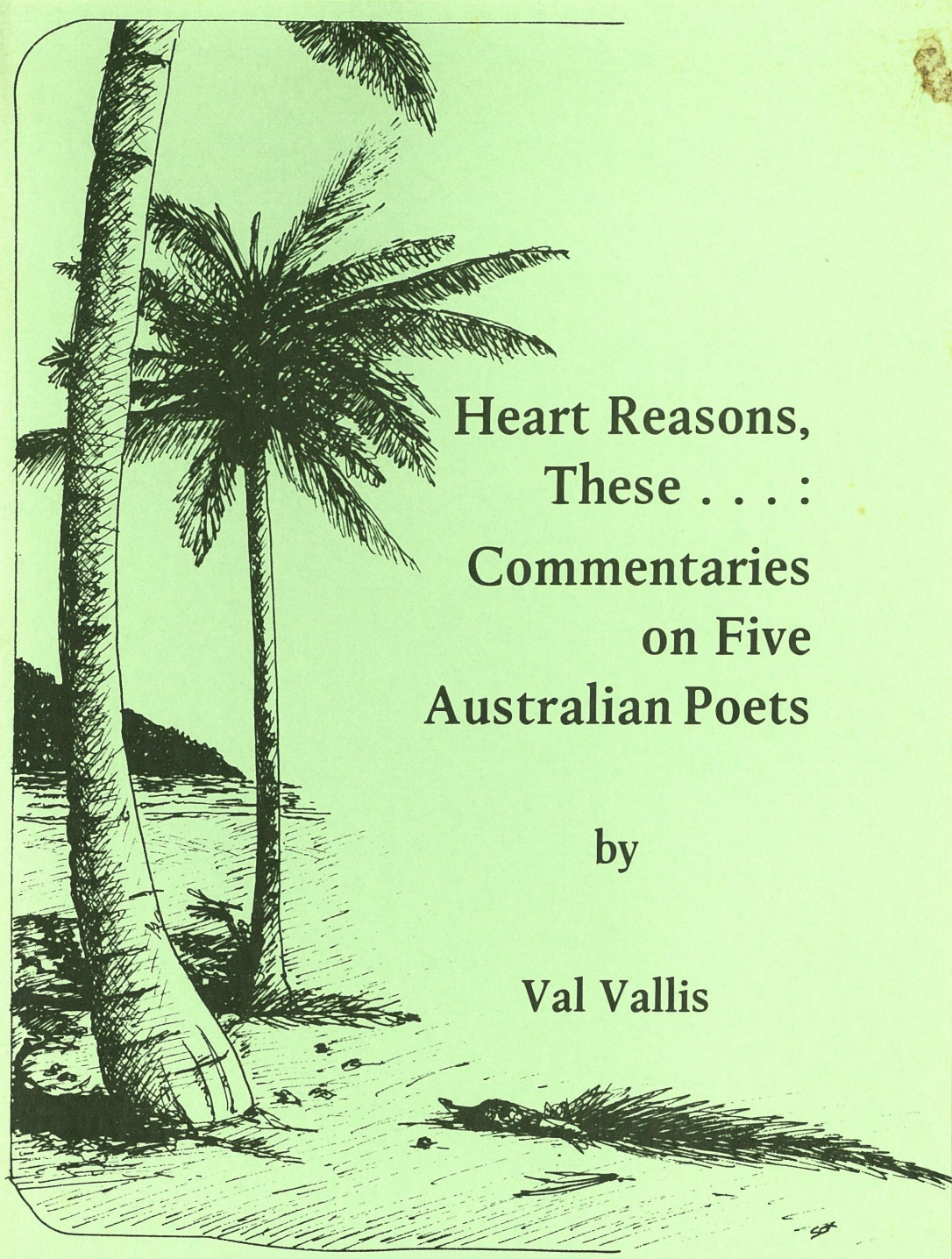

Heart Reasons, These . . . : Commentaries on Five Australian Poets

by

Val Vallis

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1988

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PREFACE

When Professor Elizabeth Perkins first sounded me out on giving the Colin Roderick Lectures for 1987 I accepted, knowing full well that Elizabeth had for several years at the University of Queensland been subjected to the passionate chaos of my style of lecturing. From 1950 to 1981, first in Philosophy and from 1965 onwards in first-year English, to classes of over 200, I was aware of the contradiction embedded in the phrase "printed lectures." To get across, to sell, the poets I most believed in — Neilson (in the "Aust. Lit." segment of English I), Hopkins, Hardy, Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats — I used every device at my disposal. They included vestiges of my poetry writing past and dwindling present, to coin images on the spot, parallels with personal experiences of landscape and objects as symbols. A cinema addict from the age of five in the hen-roost of the "Lincoln Hall" in Gladstone, I used hands, eyes, gestures worthy of the worst B Grade silent movies. Endorsing Browning's "What so wild as words are!" dangling participles festered into unfinished sentences; phrases, reminiscences ricochetted off in all tangents and directions. Somehow I did manage to convert some fine students to the holy art of poetry.

So when, after telephone acceptance of the honour, I found that the talks were liable to be published, I withdrew. Repersuaded by Elizabeth and Professor Tony Hassall, I here offer the printed text more than somewhat tidied up, and if there are many more "warts" than "all", I hope that the clear truth of my love and enthusiasm for the poets chosen will shine through.

How come these particular poets? Shaw Neilson needs no special pleading these days. In the past Neilson was championed by A.G. Stephens and, in my time, by the succession of Tom Inglis Moore, Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright. My initial acquaintance with his work began with a school anthology in 1930 containing the inevitable and difficult "Orange Tree". I must confess that at the time it made only a minor impression. Anyway, it had to compete with the much more intriguing image of "Bannerman of the Dandenong, with a blood-red rose on his *breast*!"

(Shades of Tom Collins's hero-heroine in *Such is Life.*) A twenty-first birthday present of the *Collected Poems* in 1937 set in motion a tide that has never turned back.

In the 1960's the late Cecil Hadgraft and I pooled our tutorial groups for poetry in "Aust. Lit." and Shaw Neilson surfaced again. Cec. was never satisfied with technical aspects of Neilson's work, slating him for inevitable rhymes, limited vocabulary and (unfairly, I believe) his paucity of thought. For ten years our happy battle was staged for and against the lyric poet.

If I was certain where I stood in the Neilson campaign, my uncertainty concerning Robert D. FitzGerald's work contrasted with Cec's great respect for the craftsmanship, imagery and thought in such poems as "Essay on Memory" and "The Face of the Waters." Hadgraft was right, and I hope my coming to terms with much of FitzGerald is apparent in my second talk.

The choice of poets — poems, rather — in the third talk springs from a deep-seated distrust of one fashion in the academic approach to literature. It would sometimes seem that discussions increasingly centre on movements, social, political, rarely aesthetic. There seems little joy in individual poems for their own sakes.

I remember as a boy at Sunday School in North Rockhampton being told by a visiting bishop a home-made parable of an artist who sold some of his pictures to buy precious stones — a ruby, an emerald and so on — "touchstones" if you like, or better still, "see-stones", so that he could keep intact his knowledge of true colours. I suppose it isn't very different from Matthew Arnold's "touchstones", come to think of it. Just as Charlotte Mew's "Sea Love" has for half a century been for me THE lyric, I would hate to see the few poems of Elizabeth Riddell, Ray Mathew and Eve Langley submerged in the learned cross-currents and tides of literary movements. Theirs are just some of the poems to which the heart listens for confirmation of its own beat. Which brings me to the title for all three talks. HEART REASONS,

THESE. Out of Pascal (by the Duchess of Windsor), it is still a comfort to shelter under in the whirlwind of critical rage.

I record my deep thanks to Professors Perkins and Hassall and Dr Stephen Torre for making the delivery of the talks a labour of love.

Val Vallis

JOHN SHAW NEILSON — AN APPRECIATION

Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great honour to be one of the lecturers under Professor Colin Roderick's sponsorship. "Have you got a sponsor?" seems to be the thing everyone wants to know before they allow you to undertake anything these days. I've known Colin for many years, since he was at Angus and Robertson's. In fact, it was when I was first sent down there by Douglas Stewart with a note for Beatrice Davis who sent back, in the neatest, tiniest handwriting I've ever seen, not at all like Shaw Neilson's scrawl, incidentally, a little note saying "We would be interested in publishing some of your work!" that my association with Colin all started. I've caught up with him at various times since, and now I feel very proud to be on the list of lecturers whom he has "sponsored" here.

I want to base this talk on a lecture I gave in 1972 for the Adelaide Festival for the Centenary of Shaw Neilson's birth. I've changed my mind a bit about Neilson since then, and also have helped on the publishing of another book of Neilson's poems. It is the one with a yellowy cover (I wore a yellow tie today to remind me that Neilson was very fond of yellow). This book was initiated by a student of mine, Ruth Harrison, at the University of Queensland. Ruth collected a lot of manuscripts for her thesis for BA Honours. Finally she got together so much stuff that, after an enthusiastic nudge from Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright came in, and we three, Judith, Ruth and I, sat around and deciphered the wayward Neilson handwriting in manuscripts that were in an absolutely awful state. The result was the book published under the title *Witnesses of Spring*, put out by Angus and Robertson in 1970. Poetry begetting poetry. When I first showed Douglas Stewart some of the Ruth Harrison "finds" he asked excitedly whether these were the ones supposed to have been devoured by the mice at Chinkapook. He said he had bogged down on writing a poem about them some years before. Shortly afterwards he wrote to me in Brisbane saying that this discovery had led him to complete the poem. (See p.33 in his *Collected Poems 1936-1967*). "Perhaps you should be known as 'a person from Porlock,' in reverse!" His letter is lodged with the Fryer Library.

Suppose you take any two lines from the best of Shaw Neilson. Let me suggest these:

> Let your song be delicate.
> The flowers can hear:

You see at once the quality of the poet that Douglas Stewart simply described as "the best of us". Lines such as "Let your song be delicate. / The flowers can hear" do not give you any idea of the life that the man lived. Like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson he humped his bluey in search of work, but where their emphasis lay on the externals of life, the funny and the tragic, Neilson was more interested in the internal life.

There are also his portraits of people, and all the landscapes and still-lifes in his poetry; so you can argue the case that he did make many observations of people and, in fact, it is in "our" later book, *Witnesses of Spring*, there are to be found many of these poems about people. Many of his later poems, as you find with FitzGerald, are about places and people.

I want to pick out a couple here just to give you an idea of what he does with people. I am thinking of some that have not been put in anthologies. When Chisholm re-edited his book, *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*, he took only twelve poems from our later collection to add to it. (I don't know why the others didn't qualify, but some of the best ones in this book, I think, are not included in Chisholm's later edition.) In Australia we've developed a thing that I like to call a 'Narrative Lyric'. You see it in Judith Wright quite a lot: "Remittance Man", for instance; in Slessor, David Campbell, Rosemary Dobson, and some of my earlier "Gladstone" pieces. The best way I can think to describe it is as a narrative lyric, as opposed to the more famous "Lyrical Ballads". Some of these narrative lyrics of Shaw Neilson are worth noting. Here's one you can judge for yourselves, "Letty at the Grave".

> Letty came to the yellow grave
> 'Twas under a dirty sky,

An ache for a dance was in her feet
And the victory in her eye.

"Andy McDonough," she said,
"Oh you would not hear before,
And I often heard that the spirit hangs
Three days to the Dead and more.

"'Twas yesterday they buried you,
All night 'twas a bitter rain,
And I laughed to think of the taste you had
Of the bed and the nights of pain."

A stark little snippet for you there. I'd love to know what went on between Letty and Andy McDonough. Quite a lot of the poems are in that style. One poem in particular will show something about the way he carried ideas around in his head before he had a chance to knock them into shape. This is "A Lament for Sadie", and later in the lecture I may get round to that question of "Was he ever in love?" We have to give a Freudian look at everybody these days, especially as Neilson carried around a packet of boiled lollies for little girls. (He was known to do that, and it's nice that sometimes people do give lollies just out of the kindness of their hearts.) "The Lament for Sadie", then, is a poem that really, you might say, rips the guts out of Neilson, although it was never set in a final poetic form. Judith Wright has just put the lines down here (in *Witnesses of Spring*) in the way he left them in the middle of writing, scrambling or scrawling down a page.

She is not here
  She is not there
    it is her shadow
They muffled with
    many prayers
insipid sorrow.
She is not there, she
      would keep to the sunlight,
or leafy places and the
      cool islands.

I cannot wait, the night
is long coming.
In the green it is dark
all the green
day I suffer.
All the cries I have cried
are unheard.
Tear my heart out,
hear me. Oh God I struggle.

She is not here
her eyes were as
wide pansies,
Mournful, and telling of Love,
Love and his shadow
I was with Love, Love
with his violins
Played in the dark
to me, mounted
the sunlight,
Put upon me the love
of all fragile things.
My heart was
faint at the slow
kiss of a child.
So died my Sadie,
and Love and his
violins assail me.

She is not here. She
will never come.
Why will the blue bird
say to his love
I am your lover?
All your body is
mine, your voice cooling
crying.
I am athirst with love
in a white anger.

She is not there
  here eyes were
  jewels telling
all the kindness
that falls and dances
about us in black
  cities and green valleys.
No lips were red as
    the lips of my Sadie.
Tear my heart out O
God hear me, I struggle.

He wrote that much down and was waiting to make a poem out of it. There are plenty of modern poems that are not even as regular as that, and many modern poets would call that a finished poem and be very proud to have written it, leaving it just as here transcribed from Neilson's unfinished manuscript. But it would not have satisfied Shaw Neilson. I mention those poems about people, not because they necessarily give us clues to his private autobiography, but because as he got older — and you will find this with FitzGerald too — Neilson began to move into a world where places and people loom up from the past, merge, and enter his poetry.

