁶ Chisholm, p. 17.
- ⁷ p. 17.
- ⁸ p. 15.
- ⁹ p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Clifford Hanna: 'The Orange Tree' and the Limitations of Poetry, *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol 5 (1972), p. 287. Also Hugh Anderson, L.J. Blake: *John Shaw Neilson*, Rigby, 1972, pp. 131-132. Also, on Botticelli's "Primavera," cf. Elemire Zolla: "Il Simbolismo Vegetale Nella "Primavera" di Botticelli," in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 9 January 1984, p. 3, and Mirella Levi d'Ancona: *Botticelli's Primavera*, Olschki, Florence 1983.
- ¹¹ James McAuley: Shaw Neilson's Poetry, in McAuley's *The Grammar of the Real*, O.U.P. Melbourne 1975, p. 16.

- ¹² Chisholm, p. 105.
- ¹³ p. v.
- ¹⁴ p. 153.
- ¹⁵ p. 124.
- ¹⁶ p. 70.
- ¹⁷ p. 186.
- ¹⁸ p. 253.
- ¹⁹ p. 17.
- ²⁰ Edward Burne-Jones: *The Flower Book*, Foreword by Georgina Burne-Jones, London 1905, p. 1ff.
- ²¹ Chisholm, *Poems*, p. 203.
- ²² p. 164.
- ²³ p. 70.
- ²⁴ p. 73.
- ²⁵ p. 78.
- ²⁶ p. 92.
- ²⁷ p. 257.
- ²⁸ p. 182.
- ²⁹ p. 218.
- ³⁰ p. 90.
- ³¹ p. 64.
- ³² p. 255.
- ³³ p. 136.
- ³⁴ p. 92.
- ³⁵ p. 234.
- ³⁶ p. 249.
- ³⁷ p. 129.
- ³⁸ p. 180.
- ³⁹ p. 146.
- ⁴⁰ p. 95.
- ⁴¹ p. 163.
- ⁴² Hanna, p. 286.