We will have to go back now and look at the early landscape poems and particularly those about the birds he knew. As far as cities go, of course, Stoney Town is the setting for a lot of things. Among other things it does stand, of course, for the hard-heartedness of the real city. Neilson did get a job in the city in a Main Roads Office towards the end of his life and hated it. He also knew a lot about the quality of stones, because he worked on the roads as part of a road gang earlier in his life — of all things that a frail sort of man would try to do, humping stones on the road would be about the last.

As an introduction to the poems that use landscape and birds, I should say something about where this landscape was. The poet's father, John, was born in Scotland and came to Australia in 1853. They went first to Victoria, then they moved to South

Australia, where John Shaw Neilson was born in a little place he remembered well, called Penola — a quiet little place with white roads and plenty of gardens. Now the mentioning of white recalls that Neilson was mad about colours. He had weak eyesight and colour seems to be one of the dominant senses of imagery in his pattern of things. When he was eight years old he went to school for 18 months. The family then moved over the border to Victoria to take up a block of land, and reading the excellent biography written by Anderson and Blake — also launched at that 1972 Adelaide Festival — it seems that the Neilsons took up one block of land after the other for the rest of their lives. The father was trying to stay on and make it pay. If they had animals, the dingoes killed them; if they had crops, the rabbits destroyed them. (Mind you, Dad doesn't come out as too practical. Anderson and Blake mention that he fenced three sides of most of the paddocks he had. Only on Synge's "Aran Islands" have I seen three fences divide up a piece of property successfully. There, instead of giving it to one son, they keep dividing and dividing the land into things that look like the boxed segments of Gruyere cheese, only with stone fences. With our penchant for rectangular blocks, three fences don't keep out rabbits too easily.) Anyway the poet really grew up enjoying the landscape around his father's selections, which at one point included an adjacent swamp with flowering trees. This was at Minimay in Victoria. And this was where he got to know the wildlife that becomes somehow an intimate part of his experience and makes up the personnel or the extras in the lyrics: ibises, cranes, herons, black swans and all those birds which were to people his poetry years later. There he found native bees too, and his sister has recorded that he was expert at tracking bees back to cut the sugar-bag out of the trees. This was the boyhood time for stocking up on images. I, too, believe that images are the real stuff of poetry. As Croce, the great Italian writer on aesthetics said, all poetry is a complex of images. Never mind the "thought": a lot of poetry sinks when it gets overburdened with thought (cf. some passages in the later books of "The Prelude"). Images and the feeling that animates them are what's important. When you light on an object in poetry you see the difference. When Yeats's father was in New York, he wrote back to his poet son and said, "get rid of Lady Gregory and all that crowd, you're better when you've stuck with concrete objects".

And when you read Yeats you think he should've taken the old man's advice instead of relying on Irish heroes and gyres and a few things like that. The real object, the seagull that flies into Con Markievicz's prison cell, to me is what poetry is about. Well, that's Yeats. We are talking here about an equally Celtic Neilson. All these objects in Neilson's poetry, the blue cranes that feed their young all day, for example, are there as themselves, but they also become images. He lived in a flat country. The tall tree is the real one, the one the birds picked as a suitable place to get a good view of the landscape over the swampy, ti-tree country.

> The blue cranes fed their young all day — how far in a tall tree!
> And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me.

No, Neilson was not a member of the landed gentry; as Muriel Bradbrook in her account of her rushed tour of Australia makes him sound. Similarly, from that particular "tall tree", she deduces, wrongly, that his was a landscape of "tall trees". So much for travellers' tales! He had to borrow a coat from someone to go to a funeral on one occasion. Neilson received his final eighteen months schooling about this time and it was the last he was to receive. His father had already written a bit of verse and in the house they did keep a few books. Sir Walter Scott's poems were there, and some of the Irish poets, Thomas Moore, the Irish melodies and things like that, and you can see the influence of these once you look.

On the whole thing about landscape, I feel very akin to him. Neilson means that it is really true when he says, "no pauper was I". I grew up in a town that was always looked on as a backwater in Queensland — Gladstone, and I loved it. Sunlight came in my window of a morning, and dad had a fishing boat. If we went to an island and someone was on it, we would say, "Oh dad, take us to another one, there's someone here already!" This was the wonderful life. Even to this day I can still see the sunlight, although *you* can't see it now because they've reclaimed that nasty bit of foreshore that had mangroves and sand on it, to put oil storage tanks there. But in those days the sunlight glittered all through

my boyhood in the front room. From superior Rockhampton, Gladstone was looked on as a sandfly-ridden hole; it wasn't that to me. Nowadays the place that we used to call Sandfly Hill is known as Hollywood Glen or something like that . . . but that's Progress of course.

I expect in later life Neilson had the same problems dealing with his country, but he loved the individual things and these remained with him and he made them his own entirely in his poetry. Yet I don't want you to misunderstand — Neilson is not a poet of *things*. The objects are not important only for their own sake, although he respects them. He's like Coleridge, in that "all things that meet the bodily sense, I deem symbolical, one mighty alphabet". And that's the centre of romanticism. You spell out the dark continent that you're trying to explore, the inner continent of Self and Love and Hate, and you spell it out in terms of the things you know, the certainty of the sea, the certainty of the blue crane, and real things like that. And this is what Neilson was to do.

He didn't remain long at home as there was not money to support the whole family, so at sixteen he set off to earn a living erecting dingo and rabbit fences for the government. From that year until he was nearly sixty he chased job after job as a casual worker, grape picking, fencing, clearing, quarrying and all that. Perhaps you could say this life style influenced his way of writing. His method was an interesting one. He bounced from rhyme to rhyme — nowadays you seldom find a rhyme in a poem — and it is certainly dangerous in poetry to leap from rhyme to rhyme. (Although it does help sometimes, don't write from rhyme to rhyme if you can help it, especially if you are using a key word like "love", which is what most poetry is about, as it forces you to 'dove' and 'shove', the one worn-out, the other thematically incompatible.)

Neilson seems often to have begun with a rhyme, although he didn't talk about iambics and trochees. He didn't talk about the verse forms in a formal way, but he'd say to Jim Devaney — and I heard a lot of this from Jim and in the last years in Brisbane when I

came to know him quite well — "I'm going to write this in Alfred's metre, only not as gloomy" — Alfred, of course, was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. One of his favourite poems in his old school book was "The Bridge of Sighs" by the Victorian poet, Thomas Hood. It was in one of the first poetry books we were given in school, and I remember scanning it in dactyls and so on:

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care,
Fashioned so slenderly,
Young, and so fair.

Professor Perkins has drawn my attention to yet another one of Thomas Hood's, even closer thematically to John Shaw Neilson's "The Time of Roses":

It was not in winter
  Our loving lot was cast;
It was the time of roses —
  We plucked them as we passed.

That churlish season never frowned
  On early lovers yet:
Oh, no, the world was newly crowned
  With flowers when first we met.

'Twas twilight, and I bade you go;
  But still you held me fast.
It was the time of roses —
  We plucked them as we passed.

This, too, reminds one of much of Neilson, but incidentally suggests that Neilson in fact was the better poet — at least, he seems to have had more to say, don't you think!

They were the metres he read as a young man. Generally he kept to them, but some later poems spring-board off from them.

The poet, Frank Francis, was another member of the group of Neilson's friends when Neilson came to live in Brisbane. Frank Francis said Neilson used to keep the tunes in his head — he wouldn't write things down when he was out. But you would hear him going around singing . . . da dah da . . . and then he would come home and put the words back into the rhythm, but the tune was the first thing. Neilson had the tune first, certainly, but the words often imposed some variation on the basic tune. In doing this he was, of course, in good lyric company. Professor Perkins also reminds me that Shelley also sometimes "sang the tune first".

Sometimes he got people to write his poems down. In one of the mining camps he got someone to write down for him "Tis the white plum tree, seven days fair, as a bride goes combing her joy of hair". And the bloke said "Christ, that's bloody poetry, I thought it was a letter back home!" Neilson was in fact sending these poems back home to his sister, and that's the way many of his poems were written down and preserved.

He wrote a lot of them in school exercise books. He bought a whole series of exercise books, and you think of all the excitement of starting a new book, the way you felt yourself when you were at school. This is the way you grew up, writing yourself into exercise books. And that was what Neilson did. Neilson had no problem about writing a new poem — he said "his head was always too crowded with rhymes, they came up too thickly like lots of young cabbages in a bed, and most of them never got into any decent shape at all." How many poems didn't get written that he started in his head?

It's important to realize that Neilson didn't like the landscape just because it was landscape, but he was always interested in objects. There is one story told in Jim Devaney's book on Shaw Neilson, published in 1944. In those days practically no one had cars and a drive out of town was a big event. Shaw Neilson was living with Jim and Jim's wife, who was a nurse. Someone had to look after Neilson, who would have lived on lolly-water if he had been left to himself. He got off the train at South Brisbane in a

dressing-gown with a bag of lollies and a bottle of something similar to ginger-ale. So as a treat one day, Devaney took Neilson up to see the Glasshouse Mountains about a hundred or so kilometres north of Brisbane. In those days the roads weren't good and it must have been quite expensive to have a day out looking at the Glasshouse Mountains. It's now, of course, accessible real estate development. But when Neilson was asked what he thought of the big volcanic cores of the Glasshouse Mountains he simply said, "Ugly lumps, aren't they?" So much for the Glasshouse Mountains. He wasn't just an indiscriminate enthusiast about "the environment".

Yet there are all the things and colours that he made into poetry. People have tried to find an inner significance for his colours and images, but they can't all be read like that. Sometimes it is just the poetry of sound and rhythm and cadence that seems to shape what he writes. When he writes, "The moon was seven days down", it probably has no esoteric meaning that he uses seven there. You couldn't say "The moon was six days down" — it goes flat. You need "seven" there because "Seven days down" leaves the n's reverberating. Neilson told Jim Devaney that green was his favourite of all the colours, but he loved yellow and blue too. Of course yellow meant for him autumnal tints, which means that yellow does have the idea of mortality written into it.

> Yellow in all the earth and in the skies,
> The world would seem
> Faint as a widow mourning with soft eyes
> And falling into dream.

This would not do in Queensland, of course, where May or autumn hasn't much yellow about it. Judith Wright has a line somewhere about summer coming straight after winter with a rush. But Neilson was particularly interested in autumnal colouring. Other real things that he liked were children. Like Blake, whom he resembles, he thought children were the real kings of the earth. Tom Inglis Moore was the first one to point this out. In fact, Moore early recognised the quality of Neilson's work. When Tom Inglis Moore was writing his piece on Neilson in that monumentally good book, *Six Australian Poets*, which was the first

thing of its kind put out, he said he was reading the Neilson manuscripts, and he'd come to things like this:

It is the white Plum Tree
  Seven days fair
As a bride goes combing
  Her joy of hair.

and he said to himself, "The man shouldn't write like that!" It was just that some of Neilson's lyrics were so exquisitely lyrical, and yet there was no reason for it, no obvious explanation. When, as Tom said, you knew his background, on the surface this exquisite poetry seems a contradiction.

One of Neilson's first books was financed by Louise Dyer, who was the wife of a Melbourne banker. The collection is dedicated to Louise Dyer. There's an interesting connection for me, an inveterate record collector. Some records in my gramophone collection come from France, "L'Oiseau Lyre", Lyrebird Records. The origin of the label had always intrigued me, until I discovered that the same Australian benefactor, Louise Dyer (by then Dyer-Hanson) had pioneered the company. (See Note in Nancy Keesing's *Shaw Neilson.*)

Neilson's poetry, however, was not always recognised by his fellow Australians. His verses were not in the typically virile manner that so many versifiers had made popular, and when his collected poems appeared in 1934, the critics were not all in his favour. One proclaimed: "He does not come within measurable distance of Kendall . . . and if poetry is the best words in the best order, Mr Neilson's poetry consists of the second best words in the best order."

Neilson was helped along by A.G. Stephens, who was *The Bulletin* Red Page editor at the time. Neilson said at the end of his life, that he worked out he had made seven pounds out of poetry. And Stephens, critic and advocate, died sixty pounds out of pocket for a whole lifetime of helping Shaw Neilson. But he did

have the thrill of re-writing and altering some of Neilson's stanzas. Neilson confided to Jim Devaney that he didn't have the heart to tell Stephens that he didn't like them. So they stayed there and I don't know which were the lines Stephens changed, and probably we never will know. Stephens was to point out quite early that Neilson's "verses come like Blake's children with innocent faces clean. To these gifts are added a vision and fancy, sympathy with humanity, and the passion of a man." Stephens said that "Some of his work, magnificent in pathos perfectly expressed, is unsurpassed in the range of English lyrics. First of Australian poets, he reflects lasting honour on the land that bred him." Then you get Douglas Stewart writing forty years later, that Neilson was "The best of us", as I said at the outset of this talk.

No poem illustrates something of what Stephens meant, better than "The Hour of Parting."

The Hour of Parting

Shall we assault the pain?
  It is the time to part:
Let us Love again
  Eat the impatient heart.

There is a gulf behind
  Dull voice and fallen lip,
The blue smoke of the mind,
  The gray light on the ship.

Parting is of the cold
  That stills the loving breath,
Dimly we taste the old
  The pitiless meal of Death.

Neilson's light verse is as yet uncollected. Someone else can get on with that. There's one of the light poems in the Chisholm book, "The Sundowner", which takes the mickey a bit out of some of the Lawson outback poems. "The Sundowner" describes

the swaggie going along like any other swaggie and everyone helping him out because they know he has the wax matches in his hand. The idea was that if you didn't get much help at a particular homestead, it was quite easy to set fire to the paddocks. The poem begins:

I know not when this tiresome man
With his shrewd, sable billy-can
And his unwashed Democracy
His boomed-up Pilgrimage began.

Sometimes he wandered far outback
On a precarious Tucker Track;
Sometimes he lacked Necessities
No gentleman would like to lack.

Tall was the grass, I understand,
When the old Squatter ruled the land.
Why were the Conquerors kind to him?
Ah, the Wax Matches in his hand!

The whole point of the poem is there in that one line, "Ah, the Wax Matches in his hand!" "Unwashed democracy" probably dates back to the French Revolution, but who else would have written about the "shrewd, sable billy-can"? I love "shrewd", even if I can't fully unpack its riches. There are a good many such comic verses of Neilson's yet to be collected. I don't know how much of it is autobiographical poetry, but some little experiences of his have gone into the making of his poetry and given it that kind of authentic "rightness" we recognize at once. We were always told people listened to bush ballads back in those days. I don't believe it, actually, and I agree with my late colleague, Cecil Hadgraft, on this. Bush ballads weren't "around" all that much. What people did sing were the Irish songs, the Irish melodies, like "The Last Rose of Summer" and "She is Far from the Land", and, of course, the so-called "darkie" songs of Stephen Foster. There's plenty of evidence about these things. As for some of the now "typically Australian" songs, I for one didn't know "Waltzing

Matilda" until 1935, and my early life was certainly in the kind of environment where I might have heard it if it had been all that well known. It is interesting, too, if you look back over the gramophone history of "Waltzing Matilda". It seems never to have been recorded in the acoustic era (1900-1926) yet it suddenly emerged on disc just before the Second World War, when I think a few people started giving it the popularity it since has. Even the indefatigable Peter Dawson, who recorded just about everything from 1904 onwards, made his first record of it in 1938!

Shaw Neilson paid one tribute at least to Stephen Foster of "Beautiful Dreamer" and "The Old Folks at Home" fame, and one stanza for Foster certainly reverberates through Neilson's poetry.

> Sweetly she sleeps, my Alice fair,
> Her cheek on the pillow pressed;
> Sweetly she sleeps, while her Saxon hair,
> Like sunlight streams o'er her breast.

Some people think it should be "flaxen hair", but it doesn't matter. There's all "the unbound melody of hair" running through Neilson's work in poem after poem, suggesting a fascination, or you could even say fetish, about hair. But to speculate a little, you feel that Neilson's fondness for the songs of Stephen Foster and Thomas Moore and others, recalls those country dances with their violinist and singer — the violinist was very important as not many people could afford a piano. The violins and flutes and singers in Neilson's poetry probably have nothing to do with the professional concert platform, but come straight from the small town country dance in the Mechanics' Institute of the School of Arts.

There's that lovely picture drawn in "Take down the fiddle, Karl". It is set in a country pub, and it's obviously in war-time, and there is a farmer whose name is Karl. Everyone is giving out hints about what a lucky bastard he is, with a name like Karl, to be playing here, and not interned. And then the poem says that

there's more intoxication in these old melodies in the pub than in all the grog that is being served. In these lyrics you can hear the fiddle of the country dances coming through as the main instrument.

I suppose the next question is, "Why wasn't he married?" You can speculate as much as you like. Anderson and Blake in their biography drew attention to the poem about Sadie, "The Lament for Sadie", which was one of the many poems in the Ruth Harrison collection that had never been noticed before. Anderson and Blake think the mysterious Sadie really did have some importance in Neilson's life, and that Sadie was the postmistress he was a bit keen on. There is, in all these love poems, a feeling that they are written by a virgin — a male virgin — but this doesn't matter a damn. It is the intensity of love that comes through in the poems. The other half-reason I'd put forward to support the idea that Neilson was something of a bachelor virgin is simply that I had Irish uncles who lived their entire lives in the same way. (Judith Wright too, for example, has a poem called "Bachelor Uncles".) I grew up with the idea that it was quite ordinary for a man not to marry, and in Irish families to this day quite often there are numerous bachelor uncles. The reason for not marrying was an economic one. There just wasn't enough work around to give every man a decent enough income to marry and support a family. Neilson certainly had no spare money — he was sending cash home to the family. Perhaps he had other problems, too, which put him off marrying, and yet few people have written as eloquently about love as Neilson did.

"He Sold Himself to the Daisies" is another poem that is used as evidence against him to suggest that he could not cope with the ordinary obligations of an ordinary man who would marry and raise a family. We have no right, of course, to assume that it is a poem about Neilson himself, but it does suggest something of the kind of person who might have written the poetry that he wrote.

He stayed too long in the sunlight,
He was so thin and shy,

He sold himself to the daisies
When no one strove to buy.

But in the end the daisies claim him, and you can't feel that it is a bitter or hopeless poem:

They gave to him small pity
Of priest or prayer or stone,
But the daisies climbed together
And the daisies knew their own.

We can sneer at it if we like — but if you go back to that very great poet, Thomas Hardy, you'll find its companion in "The Choir-Master's Burial" where the sanctimonious vicar looks out to see a band of angels singing over the choir-master's grave. Well, the daisies in Neilson's poem may owe nothing to Hardy's angels — I'm not sure whether Neilson had read any of the Thomas Hardy poems — but time and time again in these later poems a mixture of person and event like this reminds me of some of the best of the Hardy poems.

All the same, Neilson knew quite well the importance of the role of the poet. Just as Wordsworth said that the poet is a preserver and upholder of all that was beautiful and human in the world, Neilson too wasn't humble about the role of a poet. If you follow too literally the idea that Neilson was an autobiographical poet, and that a poem like "He sold himself to the daisies" makes him appear as a bit of an eccentric, a kind of pied piper, one not capable of coping with this tough, buying-and-selling, self-polluting world, this is not how he really saw himself. He wrote:

It is you and I
And a few others, lift the world along.
(Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators"?)

In concentrating on the quaint and childlike world that is part of Neilson, his admirers have done him a disservice. He is not a poet of *things* for their own sake, as I have said, but all his poetry

must be read as part of "one mighty alphabet" about the divine world.

There is one dominant theme that persists in Neilson's poetry and that he dwelt on at length in one of the poems that Ruth Harrison found he had written near the end of his life. It dealt with the topic that had worried him most of his time. It is on the same theme as the poem "The Gentle Waterbird" that he had published earlier in his life. The two poems need a little explanation. His father taught him about poetry; his mother taught him about Christianity. It was the God of the Old Testament that she knew, who was out to punish, exact vengeance and so on. He did learn about the loving side of God, because she was a loving mother herself, but she also had this strict Calvinist way of looking at God. So Neilson grew up thinking God was "terrible". He grew up to *fear* God. And then suddenly you find the famous poem "The Gentle Waterbird" that by watching the bird he discovered far more than his mother had taught him about God. We notice how important colours are to his discovery. The poem, you remember, is dedicated to Mary Gilmore.

In the far days when every day was long,
Fear was upon me and the fear was strong,
Ere I had learned the recompense of song.

In the dim days I trembled, for I knew
God was above me, always frowning through,
And God was terrible and thunder-blue.

Creeds the discoloured awed my opening mind,
Perils, perplexities — what could I find? —
All the old terror waiting on mankind.

Even the gentle flowers of white and cream,
The rainbow, with its treasury of dream,
Trembled because of God's ungracious scheme.

And in the night the many stars would say
Dark things unaltered in the light of day:
Fear was upon me even in my play.

There was a lake I loved in gentle rain:
One day there fell a bird, a courtly crane:
Wisely he walked, as one who knows of pain.

Gracious he was and lofty as a king:
Silent he was, and yet he seemed to sing
Always of little children and the Spring.

God? Did he know him? It was far he flew. . .
God was not terrible and thunder-blue:
— It was a gentle water-bird I knew.

Even in his old age Neilson was to remember his mother as a religious fanatic, and he rebelled against this attitude even while it was clear that he loved her very much. I'll deal in a moment with that later poem "Some Thievery of Old". But before that I'll go back to Jim Devaney and quote something he dictated to us one day in the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland.

> "There's a lot of nonsense talked about the simplicity of Shaw Neilson. He wasn't as simple as all that. He was the only man I met who made me think of the word genius. You'd never think he'd look twice at a domestic fowl, a hen, about the silliest thing we have, and he gave us "The Hen in the Bushes".

Whether or not Neilson was a simple man in real life cannot be decided yet — or what it means to say someone was a "simple" man. His real biography is still to be written. Frank Francis told us the same day the bit I've already mentioned about how Neilson kept the tunes in his head to recall the words, until he could get someone to help him write them down, but he said, too, that as far as the composition went, Neilson worked completely on his own. Jim Devaney said at the end of this little meeting:

> "I can't explain Shaw Neilson, he seemed such an ordinary person to talk to, so matter of fact, so far removed from poetry, limited, full of prejudices of his own. He thought all doctors were thieves or quacks, and all traders (people with shops) were thieves. Well, queer that way, and yet when you got to know him, the miracle, the other something that you couldn't explain, that other part of his mind that made him a poet. That was the miracle. The part you'd never suspect until you'd read his poems. One of the very rare people of the world, a poet, I couldn't understand it."

We come now to that long poem from *Witnesses of Spring*, a poem written about 1941, the year before his death. In this poem we find the old problem of God emerging, right at the end of his life in one of the last things he ever wrote. The poem is called "Some Thievery of Old". The word "thievery" in the title is a strange word, but Neilson uses it with a special connotation: man is thieving from God and stealing God's creations for his personal use. Neilson no longer sees the created things as gifts, as he had in earlier poems. Now he sees the world as a treasure house which we plunder: we are not receiving gifts, but are thieving from God's own treasures. A certain sense of guilt is recorded in this poem. He admits "Then did I thieve" when he robbed the combs of bees, cut down trees and destroyed birds' nests. When you do these acts, says the poem, you are not using the things on the earth, you're *thieving* them.

Again, the use of colours is surprising. Neilson had read Gray and in some of the lines you can see how Gray may have influenced him according to Anderson and Blake. "The purple year" is one phrase he could have found in Gray. That phrase sums up the sort of synthesis that he makes of the different senses, and his best imagery is of course what is called synaesthetic imagery, where you appropriate one sense channel to illuminate another. It used to be regarded as a symptom of mental derangement. It was also thought to be very Celtic. Some of us even regard it as the highest achievement in imagery making. You find it all the time in Neilson. Concluding "For a Child", for example:

Wild kiss and heavy love
Lose every hold,
Oh, sunlight — my sunlight —
How dark the cold.

But to return to "Some Thievery of Old", a long poem written at the end of his life, and one of the most interesting and probably least known of his poems. I'll make some comments as I go.

How long ago since first a thief was I,
That time I was too close unto the earth,
And yet God was upon me from the sky.

That goes right back to the poem written nearly thirty years before, "The Gentle Water Bird", where he wrote, you recall, "Fear was upon me even in my play". The poem goes on:

Pain was about the world, I saw the pain,
I looked all day for light; the touch of gold
Brought to me generous thirst and generous rain.

I would not speak to God, for well I knew
He did much count on well-loved little things,
The Challenger who walked about the blue.

But he remembers he used to rob the nest "Of every brooding bird who caught the Spring", and says, "I was not guiltless either east or west". The poem goes on:

Then to the great Controller of the sky
I said, "The birds in love I hinder not;
I have no wish that any more shall die."

Dull was my axe and hard my heart next day,
Feverish my hands, then could I pity not;
Murder was in me and I lived to slay.

Then did I haste, I scented honeycomb,
Nor did I stop till in the gold I saw
The wind-blown carriers clambering to their home.

The poem continues to talk about the "old-time peace" and the happiness that "sat never far away", and then

In the long grass I saw a golden mare,
And by her side the tall comedian;
The foal with eyes all innocent was there.

"Comedian" is a magnificent word — you know that wonky way foals walk when they're first born. "The tall comedian" is a phrase a lot of poets would like to have written. We often say foals look as though they are drunk, but he gets it so right with "the tall comedian" was there! Then he goes on:

But still the Challenger who roved the blue
Would speak — how slow He spoke — about the law,
And He would say, "My rage may fall on you".

But being now full sixteen years and strong
I would dispute with Him; I feared Him not.
I said, "You have been Challenger too long."

("Thou are indeed just, Lord, if I contend with thee", as Gerard Manley Hopkins, a much more elaborate poet, said.) Neilson goes on:

Once in the Spring I had sweet scent of air,
And a quaint pony mother met my eye,
And a comedian, my beloved, was there.

The order of the stanzas shows that the poem is still basically in draft, but even the present order is curiously interesting. The next stanza continues with the foal:

Blue, he was blue, as well becomes a foal.
Proudly he stood, with all benevolence.
Great were his eyes with cleansing of the soul.

And it is almost like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who sees the water creatures and even in his own tortured state says "I blessed them unawares", and the hatred in his heart drains away at the sight of the beauty of the created things. Neilson seems to have arrived at this same point quite independently of Coleridge. But he does not arrive at such a happy ending as the Ancient Mariner, and seems to feel that there's been some kind of compromise between himself and the old Challenger. The next stanza is odd since it's written by a man who once put so much value on the colour yellow, and who has so much autumnal yellow running through his poetry:

Autumn is now not any friend of mine;
Long have I scented some deceitfulness,
And so I question all things called divine. . .

Sometimes unto the Challenger I say,
"Spare me no longer for my thieveries!
Slay me, if Thou have competence to slay.

"Seeing your world, I treat You as a foe.
Dull, You are dull. I know not, Challenger,
How in the dark the wind began to blow."

So that carries Neilson's story on from "The Gentle Waterbird". I'm sorry it doesn't have a happier ending, but it does help to show you the very complex and the unique quality of the man. And about the order of the stanzas, I should tell you what Neilson himself said to Jim Devaney when the two of them were transcribing the poem. It came after the stanza about the blue foal whose eyes were great "with cleansing of the soul". Beginning the next stanza, "Autumn is now not any friend of mine", that I referred to as odd coming from a man so struck with the yellow colour of autumn, Neilson said: "Now a sudden break — I want to get in a

bit about the autumn. It's good to be a bit abrupt in these things. You have to manoeuvre like that when you make up verse. It's full of jobbery and all sorts of dodges."

Now another poem where he deals with the simple problems of metaphysics, about the creation of things, is "The Walker on the Sand". I suppose you've got to imagine yourself walking along the beach somewhere like Surfers' Paradise: a bit of a rise there, and a nest of houses further back and the casinos and the flats — they weren't there then — but I believe Neilson did go down to the beach guest house then known as "Sans Souci" at Southport.

The Walker on the Sand

The spires so delicate are but the fears
Of the poor fishes back a million years;
These terraces that bring the eye delight
Are but the wishes of the birds of night.
They all have feared the Riddler, he who planned
The reptiles and the fishes hungry from the sea.
Slowly I walk, I walk uneasily
Along the sand.

Comparing this with "Some Thievery of Old", you see that Neilson was as adept with the short burst as with the longer statement. And finally I want to finish with one poem which by itself establishes him without any strings as a great lyric poet. It is "The Sweetening of the Year". There's a horrid phrase by Herbert Read who said the test of a poem is its psychological exactitude. It is an awful but accurate phrase, and you do intuit this somehow or other. "The Sweetening of the Year" is a poem where you take the lines "unto yourself", and fantasize on them as much as you like, and then you come back, and it all ties up:

When old birds strangely-hearted strive to sing
and young birds face the Great Adventuring;

When manna from the Heaven-appointed trees
bids us to banquet on divinities:

When water birds, half fearing each blue thing,
trace the blue heavens for the roving Spring:

When school-girls listening hope and listening fear:
They call that time the sweetening of the year.

. . . . . .

When schoolboys build great navies in the skies
and a rebellion burns the butterflies:

Sunlight has strange conspiracies above
and the whole Earth is leaning out to Love:

When joys long dead climb out upon a tear:
They call that time the sweetening of the year.

That gives me just the final point I wanted to make. I am interested in art that generates other art. Sometimes it is not as good, as Douglas Stewart said to me once: is a poem written about the Fifth Symphony as good as the Fifth Symphony? Probably not, but it should at least try to be. These Shaw Neilson poems about schoolgirls hastening in the light reminds me of Charles Blackman's series of paintings about schoolgirls. Blackman was living with Jack McKinney and Judith Wright for a while, on Mt Tamborine outside Brisbane, at a time when Judith and Jack were steeped in Neilson. All Blackman's schoolgirl series of pictures — the best series he did, I think — came straight from the contact he made there, the images in Neilson.

As a kind of postscript, I should tell you the story of a play that Jack McKinney wrote about this time, which was, I imagine, the first play to have been written about Neilson. It was about the excitement that Neilson and his family felt in their home when he had his first poem accepted by *The Bulletin*. Neilson's father had been a poet too, and the family pride and excitement seemed a good moment for a little drama. Jack sent the play to the ABC to see if they might put it on, because radio drama was a big thing then. The ABC rejected it with the comment, "Who'd be interested in that topic!". It was, however, staged by Twelfth Night

Theatre in Brisbane and enjoyed by the audiences. It is interesting that in 1986 the wheel came full circle, and a play about Shaw Neilson, called "The Pathfinder", by Darryl Emmerson, for which I wrote the program essay, was performed and acclaimed at the Spoleto Festival of Three Worlds in Melbourne. It is even being re-presented amongst the festivities planned for Queensland's EXPO 88.

Thank you very much.

R.D. FITZGERALD — A CRITICAL TRIBUTE

This second lecture is an attempt to say something about the work of R.D. FitzGerald who was born in 1902 and who died only a few weeks ago. There is something rather sobering about thinking you are writing a lecture on a living poet, and then to realize that you won't be having any more poems from him. FitzGerald is not the easiest poet for me to tackle. I have found that if ever I give a lecture that my students like, it is usually more fantastical than fantastic. So now I'm in a quandary with FitzGerald, who is not a poet that inclines to the fantastical. I went abroad a few months ago with this lecture on my mind, and thinking, "I hope FitzGerald doesn't mind what I'm going to say". I doubt whether he's tuned in today, as we'll all have better things to do with eternity than listen to lectures. But as for my lecture on FitzGerald's poetry, to make matters worse, I had never come to grips with FitzGerald properly, so I took my copies of FitzGerald with me to Europe, and in the only case I had stolen in Munich was that collection of poems. (I hope some German there is having trouble reading them.)

I think that for someone taking FitzGerald seriously, Judith Wright's essay on his work in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, written in 1965, is the place to begin reading the criticism. When Judith Wright, John Blight and I were reading and writing in Brisbane, we were sometimes a bit irreverent about FitzGerald. I remember we called him "the Scoutmaster", and said his poetry was full of "Pull on the rope, boys!" sort of stuff. But when Judith Wright reconsidered his work several years later, she thought much more highly of it, and in the "Preoccupations" essay she writes of "his noble utterance." G.A. Wilkes is another critic who writes well on FitzGerald's poetry. And some elusive passages in "Essay on Memory" have been analyzed in a very interesting way by K.M. Cantrell. Another piece that you may not know about is Des Petersen's article called "Man the Seeker: Robert FitzGerald and James Asesela", which is a useful introduction to one of FitzGerald's Fijian sources. It is printed in LiNQ Vol.4 No. 3/4, 1975. Another very useful article is Terry Sturm's "FitzGerald's Poetry and A.N. Whitehead". I don't know how much philosophy

FitzGerald did but certainly he learned a lot of it from *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead's book that came out in the nineteen twenties. He mentions this in his own essays based on his lectures at Queensland University. He says that as a young man he kept that book under his pillow and certainly a lot of it came up through the mattress. Otherwise he has a good working command of the other philosophers too. From some phrases I suspect that he may even have used Rogers' *Student's History of Philosophy* that most of us ploughed through as undergraduates. But Rogers, in fact, was a very useful book since it printed extracts from the philosophers' work instead of watered-down paraphrases intended to make them "easier" for students but leaving you dissatisfied. There is a full bibliography in Julian Croft's edition of FitzGerald's selected poetry and prose which has just come out in the *Portable Australian Authors* series.

Robert FitzGerald was born in 1902, so that means he was 85 when he died, after giving a great deal to Australian poetry, not only through his own writing, but also in his critical and expository work, like *The Elements of Poetry*, written in 1963, and "Of Places and Poetry" which came out in 1976. He was born at Hunters Hill, in Sydney, and eventually lived there for much of his married life. As a young man he became a land surveyor in 1925 and spent some years in that profession in Fiji, which became the inspiration for many of his poems. His family tree included the poet and critic, John Le Gay Brereton. A useful summary of FitzGerald's achievements is found in Julian Croft's edition of his selected work.

FitzGerald at one of the Christmas parties that Douglas Stewart held when he was editor of the Red Page of *The Bulletin*, and we found that we both sent any poems that *The Bulletin* didn't take to other Australian journals. Not that there were as many of them around then as there are now. That made *The Bulletin* very important, of course, and what made it even more important was that it also *paid* contributors. It had the cunning idea, however, of printing on the cheque an amusing cartoon by the cartoonist "Hop", of Mr Micawber saying "Thank heavens, that's paid". Of course, some writers didn't cash those cheques,

but had them framed as curiosities, so saving *The Bulletin* a lot of money from uncashed cheques. As a young man living on a post-war living allowance from the Army, I didn't have much chance to pin mine on the wall, let alone pay to have it framed. On that occasion, too, Douglas Stewart told us that because everyone sent their work first to *The Bulletin* and afterwards to other journals, he found he had read beforehand just about every poem that appeared anywhere in Australia.

One of the outlets apart from *The Bulletin* was the Jindyworobak anthologies, started by Rex Ingamells in Adelaide in about 1938. These anthologies appeared every year until 1953. I also found that he was one of those who was critical of some aspects of the Jindyworobak attempt to introduce what they thought of as a genuine Aboriginal culture into Australian poetry. In the heyday of the Jindyworobak movement, everyone who was interested in any way in Australian literature was expected to support or oppose the Jindyworobak manifesto.

Like FitzGerald, I think the only unreasonable part of the Jindyworobak movement was its insistence that only works that dealt directly with Australia could be said truly to be part of Australian literature. In FitzGerald's *Elements of Poetry* he acknowledges the value of the Jindyworobaks but says that for them the quality of the verse, for example, seemed to be secondary to its intensity of local colour. It is, of course, an old fight. I believe, and you will find in FitzGerald's work that he also argued, that poetry has a universal as well as a local aspect, and he said that instinctively he regarded the universal as more important. Of course, poetry can become too universal, that is, it needs to have its roots in some kind of local ground. Perhaps you could say, with FitzGerald, that topography and atmosphere are the bricks rather than the architecture of poetry. This means that FitzGerald's poetry set in Fiji, for example, the epic sequence, "Between Two Tides", is just as much an Australian poem as that well-known lyric of his about his First Fleet medical ancestor, "The Wind at Your Door."

On this point, FitzGerald suggested that where the older writers like Lawson seemed to be able to express and absorb the Australian scene as a matter of course and quite unselfconsciously, the modernist fashion, as he called it, was to turn it into propaganda. Perhaps FitzGerald was over-generous when he said that poets such as Brennan took it for granted that they were Australians and the fact hardly concerned them, and was seldom obviously discernible in their work. As FitzGerald saw it, they accepted their Australian environment along with other factors in their education, and it left its impress on their outlook. Their work is Australian, he said, because it is inconceivable that it would have been the same if it had been written elsewhere. Quoting FitzGerald directly, we find that he says, "The problem for the modern verse writer in Australia, as I see it, is to achieve again self-realisation and establish a relationship with his surroundings at once unforced and inseparable".

What interests me at present is the idea of self-realisation. Just as you cannot take Australianism, and think that alone will make a poem good, so you cannot take a universal thing like philosophy, and versify it. That does not necessarily make good poetry either. We need in a poem the particular thing that illuminates the universal concept. You do need the bread and wine at the Communion service as something real, tangible, to illuminate the universal.

Now FitzGerald is sometimes very good at finding the physical object needed for his poetry, but sometimes he does rely too heavily on pure philosophy, and all that metapysical weight just does not make the poem better. There's always a danger when people go simply looking for thought in poetry.

Now I admit that on first encounter I did not like FitzGerald's poetry much. But it's too easy to say that it was too philosophical. The same charge was made against Judith Wright's poetry. In Judith's case it was supposed to be the result of her having met Jack McKinney, a philosopher. People would say, "Oh, she was a good poet when she wrote poems like "Bora Ring", but then she got too philosophical." What people didn't realise

was that her poetry was always philosophical — not necessarily metaphysical, because there are other branches of philosophy like ethics and aesthetics. We find that in the best of FitzGerald's poetry too, aesthetics must be taken into account. FitzGerald, however, did not always have, as Judith Wright has, the pure lyricism that transmutes the philosophy into poetry.

FitzGerald said, late in life, that he did not suppose that anyone ever learnt a poem of his off by heart for the sheer love of storing it up. And I must admit that I don't know anyone who knows any of FitzGerald's poetry in that way. I even learnt bits of Brennan when I was a student, because I loved it, but FitzGerald's work just does not have that seduction. Perhaps parts of "The Hidden Bole" are an exception. When FitzGerald was speaking about Judith Wright's work once in his Queensland lectures he took "Gum-trees Stripping" as a model poem, and I agree that if that poem does not get down "treeness", then no poem ever has. It is interesting, however, that FitzGerald took "Gum-trees Stripping" as a model poem, because it is also extremely philosophical.

I remember that we often used to meet at Jack Blight's house in Brisbane on a Thursday, the day that *The Bulletin* came out, and if anyone had a poem in that issue, we'd celebrate with a bottle of sherry. Jack was a bit cautious, and he cautioned me about FitzGerald's poetry at first. He said, "It will make you develop muscles in your mind." I've always thought since then, when I'm reading his poetry, that I'm developing a muscle in my mind, whereas I prefer poetry that, without being too specific, develops other muscles.

Our judgement of poetry is confined by what we have read, and in those days of my exposure to poetry in Queensland in the 1940's there was precious little contemporary overseas poetry accessible here. I remember that when I finished Queensland Senior in the mid thirties, we had one Yeats poem, "Lake Isle of Innisfree", and one other modern poem in the book just to show us that poets still lived. It was about a Miss Thompson who goes shopping and buys some kippers, which she pops in her basket

along with some slippers. That was given to us as a "modern" poem because it mentioned such things as kippers and slippers. Eliot was not even heard of in our classrooms. I was amused years later when I was accused of imitating Slessor, and thanks to our English teaching then, I had never read a line of Slessor. Of course, during the war, his books were not available, and certainly not in New Guinea where I was when I wrote the poem that was supposed to imitate his. It was at University after the war, in 1946, that I first came across Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, and before I read him with the stresses where he told you to place them, I thought it the silliest poetry I had ever encountered. Then I followed his own ideas of stressing, and thought "This is magnificent." It surprises me that FitzGerald did not find something important to his own work in Hopkins's poetry. I think he objected to his metrical oddities. But Hopkins wrestling with God and other problems should have appealed to him.

It was easy enough then to be suspicious of all this difficult stuff that we seemed to find in FitzGerald's poetry, and I remember that when I bought the second edition of *The Moonlight Acre* I disliked the title poem. Under the influence of the kippers and slippers, which had been presented at school as the pinnacle of modernity, I didn't like the imagery that came from Caesars and sceptres and brave King Harrys, and all the references that pointed to past literary cliches and stock stuff. I also objected to angels, and ghosts, and wraiths of various kinds. I haven't met one and I don't know anyone who has, and I want my objects to be tangible, and I noticed that FitzGerald had a few angels and wraiths in the first book. But he soon gets away from all that. I remember immediately liking poems such as "The Toss":

> Life, toss up your florin;
> "Heads," I call.
> Regret be far and foreign
> whichever fall,
> whether for losing or winning
> the stake scarce to be won —
> it's a fine flash of silver, spinning
> in the gay sun.

Actually, I remember that we didn't say florin in those days, so that might have been a poeticism too; on the other hand, perhaps FitzGerald did say florin when we said two bob. It was written on the coin itself, but no one except the American soldiers here, who saw more of our currency than we did, ever called them florins — or "floreens" as they pronounced it. Yet I did like that poem of FitzGerald's, because it was a vivid image of a poem. I always remember what Conrad said about images: "Make see"; Get your object fixed first and then you can use it as symbolically as you like. (Advice given me by Douglas Stewart in the mid-forties.) The next poem from "Moonlight Acre" put me off, the one called "Coiled Wire", because I had never come across the word "atavistic" before, and I wasn't going to look up a word like that just to understand a poem. But of course FitzGerald won on that one, because for some reason "atavistic" became a really in-word in literary criticism not long after — perhaps it was T.S. Eliot or F.R. Leavis who brought it in. My biassed sense of "poetic diction" led me astray on this one.

FitzGerald, however, won me over with lines like "Long since I heard the muttered anger of the reef," and I remembered wishing that I'd written that line. There were shoals just off Gladstone where I used to sail, and "muttered anger" was exactly right to describe the treacherous bit of movement of water over the reef. I thought, "There's hope for this fellow in my affections yet," but I was pretty arrogant at the time.

I went right through the book, of course, and then came to "The Hidden Bole". Now every poet in those days wrote a ballet poem — even I had ballerinas flopping under trees and that sort of thing, so when I got to "The Hidden Bole", with Pavlova in the first stanza, I thought immediately, "This is pretty good." I didn't know what it was about, or the essence of it, and I had never seen a ballet at that time, but I knew what went on in one, perhaps I'd seen it in a movie. So "The Hidden Bole" put FitzGerald high on my list. Of it, more later.

I recall the vivid disappointment I felt when "Heemskerck Shoals" came out in 1944, first published in R.G. Howarth's

edition of the annual selection called *Australian Poetry*. I thought this was the flattest bit of poetry I'd ever read. It doesn't seem to help if you argue that after all this is a poem about a "practical man". What can you do about a poem that begins "Too many councils and committees"? Even Douglas Stewart, who always had an interest in what he called the voyager poem, had to admit that there wasn't enough sea in "Heemskerck Shoals", and there are only a few good lines about coral running inches under the reef, and phrases like "a pack of snarling reefs and jagged islands". Stewart has a whole essay on the poem in *The Flesh and the Spirit*. I'd been writing about long sweeps of the Queensland coast, and all that sort of thing, and I thought "God, he's a land-lubber, this fellow." I didn't know then that he had been in Fiji and did all those wonderful years' service as a Native Lands Surveyor there. The qualities of a surveyor have to be kept in mind when reading FitzGerald: the poems seem planned and plotted and go straight on for lines at a time, and they are so organised, and he likes rhymes that have a definite sound to them. He's a very clever rhymer, and it is a surprise when you realize how much of what you have read has a very elaborate rhyme pattern running through it. He doesn't think from rhyme to rhyme, as poets are often forced to do, but he is very much within the tradition of rhymed poetry.

We were all discovering the Pacific and De Quiros at that time. I can think of about five different writers who were busy with De Quiros, and I remember myself writing a long poem that looked like "The Ancient Mariner" put into Spanish. *The Bulletin* rejected it. It appeared elsewhere. That was because the Catholic Church said that De Quiros came to Gladstone, and at Auckland Hill there used to be an old Spanish face, so they said, carved into the rock. They found some doubloons over on South-trees Island and so on. The legend supported by Cardinal Moran at the time said that the first Mass in Australia was held on Auckland Hill, but all the relics of De Quiros' visit somehow disappeared. Anyway, that was reason enough for me to write my De Quiros poem along with everyone else.

To return to FitzGerald, I recall I met him once in the fifties. He was a tall, wiry, amiable man and was a pretty looming figure at the time. I was very flattered that he had even heard of some of it — and had reviewed some of my work — not too favourably, but it's better to be mentioned than ignored. As I was only casually familiar with the bulk of his work, I praised "The Hidden Bole". Now I've often made the same mistake with writers, and praised some of their early work. Writers mostly are in love with their most recent production, and until the next piece comes along they're inclined to regard comments on anything but the latest offspring as somehow denigrating the thing they most value. I did the same when I timidly met Marjorie Barnard, and praised her novel *A House is Built*. She said, "Val, never praise an author's first book. It either shows you haven't read the later ones or that you think they've slipped." I felt like saying to Marjorie, "Well, that's it, you see. I have read the later novels and I think the first one is still the best." It may have been as well that I didn't actually say that at the time, because someone researching in Marjorie Barnard's papers came across a reference to a visit from "an engaging young poet, Val Vallis." Perhaps she would have found the poet less engaging if he'd said what he thought, but then I wasn't as arrogant about prose as I was about poetry. It worked out differently with FitzGerald, because when I said to him that I did like "The Hidden Bole", he said "Oh, it's my best poem."

I'll go on to some of the poems I want to talk about now. "The Greater Apollo" was one of his earlier poems, published in 1926. To my mind it has echoes of a poet that perhaps he would not much have liked to be linked with, the late nineteenth-century English poet, Swinburne. Take lines like these, for example:

> Time is a fool if he thinks to have ended
> one single splendid thing that has been.
> Though much has changed, what is expended
> of all that the youthful earth has seen?

But in "The Greater Apollo: Seven Metaphysical Songs", as he calls the sequence, you get the first statement of some of his

philosophy. Now in the essay "Poetry's Approach to Reality" FitzGerald himself had this to say:

> Whatever the private philosophy of the poet — idealist, Berkeleian Platonist, or what you will — his concern is with his environment. Illusory or otherwise, his environment is his irreducible and stubborn fact. A love of some aspect which presents itself to him objectively, best of all an aspect of life as he sees it lived, and a sense of worship not necessarily recognised as such, make him seek within or beyond environment that reality out of which he may shape serious art.

Now the philosophy that you get in this poem is a plain statement of the Berkeleian position. A tree is a tree, and stones are stones, taking the old test that perceivability of a thing is the guarantee of its existence. And that's Bishop Berkeley's position reduced from John Locke, the seventeenth century rationalist. This was the line that was to interest Kant, because German philosophy had become so transcendental it seemed to have gone practically off the face of the earth. Plato was the culprit that started it all by saying you distrust the subjectivity of the senses, and used the old trick of the bent stick in a glass of water: you can see it is bent, and you know it's not. So when Locke said that somehow our knowledge is constructed out of the things we see, smell and perceive with the five senses, we were left with the problem of who's going to perceive things, if perceivability is the test of existence? So Berkeley, who was a Bishop, couldn't do otherwise than set up God on a 24 hour watch. This means everything is being perceived by God the whole time and that guarantees its existence — a bit awkward if you're not a God man. Then Hume came along and took the God bit out and said all we've got are the ideas running around in our head — nothing governing them — we can't be certain they correspond to other objects outside. Kant then borrowed these ideas from Hume, leaving us with the notion that all our knowledge is our own minds juggling with the sensations it receives in from the sense. Now this is the position stated in "The Greater Apollo" and others of these earlier poems of FitzGerald. He gave the lectures on "Poetry's Approach to Reality" first in

1959, but the ideas appeared much earlier in his poetry in the twenties.

> What is revealed to me and known
> beyond material things alone?
> It is enough that trees are trees,
> that earth is earth and stone is stone.

It is interesting that in fact FitzGerald at this early age, before he was thirty, had very few themes and they keep surfacing and coming up again and again. This is the first stanza of the last lyric in "The Greater Apollo" sequence:

> Caesar and Catiline are dead
> and magistrates and slaves of Rome,
> So long ago that winds can shed
> no dust of them about my home.

He ends up saying that Caesar and the others do exist still because they "feel through me today's known bliss". And one of his best poems written about the middle of his life is "The Wind at Your Door", in which he finds that the wind of the convict days

> blows to your door down all these years.
> Have you not known it when some breath you drew
> tasted of blood?

He fed on that image of the wind of time and the dust of the past which he discovered in his youth, and developed it into a beautiful poem later on. Like Slessor and others, he was dealing with the question of time, and his first wrestling can be seen in the lines I said reminded me of Swinburne:

> Time is a fool if he thinks to have ended
> One single splendid thing that has been.

Now that idea is going to come up again about ten years later in "The Hidden Bole". Although Pavlova's dance is transient it is not destroyed. It has finished, but it still has the permanence of beauty about it. The Greater Apollo is not simply the Greek god of art and beauty, but the greater force that ensures that beauty is eternal.

FitzGerald grew up with the Slessors and the Lindsays, and they were all drinking companions, although FitzGerald said he was not a close friend of Slessor, but knew Philip Lindsay very well. He was involved through him with the Vision school of poets. In the prose work called *Of Places and Poetry*, FitzGerald talks a great deal about Slessor, and also about that wonderful old man Hugh McCrae. I was taken to meet McCrae by Tom Inglis Moore, when McCrae was nearing the end of his fantastic life. He was full of stories, and he was rejecting much of the proclamation of the Vision movement by then. McCrae said he was no longer going to look for Pan and other such gods as an explanation for things. Now whether FitzGerald is really using the Greek god Apollo as an explanation for things is a bit doubtful. It seems to me, in taking the title, "The Greater Apollo", he is looking for another reason for the existence of beauty, and suggesting that it does not depend on a god called Apollo. You can trace the line of his thought down through Nietzsche, of course, with the idea of the Apollonian as a force that imposes order upon chaos. On one hand, you have the Berkeleian idea of that ever-watchful God, and against that the notion of form being imposed upon everything, not being inherent in everything. I suppose this takes you further back to Pythagoras, and his idea that the explanation of the universe is not found in material things, but in numbers and in the relations between numbers, which are represented by the objects we perceive through our senses. At any rate, Pythagoras discovered the relationship between the length of strings and the musical notes they produce when they vibrate. Much of this I found personally useful in trying to enter into FitzGerald's poetry. The imposition of attunement onto chaos is something that is considered in FitzGerald's poem, "The Face of the Waters", published in 1944. It is a poem about creation, and what he is looking for is a principle, rather than an old Greek god. After all, the Greek philosophers, who were also what we call scientists,

thought of the gods, I expect, as principles. How the Lindsay and Vision poets really thought about the gods they invoked is another matter. At any rate, by the end at least Hugh McCrae had thought it out a bit further.

The whole question of attunement, that chaos is being attuned, and that the Apollonian spirit is in charge of music, is what FitzGerald is looking for as a principle. The Greater Apollo is the principle, I think. These other gods are not good enough, but it is the principle that Apollo stands for, the attunement of chaos, that is really the origin of things.

"The Face of the Waters" tries to work through the idea of creation out of formlessness, and the idea of a spirit imposing form:

> Once again the scurry of feet — those myriads
> crossing the black granite; and again
> laughter cruelly in pursuit; and then
> the twang like a harpstring or the spring of a trap,
> and the swerve on the polished surface: the soft little pads
> sidling and skidding and avoiding; but soon caught up
> in the hand of laughter and put back. . . .

So although he can't say what this twang like a harpstring is, it is a no-thing that chaos can't escape:

> but neither is there anything to escape,
> or to laugh,
> or to twang that string which is not a string but silence
> plucked at the heart of silence.

In a good deal of FitzGerald's poetry, this idea of an attuning principle is interwoven with his other interest in the Berkeleian idea of the watchful God or presence that maintains the existence of everything.

The next poem that I want to look at is a directly philosophical one but it is also one of his lightest and friendliest poems. In the poem called "Copernicus" there is a real Kantian twist involved. It's a rooster's eye view of the world. The only other poem I know that does something like this, is a lesser poem, by Rupert Brooke, about the way that fish see heaven, and of course they see everything from the fish-eye point of view, so in their heaven is everything they wish: there's wetter water, slimier slime and fatter grubs. Here the rooster is doing the Copernican twist that Kant talks about, in that you can have no progress until you reverse the whole thing, and see that *our* knowledge of the world is what *we* read off from the world. So when the rooster reverses his idea of cause and effect, he is entitled to think that his crowing is the cause that makes the dawn come up. If his crow doesn't reach the next rooster who is on sentry duty, the daylight won't come. So you've got all these roosters dragging the dawn up out of the sea, believing that if one of them didn't do his duty, there'd be no sunrise.

> The cock that crowed this dawn up, heard
> along the east an earlier call
> as through sunk acres bird by bird
> till imminent upon sleep's coast
> day-urgent messages were tossed,
> forerunners of the flaring ball;

I love that phrase, "the flaring ball", which is the rooster's idea of the sun, so that the poem is presented through his knowledge of the thing.

> and reckoned thus: "Let one voice fail
> our sacred task, then drowns the sun;
> nor could the parted chain avail
> to fish him forth or in the least
> appease that Rooster of the East
> by whom first daylight is begun.

It's also one of FitzGerald's most beautifully made poems, I think.

Then, not much later, we come to "Essay on Memory". And this also is a directly philosophical poem. I'm sure it comes from reading Bergson's philosophical discourse on *Matter and Memory* written at the end of the last century, and his *Creative Evolution* written a little later. Certainly Whitehead refers to Bergson's ideas, and we know that FitzGerald absorbed Whitehead thoroughly. Thinking of poets and philosophers, our problem might be can we really say that a philosopher is not also a poet, even when he writes prose, if he can come up with images that seem to belong to pure poetry. Think of the way Plato, for example, comes up with images. There's Plato's great image of the cave, and of the soul as a chariot being dragged by two horses, with the one wanting to sniff at the earthly level of sensation, and the other one wanting to go back to the eternal non-sentient Ideal. It's a hell of a rough trot for the poor soul, and we're all in that same chariot. There are some key images in FitzGerald, and one of them is the image of the body or life as a house which is invaded by other forces. "The Essay on Memory" involves the more modern theories of Bergson that our consciousness of time cannot be thought of in terms of something measured mechanically, "by little fidget wheels" as Slessor said later. "Real duration", Bergson said, as against measured time, was something that belonged to the intuitive consciousness. Reality must be thought of as a continuing process of duration. FitzGerald's image of our life is that here we are in a house, and if we sit there doing nothing, we are simply being bombarded by external forces. FitzGerald is an enemy of doing nothing — this scout master activity runs right through his poetry — we must be up and doing. He sees himself sitting inside with rain pelting down outside, and suddenly "the hand of Memory comes scratching" at the door. He is bombarded by memories, each one linking on to another to form "the twisted chain of thought," which stretches link by link back "past first hammerings of conscious mind." FitzGerald here seems to go back to Hume's idea that we do not control our thoughts at all. "They all come as bloodless dancers on a stage", he said, "each leading the other one by the hand and there's no chorus-master". And then he said "How can I say a stage?" No idea of the stage came there consciously. So you are just left with an impression upon your mind, a vague memory of something, so that later it returns without conscious control. According to Hume, that's

where you get your ideas, residues of impresses — the way coins are impressed in a mint.

Now this is where FitzGerald's poem starts. In the house, which is his head, he is a victim of the continual bombardment of rain, which is memory. And then FitzGerald introduces one of the best images I know in poetry, when he imagines this rain of memory hitting the window pane and being cut off sharply. Argument or reason is the window, and argument or reason is an activity of the mind. As I have said, FitzGerald believed that activity is absolutely necessary, it is a rope that we must climb if we are to get out of the morass of existence. I suppose you could say that FitzGerald was not a contemplative poet at all, but a poet who found that he could not avoid thinking about some aspects of existence, and found that the only way he could cope was to wrestle actively with these questions as well as he could. Once you did that, you were fairly safe from the external forces for a while:

> Argument is the blade-bright window-pane
> which shears off cleanly the slant sheaf of rain,
> and in the room heart's dream and life's desire
> are radiance and curled, unfolding fire.

Yeats, of course, would not have agreed at all that argument is what keeps the hearth bright and warm, in fact he says the direct opposite in "A Prayer for My Daughter". But for FitzGerald, argument is the thing that holds off the continual bombardment of external chaotic forces. The poem follows that image through and at the end comes a marvellous bit explaining that all form of activity is a rope to keep the individual consciousness from falling back into chaos:

> Then knot this hour's activity as a rope
> in strength of climbing hands; for still our hope
> best clings to shoulders swarming — from the mouth,
> black-gaping, of loss and failure; all we know
> is this jerked ladder of change whereby men go
> with gasping struggle, vigour of movement — up!

> Wherefore all good is effort, and all truth
> encounter and overcoming. . . .

You get a certain pragmatism there, almost without a critical judgement on it, that you must do something, anything, rather than just sit there and be bombarded by life. And of course once again that's the surveyor's response. It's no use just looking at the landscape and saying "Isn't it lovely?" The surveyor has his goals to mark out and work to do. I really feel this characterises quite a lot of FitzGerald's poetry.

The next poem I'd like to look at is "The Hidden Bole." It was probably influenced by Yeats's "Among School Children", with its lovely image of the dancer in the last stanza. You remember it:

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

You don't expect usually in the world of theatre that a big, wiry, tough bloke, over six feet tall,will be an ardent ballet fan. But FitzGerald loved ballet, and I noticed in his memoirs that when he went to Spain he makes a point of mentioning the marvellous ballet they saw there. Now Pavlova had died in 1931, and in about 1934 he sketched out this poem, "The Hidden Bole." The way Pavlova actually danced is rather important for understanding his poem, in fact. (She had come to Australia in 1928, and as she was travelling by ship, of course, she did stop in Rockhampton for a performance, but my aunt didn't allow me to go, so I only know about her actual dance movements from a few brief footages of film. There is a fragment of "The Dying Swan" which was done on the set of Douglas Fairbank's movie, "The Thief of Baghdad", and there's the dying swan under a palm tree, so it's no wonder the poor thing dies.)

FitzGerald introduces Pavlova in the first stanza of "The Hidden Bole" where he talks about "wheel measures for a skilled Pavlova's solving". Here is the other part of his philosophic concern. The first part we could call metaphysics, or even ontol-

ogy, when he is looking at the nature of being, as in "The Face of the Waters". And now we get his major statement on the nature of beauty, or the aesthetic side of philosophy. He thought it was an important poem, and so it is, and it is about an important subject. That night at Stewart's he said, jokingly, that he felt it was perhaps his only claim to being considered a poet at all. Well, he has other claims, as I hope I've somehow made clear, but "The Hidden Bole" certainly establishes that claim.

The poem takes the stand that it is the transience of beauty that is so significant, just as writers in aesthetics point out. G.E. Moore, for example, said that beauty is a simple unanalyzable quality that just comes and goes. If it seems to be in an object, then you don't always perceive it: sometimes familiarity kills it. FitzGerald thinks about this transience and says that once the dancer's feet are stilled you will never find again the same beauty that they created. Not even if the world around seems to re-create the same images as the dancer. And he uses the most appropriate image from nature that I think he could find:

> You will not find, though cannas flame for you
> and garlanded earth threads tiptoe round her stage,
> not wearily trudging as on pilgrimage
> but gay in the pelting floodlight of the sun; . . .

Notice that tidiness of the treatment of the theme. This is the poet at his best here. Cannas are always planted over the drainage from your septic tank in Brisbane — everyone had them down near the effluent pit to take up excess moisture, so cannas, wrongly, seem a very pedestrian kind of flower to Brisbanites. Perhaps they have regained some of the exotic quality they possess in their own right now that all of Brisbane is sewered. But that is an example of the way beauty operates: the canna hardly seemed a thing of beauty to some of us for many years, rather it was just a common, rather useful lily. Notice, too, that he doesn't say "treads" in the second line, but "threads", suggesting something much more intricate. Now, if you look at it carefully, a canna is absolutely the right flower for the image of a dancer, because it comes up on a central stem almost like a body, and the petals unroll to make the perfect

image of a dancer's arms and the wisps of drapery around her figure. And then with "But gay in the pelting *floodlight* of the sun" he puts the whole thing into theatre terms. And then he takes the Banyan tree, which seems to grow up from a whole crowd of boles, and this allows him to slip back into that other side of philosophy for a moment, while he asks where is the hidden bole, the original bole of the tree, from which all the energy of the tree came. You might link this in with Bergson's theory of the *elan vital.* The line with the Banyan Tree is the central force from which all this energy and beauty come. He's addressing beauty here, the central force that drives outward in the tree:

> For that's a very banyan; and who knows
> where its true nucleus grows
> when every shoot of progress makes the claim?
> I see it as a mass; even boughs the plan rejects,
> shed at the outmost fringe, are of the whole —
> sheltering, share the life their loss protects,
> the main line of ascent, the hidden bole.

The outside leaves die and close over to protect the new growth, as though there's a continuity of the principle of the beautiful growing from this as a life force within it. It is in that inner force that the spirit of the beautiful exists.

Then right at the end, the poem returns to the original image of the real thing, the dancer, and not any dancer, but the real person, Pavlova herself:

> Death lets her dance on always through my mind —
> is there a grave could close away Giselle
> when music calls her, when lorn flutes impel,
> and necromancing strings that cry and quiver?
> No curtain falls. Eyes, were you drunk or blind
> not knowing her steps although you watched their thief,
> the wind's toe-pointing leaf,
> not seeing her swiftness chase the pebbled river?

I think that's a fantastic image, and perhaps we need to think of a eucalyptus leaf to imagine "the wind's toe-pointing" sort of leaf, blown, as it were, on tiptoe. And of course that's the effect the dancer in *Giselle* must get when she dances back to her grave at dawn. At the end of a great performance of Giselle, the dancer retreats before your very eyes into the earth and the effect of retreating and sinking into the earth is done simply by foot movements. It is imperceptibility made perceptible, as Giselle goes back into the grave from which she emerged to dance with the prince. She wanted to dance all night with him to save him from destruction, because he will be destroyed by the other witches when Giselle is forced to leave him. And she goes back and folds into the earth as imperceptibly as it can be done. It has to be *no movement* converted into movement. This ability to show movement in stasis is the great paradox of art, and it is absolutely right that FitzGerald should choose that moment in the ballet to illustrate the permanence in impermanence of beauty.

Then the poem refers to the coming and going of the seasons, and I wonder if here again he is not referring to Pavlova. One of Pavlova's favourite selections of music was Glazounov's "Four Seasons" and she used to dance "Autumn" from this as one of her short pieces. It and "The Swan" were standard things on any programme of hers. Here the poet links Pavlova, I think, with the passing of the seasons, because this was one of the items in her repertoire. I think it strengthens an image for you if you can find connection for it in your knowledge of other parts of experience.

Now let me come back briefly to "The Face of the Waters". Here, of course, we must return to the Book of Genesis, where there is a passage about God moving on the face of the waters during the creation of the world. This is another poem from the ontological side of philosophy, of course. Where Dylan Thomas, for example, in "Fern Hill", takes creation as something accomplished — it was all Adam and shining and maiden in the first spinning place — FitzGerald tries to go back further than that, to the very beginning, before Adam or even the spinning place appeared. He is again following Whitehead, who took a line, very

much against some of the scientists like Einstein, who said God does not play dice. But some physicists agree with Whitehead and, as a nuclear physicist that I know says, "Yes, that's exactly what God does do. Some things cannot be accounted for except in terms of God's letting things take their chances, as the dice fall, so to speak." The poem begins with the lines I quoted before, with a great hand seeming to throw down a handful of little scurrying things, and then catching them up again to have another throw:

> the soft little pads
> sidling and skidding and avoiding; but soon caught up
> in the hand of laughter and put back. . . .

The only comparable image I know in art was the start of "Space Odyssey 2001". With the bashing of all those drums and the shapes forming, and then gradually something like a foetus being made in the clouds. Fantastic sort of things. Well, the beginning of this poem does something like that. Mind you, the Greek philosophers could see that the beginning of things could not have happened simply with a lot of cold, icy Platonic forms simply being copied in some vague way. There had to be a force, a state of becoming, as Heracleitus said, a state of flux. So that is what we have at the beginning of this poem, the idea of a centre of force with God just throwing all this matter out, so that it's skidding and slipping all over the place. Then the bits are gathered back: have another throw. It's a fantastic image of the beginning of things, and I don't know that he follows it through so well. Now some readers are put off, because they feel that the laughter there is an evil laughter, but I think it's rather a great joyous laughter of a creator saying, "Just try again, go on, try your luck". If you read on to the fourth stanza, you find that it is the laughter itself that is "tortured by darkness", so that the laughter does seem to be a defiantly creative force.

In the first and second stanzas, the poem uses the "twang like a harpstring" that surely refers to the idea found in "The Greater Apollo" of the attuning of slack strings, opposed to the chaos represented by that which is untuned. The symbol for chaos was the untuned musical instrument.

Finally, after tracing through a lot of images of energetic striving *to become*, so to speak, the poem arrives, by way of much "wrestling and interlinking" and shattering, and "ideas unphysically alternative", at a clear statement of completed creation. Notice how the last lines pick up again the little, scurrying feet of the first stanza:

> Yet is that internal instant
> the pinpoint bursting into reality,
> the possibilities and perhapses,
> the feet scurrying on the floor.
> It is the suspense also
> with which the outward thrust
> holds the inward surrender —
> the stresses of the shell before it buckles under:
> the struggle to magpie-morning and all life's clamour and lust;
> the part breaking through the whole;
> light and the clear day and so simple a goal.

By calling the final goal "simple" the poem does a bit of sleight of hand, because it convinces you that the whole process of the poem has in fact done just what creation did: it has wrestled its way through a lot of difficult ideas and arrived at a simple conclusion. The conclusion is probably not simple at all, but by the end of the poem we are likely to be convinced that it is, partly because the last line is made up of all those simple monosyllables:

> light and the clear day and so simple a goal.

I'll refer you very briefly to later poems in the book which has the most unpoetic name that ever appeared on a poetry book — *Product*. He takes the title from some lines by Carlyle which say that even if what's inside you is only 'the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product," then produce it. I don't believe it. Some things are better if they stay inside, and perhaps that might be true of some of the poems here. The old FitzGerald is still there, however, active and struggling against all the enticements to be inert; as we see in the last stanza of the first poem, "Of Studies":

The time has come to change this working coat
for one bought off the hook; to wear a mind
conforming to the fashions of one's kind
and brushed with reading. And it might seem best
to accept in art or in political thought
right shades and styles, but for one's harbouring still
the chaos of man's will,
tides, past the flood, and the old pulse of unrest.

Well, that's it, "the old pulse of unrest," which is the essential FitzGerald. As he wrote down through the years, his seafaring poetry and his philosophic poetry and poems about characters, there are some pieces that seem to me very prosaic. It is strange, because once when criticising some poetry of mine, he referred to a kind of verse that balances on the brink of prose without falling in, and gains as poetry as much from its grace in tightrope walking as it does from its special ability to enrich the music of verse with thefts from the allied music of prose. I don't think we are inclined these days to distinguish so strictly between the music of verse and the music of prose. It seems to me, nevertheless, that passages in later FitzGerald illustrate very well what he meant. After all, I'm quite proud to feel that I was walking on the same tightrope as FitzGerald.

THREE LYRIC POETS: RIDDELL, MATHEW, LANGLEY

There is a line in a poem by Edith Sitwell which I always think applies to myself: "It is his age that makes him babble so". So I'll use that as my excuse to babble on a few words more about FitzGerald. I always feel that I do a Scheherazade act, at times like these. You know how she saved her neck for a thousand and one nights by bringing her story to an interesting bit, just as she found that it was dawn, and then she stopped. That's the moment when FitzGerald's rooster crows in "Copernicus", of course. So I've saved a little bit more of the FitzGerald lecture to keep my head on my shoulders, so to speak.

I was interested to read that FitzGerald thought that "Between Two Tides" was his only real philosophical poem. Well, I think that's nonsense, as I hope I showed to some extent when we were looking at "The Hidden Bole" or "Essay on Memory" in the last lecture. "Between Two Tides" is a poem that in many ways reminds me of a Conrad story, although not quite as well-written perhaps. But it's like Conrad in its ideas about action, and it has one very obvious point in common with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or you may know it as *Apocalypse Now*, cinema being the universal art of this century. "Between Two Tides" begins with a drowning in the Thames and ends up in the Thames, in the same way as you have the narrator in the *Heart of Darkness* yarning in a boat in the estuary of the Thames at the beginning of the novel. And of course the novel comes back to that at the end. "Between Two Tides" begins with the undignified ending of a bloke who has been all through the Pacific and then capsizes in a dinghy in the Thames. Its theme, too, is as ethnic-centred as *Lord Jim* itself.

Another side to FitzGerald's poetry is its biographical character. Everyone knows about "The Wind at Your Door", of course, and its reference to his own ancestor, a surgeon with the convict fleet. As he got older, more family portraits appeared, with studies of Irish characters and family life, and he also used the Sydney Hunters Hill environment as a kind of setting for character. If you want to forget all the difficulties of "Essay on

Memory" and "The Hidden Bole," there is this other comfortable line of biographical poetry to follow through. In the way FitzGerald uses large images, he is a Romantic in the Wordsworthian rather than in the Shelleyan sense — he's not nearly as cloudy and visionary as Shelley, of course. I thought of him always as a sensible romantic. Like Wordsworth, FitzGerald wrote his more philosophical poems when he was a comparatively young man, at the age of 33, 36 and 42. "The Face of the Waters" was written when he was 42, and after that there are no really tough metaphysical poems to speak of. He went on writing poetry right into his eighties, and you can't expect that intense concern with philosophical matters to go on. People and places do take over. Memories do bombard. I also wanted to suggest that another connection between his poetry and Romantic poetry is found in his style. Wordsworth and Coleridge said that the style of a poem should be that of a man speaking to men. Now that wasn't meant to exclude women, of course, and the popularity of their poetry with readers indicates that in the case of the Romantics, anyway, the man-speaking-to-men style is not sexist in any way. In so many of FitzGerald's poems I can hear what I call "buttonholing", as though the poem is coming up to you and saying, "Now, look at this." The speaking quality comes through. I also wanted to mention, finally, how appropriately he chose the title for "Essay on Memory"; it is just that: an elegantly written, leisurely attempt to think through some of the problems of our conscious existence. It has a beginning, a middle and an end, and something of the reflective calm of the essay, and this balances the active energy of his own underlying philosophy.

I'm giving three lectures; now to my official third. My main hobby is giving lectures on music these days. So I thought of these Foundation lectures as having in their way an almost symphonic structure. Lyrical outbursts, if you want to be generous about it, with Neilson — the arrangement was quite deliberate — and then you come to a heavy, slow movement which was FitzGerald. Today is the Scherzo movement and tonight is the tragic conclusion. Me reading me. That's about the pattern of it. And for the Scherzo movement I've added the title "Operation Heart Bypass". I'm dealing with three lyric poets that I like, and in the

tendency to talk and write in terms of movements, these three poets along with dozens of others often get stranded. They'll sink into a few anthologies, and then the time will come — although Elizabeth Riddell put out another book just the other day — when Elizabeth Riddell, Eve Langley and Ray Mathew may not be much remembered. Yet all three have written poems that you can carry round with you to keep you warm, so to speak. Judith Wright told me that she used to go to the baker's shop when living at Tamborine, where it can be very cold sometimes, and in a lovely old bakehouse up there you could get the loaf of bread straight out of the oven of Carter's Bakery, and nestle the hot loaf to your bosom while finishing the rest of the shopping. I think you can do this especially with the Betty Riddell poems. Some of these I carry round in the pocket of my heart, so to speak.

Elizabeth Riddell was born in 1909, in Napier in New Zealand, and came to Australia as a young woman, and got a job as a journalist. She has travelled widely and made a very successful career as a journalist. It was interesting to see her interviewed on the Peter Ross Program just recently too. She joined the staff of a not very reputable paper where Slessor was also working, called *Smith's Weekly*. Then she worked on women's magazines, and in 1942 the Sydney newspaper sent her to the United States to open the New York office, and later she was transferred to London and Paris. She married "Blue" Greatorex, a great football player. I am told that his death devastated her, and she went into a kind of retirement for a long time.

The first poem by Elizabeth Riddell that I want to read is "The Old Sailor", which I've always regarded as one of the completest lyrics I know in Australian writing.

> The old sailor dreams of a little island
> Rolling like an apple in the wide green sea,
> A little island he could hold in his hand
> Turn over this way and then that
> Set a tree here, and there a nigger in a palm-leaf hat.

He sailed all his life
Till his blood ran as salt as the sea,
His ship was his sweetheart and his wife.
And he passed many an island with no more
Than a glance at the bright white sand of the curving shore.
But now that the sailor is old
He would like a little island like an apple
Just to look at and to hold.

I've always used that poem for the sheer sense of truth-to-life in it. It also has a meaning within the art of poetry for me. If only you could always get your poems so spewed out of yourself and knocked into shape so beautifully that you have that sense of detachment. The feeling "Yes, that will do for it". This poem becomes a symbol in its own right. One general thing I'd say about her poems is she doesn't make one big elaborate image as such, but builds up a picture that, in a peculiar way, you can use as a symbol. Whereas Judith Wright takes the old prison, describes it, and makes it starkly symbolic. These poems of Elizabeth Riddell, on the other hand, don't seem to have a strong central image; they are often a cluster of images, almost a cinema "montage" and the whole poem becomes an image in itself.

To illustrate what I mean, I'll just introduce a poem by another woman poet, which is my favourite poem of all poems in the English language. It is a poem called "Sea Love" by Charlotte Mew, and it simply has in itself the movement of the tide:

Tide be runnin' the great world over:
'Twas only last June month I mind that we were sink
Was thinkin' the toss and the call in the breast of the lover
So everlastin' as the sea.

There the poem establishes the sea image. And in the next stanza love has gone out like the receding tide.

Here's the same little fishes that sputter and swim,
Wi' moon's old glim on the gray, wet sand;
An' him no more to me nor me to him
Than the wind goin' over my hand.

The poem makes its identification and then exploits all the possibilities of it.

Here's another poem of Riddell's now — another "montage" one that I particularly like and you'll have no difficulty succumbing to the magic of it yourself. This is one of her "country tunes". She has some very good poems, many of them in a little book that it's rather hard to get now, called *Forbears*. Some of them are very beautiful lyrics, and this one is actually called "Country Tunes."

I went out to walk
Beside the river flowing
I saw what I'd not hoped to see:
A black man washing a white horse,
That's how the world was going.

He washed the horse's tail
And plaited it with yellow.
The wild west show had come to town,
That's how I saw the high white horse
And the brave black fellow.

The wild hawks flew above the smoke,
Above the river flowing;
The drunken cowboy stumbled past
And his long legs without his will
Took him where he was going.

I saw his eyes of bitter blue
Who crossed my path unknowing,
Who would leap over my head that night,
Over the tent-pole, over the stars,
Over the river flowing.

I never hope to see again
The white horse decked in yellow,
The horse, the hawks, the river in flood,
The cowboy's eyes of bitter blue
Or the brave black fellow.

I don't know all that it's saying but it has an indefinable quality that perfectly indicates the atmosphere of the show when it comes to town, and everything seems new and intense and unrepeatable. The poem seems complete in itself, although it's quite illusive. It is the kind of poem that baffles intellectual analysis; serene in its own completeness.

Now the next one is more straightforward, and you may be quite familiar with this, because it used to be in school books. Poetry for a long time almost totally neglected one part of Australian life, the surfing activity. There's Adam Lindsay Gordon's "The Swimmer", of course. But this is one poem which very early on did deal with the surf. It is called "Lifesaver".

He was brought up out of the sea,
His tall body dead.
He was carried shoulder high
Between the sea and the sky.
The sun and the water trembled down
From his fingers, and from the brown
Valley between his shoulders, and the spray
Fell before him as he passed on his way.

His eyes were dead, and his lips
Closed on death, and his feet
Chained with death, and his hands
Cold with death. He is one with the ships,
One with fish and fern and pearl
And the long lonely beat
Of the waves that curl
On the shell and wave and sand
Of a deep drowned land.

He was carried shoulder high
Up the alleys of the sun
And the heat
Washed him over from his head to his feet.
But you cannot give the body back breath
With a flagon full of sun.
He is drowned, the tall one.
Thin brother death
Has him by the throat
On the sand, in the sun.

There is a wonderful cumulative effect here. There is nothing here but the particular facts, as a journalist might report them. Mostly monosyllabic words, too, no similes, but some tremendous metaphors. It moves, I suppose, like a funeral march; but the real impact of the death does not come until the last three lines, and the insistence on the presence of the sun makes death here on the sand seem like something almost obscene. It is somehow useful to remind Australians that their famous sun, although it is the source of so much of the good life, is impotent against death.

There is another poem you may find interesting, because it is set on Brampton Island. Another of those De Quiros poems, I suppose, or at least it mentions De Quiros. It is about two men, who are complete strangers, and who are buried on Brampton Island, one a sea-captain buried there on his request that his men should bury him "on the first green earth you see". The other is a young man:

My name is Stanley Montague

I had no parents who would care
Were I buried here or there
So I sleep at twenty-one
With almost nothing done.

The poem is written in a mixture of rhythms, but the young man begins and ends the poem in this simple ballad rhythm:

If I could stretch out my hand
Past this little wall of sand
I might touch that other face
Staring from its narrow place.

He fulfilled and I so young
May not find a common tongue.
Strangers in the ground we stay,
Waiting the judgment day.

She is very interested in the basic things, and I think what C. for Day Lewis said applies very much to her poetry: "general truths of poetry are recognisable only through their emotional effects. Certain themes keep recurring and the poems in which they are found tend to be the best poetry. They have the power to move readers more deeply than other poetry which may be of equal technical mastery. And we can only account for this by conjecturing that beneath such themes there must lie truths of unusual potency and universality. In simple language the stock subjects, birth, life, nature, death are the best subjects. But critics must live and critics of poetry live very largely by annotating, codifying, refining or delicately wincing at this coarse and fundamental truth." Yeats too: "single symbols cluster about and point towards various aspects of the relationship between man and man and between man and God. Earth, death, love, fear, fertility, desolation, immortality and suffering."

I'd add to that, something from my favourite aesthetician, Suzanne Langer, who said that all art is the creation of form symbolic of human feeling. We can leave aside something called "intellectual content" — just all that is needed for the creation of form symbolic of human feeling. All writers on aesthetics seem to come to aesthetics from one of the arts. Suzanne Langer came from music. So perhaps it is easy for her to insist on "form symbolic of feeling," because you can't talk about the intellectual content of music very sensibly. As a creator of such forms "symbolic of human feeling," even on the evidence of the few poems I've included, I would admit Elizabeth Riddell into the close company of Shaw Neilson and Judith Wright at their lyric best.

Now I want to draw attention to just one more poem by Riddell, and I'm afraid it is another poem about drowning, rather ironic and sad. It's called "Molly, Who Drowned Herself in the Derwent".

> Put off my shoes. Early the wind was sighing
> About these rushes where the black swans come no longer,
> Where freezes the clod of earth hard as my frosty heart,
> Where the plover calls over the darkening water and
> the rattling cart
> And the dogs follow each other into the dusk.
>
> Put off my shoes. I have had eighteen years
> Of other people's living, but now I shall
> Make death my own. No more to care
> Whose shadows pass beside me on the wall
> Walking together. No more of anything
> But dark, and dropping like a stone
> Into the green and dark, and lying still
> Except to swing a little, this way that way
> Among the weeds, at evening, on the tide. . . .
>
> Put off my shoes, put off my little shoes.
> I was a poor silly girl who drowned myself.
> But they'll not let me lie in those cold waters.
> They'll bury me shallow and high
> In the graveyard over the river,
> Young, dead, dry.

The pathos is overridden by the irony of the girl's not getting her last wish,that she should lie in the cold green water and sway this way and that with the current. Instead, she will be dragged out and stuck up on shore: "Young, dead, dry." Elizabeth Riddell has written with the same kind of sympathy about another girl, who ran away and joined a circus. It is called "Wakeful in the Township":

Barks the melancholy dog,
Swims in the stream the shadowy fish.
Who would live in a country town
If they had their wish?

When the sun comes hurrying up
I will take the circus train
That cries, cries once in the night
and then not again.

In the stream the shadowy fish
Sleeps below the sleeping fly.
Many around me straitly sleep
But not I. . . .

I will join the circus train
For mangy leopard and tinsel girl
And the trotting horses' great white haunches
Whiter than a pearl.

When to the dark blue mountains
My captive pigeons flew
I'd no heart to lure them back
With wheat upon the dew.

When the dog at morning
Whines upon the frost
I shall be in another place,
Lost, lost, lost.

That poem is linked with the other one, I think, where the speaker sees the circus rider and the horse getting prepared. There's nothing I can say about her more than to draw your attention to her poems as lyrics that should not be lost. All the lyrics in this book called *Forbears* are of comparable quality, and that is something of an achievement over some fifty poems.

The second poet about whom I wanted to talk a little is Ray Mathew. I read a little passage from FitzGerald's prose the other day about getting the Australian environment right, and getting Australian speech right. Often you read an Australian book and you think "No, that word isn't right". Ray Mathew had a perfect ear for Australian speech. I knew Ray pretty well. Once again it was Douglas Stewart who arranged for me to meet Ray, and a couple of years later I ended up sharing a mad house in London with Ray and another Australian, Charles Osborne, who writes books on Verdi and Wagner. Osborne ended up in charge of the Literary Section of the Arts Council in Britain, which is a big rise from the Little "Ballad" Bookshop that he and Barry Reid ran in Brisbane. Charles and Barry had this shop where they sold books and records at a reasonable profit, so the warehouses stopped delivering books to them because they wouldn't put the proper markup on the books. Well, such is life.

Ray was born in 1929, was a country school teacher in New South Wales for some time. The school teacher comes into literature almost as a kind of stock figure, and at least in one and possibly in two plays, and in a novel Ray has this schoolteacher figure who is both on the edge of things in the township, and also a rather central observer figure. When you go as a teacher to a small country town, the teacher becomes a kind of omniscient figure in the place, and, because teachers weren't supposed to drink then, they would have to sneak into the pub just on dark and have a beer down one end of the pub. I first met this figure of the observer in literature in Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town". It isn't such a good real life role, because although the teacher is supposed to be the intellectual leader in the town, he is not supposed to enjoy himself as ordinary people do, and certainly could not be seen flirting with and courting the local maidens. Ray was that sort of figure for some years. Teachers used to ride push-bikes too, because in those days, with the kind of salaries they had then, very few owned cars. That comes across in his poetry. In his plays, too, which I recommend you have a look at: "We Find the Bunyip" and "A Spring Song." "A Spring Song" is an extremely beautiful song, a lyrical play. It has just been revived. Ray Mathew wrote it about thirty years ago and it was performed in Brisbane then, by Professor Ken Goodwin and other Brisbane

academics, and produced by Eunice Hanger. Eunice was one of the great promoters of Australian drama long before it became the fashionable thing it is now. A great many Australian plays only survived because Eunice found them and saw what was good in them. The Hanger collection of such plays and scripts, a memorial to Eunice, is now one of the glories of the Fryer Library, at the University of Queensland. Ray's plays are the most thoroughly Australian plays I know from that period, in the forties and fifties. It is largely a question of the Australian language that Ray gets so right, and this is more than just using four-letter words and the vernacular. It's a matter of cadence and idiom. It is also a matter of character type and authenticity of setting. Some of this you may also find in his poetry.

Certainly you have a sense of real language in his poetry, the language actually spoken by men, as Wordsworth would say. Ray also liked to try an operatic effect in his plays, a kind of operatic quartet, where four voices are all singing at once. But I don't think he ever tried to achieve that effect in verse. His typical speaking voice in poetry is fairly informal and relaxed, as you can see, for example, in this poem with a rather catchy title. I wonder how many poems actually have the word "sex" in the title? Perhaps poetry would be more popular if more poems did. That is what most poetry is about, after all, in one way or another. This poem is called "O Life, O Sex, O Fun-and-Games":

O love, you country that they hide,
Thing that has no taste of night,
To think that politicians tried
To tell us work was our delight; . . .

To think of the colossal fraud
Historians deceived us with,
Pretending that the things they laud
Could last beyond our only death.

Thank God, thank you-and-me, thank this,
Time that makes an end of time,

The sure uncertainty we kiss
To find our separate beings rhyme.

O life, O sex, O fun-and-games!
What a fact you've led us to:
To know that all society blames
Is you and me and how-d'you-do.

In "Young Man's Fancy" he takes on the tone of a brash young man who thinks he is pretty great as a lover. You can just see him almost with his bike parked near one gum tree and leaning up against another one, thinking he's telling off his girlfriend:

Come tomorrow night,
or don't come ever.
The moon will give light
enough for a lover.

I'll stand in the deep dark
of a gumtree's shadow,
You'll find me all right
if you really want to.

But I won't wait long,
You must come if you're coming.
Without talk of wrong
or breakfast at morning.

If they find out
just say you were walking
to see if the night
could stop a head aching.

And don't mention me.
Because I don't own you.
We just happen to meet;
I don't really know you.

Yes, I want you to come,
With the moon in your hair.
And the moon in your eyes.
As you look for me there.

Yes, I want you to come,
but I'll promise you nothing.
And if you're not game
then I still won't be crying.

But come tomorrow night,
or don't come ever:
I won't spend two nights
waiting for a lover.

You may know Ray's play, *We Find the Bunyip*, where the young man isn't so brash, but the situation is much the same. You can feel the young country schoolteacher there, trying to brave it out in the face of the disapproval of all those strict farmers with their pretty daughters. But the lovely lilt of the speech of it — it seems so effortless — but it's really so difficult to achieve. One of his best poems is about his sad-faced uncle. Ray published three small books, and I think the first two are the best. "Elegy for My Sad-Faced Uncle" comes from the first volume called *With Cypress Pine*, published in 1951 when Ray was about thirty-two and had just given up teaching to work as a journalist.

My sad-faced uncle, who went through life melancholy
with a loud voice and the story he was always telling,
did not anticipate death as a real alternative,
never contemplated the certainty of cut string
or squashed mosquitoes:
met death
as a thirty-six model Chev: died suddenly
crossing the street under a futile umbrella that he always
said — I-never-use: shut eyes
in some affectation of amazement; found the lids heavy
and without time to push them, died.

Was buried on a Monday by mourners with black cars and
hankies
indecently white who thought of his childhood and six-
o'clock closing,
the ironing at home and the chops to be got.
No, he had not tangled the meaning of dirt-thud on the
wood,
nor the emptiness of speech-golden tombstones, nor
thought of the wonder
of star-eyes at night. He had not thought of it at all.
Which was fitting and better.
Surely death was kind to my uncle with the sad-puppy
face
and better not delayed till thinking.

There is an awful phrase, — from Sir Herbert Read — "psychological exactitude", which should have nothing to do with poetry. I think it sums up exactly something about that one. The details seem quite odd and random at first, and then you realize how exactly right they are, what perfect psychological exactitude it has.

The last poem of Ray Mathew's that I wanted to read is one with strange power. He must have been very young when he wrote this. He was born in 1929, and so he would have seen the second world war as a child. We often see war described as a game played by ignorant children, but I think it is developed beautifully here. The poem is called "Let Us Not Pretend", and it also comes from his first collection. Now this book came out in '51 but he must have written this when he was 18 or 19 I imagine.

Let us not pretend this is a war of adults.
Let us confess it is a war of children,
Little children — pushing soldiers from a table.
Only children could not realise the stopping of a sense
The sudden ceasing of delight,
Only children could pick them up again
And set them right.

You take this and I'll bomb yours.
Why did you knock them down? — Because.
I own the table; you have the floor.
Isn't it great fun having a war?

Let us not pretend this is a war of adults;
It is a war of ordinary children -
Children with running noses and much noise.
It is their great eyes that lie so still
And their white bones
That crumble, huge and silent,
Among the voiceless stones.

Let us not rejoice in the returning soldiers;
They have been too much outside humanity.
And not cry out for their wasted lives;
Adult lives are never wholly wasted.
Only the children have need of our thinking. . .
So thoughtlessly they sinned,
Those callous children who caused it all —
Their flesh paler than the summer wind.

In the city of big flies,
It is their teeth that are scattered, their flesh that is
stinking
To the crows' eyes.

There you have another kind of poem, that has nothing to do with the wry romanticism of his love poetry, which is really about the half-understood yearning of a young man, and not perhaps specifically love poetry in the romantic sense. There is still a cold kind of wit in "Let us Not Pretend", and the relaxed speaking voice, but it is a harsh poem, driving home the responsibility of wars to the childishness of those who begin and organise them. It is a strange twist to see the carrion dead, not on the battlefields, but in the cities where the power-brokers of war congregate.

You may already know that Ray knocked into shape a lot of stories of Mena Abdullah, an interesting woman, who wrote short stories about the camel trains and the Indians in outback Australia. Mena's stories are well worth looking at. She wrote those stories secretly, because her family didn't want any of their story ever to be made into literature. She kept these stories in an old suitcase under her bed. The family never read *The Bulletin* where she published them, and Ray helped Mena not only with the style but also with encouragement and inspiration. They both worked at the CSIRO as clerks — this was after he'd given up school teaching and journalism. Mena had all these stories hidden away, terrified that someone would mention them at a family gathering — "Oh, I read about Uncle Rajah last Sunday". This secret was kept. I don't know how they didn't find out, they must've been strangely uncommunicative. Ray lives in New York now, and occasionally you see some report on him from a friend who's tried to look him up there, but he hasn't published anything or, as far as I know, done anything on television, although he is a scriptwriter. One day, a trunk load of manuscripts by Ray Mathew will also be found under someone's bed. Ray himself is really the subject of a very good story. From these few poems I think you'll be able to appreciate the quality of his poetry and the ease with which he uses Australian language and scenery.

The last person I want to mention is Eve Langley. Most of us have grown to love one of her few published poems, "Native Born". She was always a bit of a mystery and, like Elizabeth Riddell, didn't publish many poems in journals. Eve Langley was born in New South Wales in 1908, and wrote quite a lot of poetry in Sydney after she came back from New Zealand, where she'd married and had children. She wrote two novels, but is best remembered by *The Pea Pickers* which came out early in the war years, in 1942. She was quite eccentric in later years, and said that she wished she had been born a man so that she could have been free to write and think and dream. So she adopted the persona of Oscar Wilde for some time and generally lived a pretty idiosyncratic kind of life. I know a family in Cairns where she turned up on their doorstop as a fat little man in a tiger-helmet, and informed them she was Eve Langley. The legend was that her suitcase had Oscar Wilde written on one side and Eve Langley

printed on the other side in big white letters. The sad end to her story was she moved into a shack in the Blue Mountains and had all her papers and suitcases there. She'd been dead three weeks when she was found. I think Megan Stewart, Doug's daughter, has been trying to put together the manuscripts that were just about destroyed by the water in the old hut, which was leaking, and as the cases were open the manuscripts were all matted together on the floor. I know Douglas Stewart was a great admirer of Eve Langley, and not only of her poetry. Apparently he fell in love with some poems she had published in New Zealand, and perhaps he rather fell in love with Eve herself a bit at one stage.

He was terribly enthusiastic about *The Pea Pickers* and wrote one of the most exuberant bits of criticism about it that has ever appeared in Australia, I think. It's in the form of a letter to Shakespeare about the book, and it says "You'll appreciate this book, she has characters just like yours". For one thing the characters in *The Pea Pickers* don't really come to life that Furphy way. There are few of them and only little incidents. Here's a passage that he finds extremely beautiful and which I find extremely embarrassing in prose. This is one of Steve's passionate apostrophes to Australia. Steve, of course, is really a woman who has disguised herself as a man and goes pea picking in Victoria with her sister Blue, also disguised as a man. Blue goes off to get married so Steve is left alone with her pure love for the country:

> I trod the hill of yellow grass. The land was
> veiled in the blue smoke of the still-burning bush
> fire that was wallowing in red seas from some
> desolate shore to the end of its journey. Above
> the dry grass the blue smoke wandered and in the
> mystical twilight I cried "Oh Patria Mia, Oh Patria
> Mia" and my naked brown feet kissed the dear earth
> of my Australia and my soul was pure with love of her. . . .
> Divine was my love then, and with an uplifted
> heart I strode into the empty paddock and alone
> there crouched in the twilight on the earth I loved,
> began to work.

I don't know if I could really say that is great prose. "Divine" worries me a bit in the middle there. I'm always a bit scared of the use of the word Divine. It is a lovely passage, but there's one passage rather like it in *Such Is Life* where Furphy suddenly lets his hair down and has a bit of "If ever I want to praise Australia," and you get as purple a passage as you'd ever want to get, only with a firmer sense of control. Then Furphy's blokes go on to saddling up a mare or something. That passage there I find a little bit uneasy.

"Native Born" is the great Eve Langley poem, I think, and it has all that intensity but without any sense of contrivance.The poem itself is a model of the way a poem can be written, and technically it is one that could be recommended to any aspiring poet.

In a white gully among fungus red
  Where serpent logs lay hissing at the air,
I found a kangaroo, tall, dewy, dead,
  So like a woman, she lay silent there.
Her ivory hands, black-nailed, crossed on her breast,
  Her skin of sun and moon hues, fallen cold.
Her brown eyes lay like rivers come to rest
  And death has made her black mouth harsh and old.
Beside her in the ashes I sat deep
  And mourned for her, but had no native song
To flatter death, while down the ploughlands steep
  Dark young Camelli whistled loud and long,
'Love, liberty and Italy are all.'
  Broad golden was his breast against the sun.
I saw his wattle-whip rise and fall
  Across the slim mare's flanks, and one by one
She drew the furrows after her as he
  Flapped like a gull behind her, climbing high,
Chanting his oaths and lashing soundingly,

. . . .

Time was whirling high around,
Like a thin woomera, and from heaven wide
He, the bull-roarer, made continuous sound.

. . . .

Globed in fire-bodies the meat-ants ran
To taste her flesh and linked us as we lay,
Forever Australian, listening to a man
From careless Italy, swearing at our day.
When, golden-lipped, the eagle-hawks came down
Hissing and whistling to eat of lovely her,
And the blowflies with their shields of purple brown
Plied hatching to and fro across her fur,
I burnt her with the logs, and stood all day
Among the ashes, pressing home the flame
Till woman, logs and dreams were scorched away,
And native with night, that land from whence they came.

I think Eve Langley there achieves a great unity of creatures and the different races that make up Australia. And technically there is a wonderful use of monosyllables, and the way the lines are broken for cadence, and the single line effect of "Her brown eyes lay like rivers come to rest", and "And death had made her black mouth harsh and old." That is all I want to say here about Eve Langley. And I'll leave you with the three poets that I want to do my bit towards rescuing from the ever-rolling torrent of Australian poetry. Thank you very much.

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