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John Shaw Neilson: 'Something of a Mystic'

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The period between Federation and World War II saw a surge in poetic responses to a sense of national destiny. This combined with the influx of international templates of British, American and French mystical poetries inspired the first explicit attempts to found an Australian mystical poetic identity. Competing representations of mysticism as bold or passive, masculine or effeminate, dogmatic or independent, Australian or foreign, drove the shifting critical notions of this era culminating in the critical designations of John Shaw Neilson (1872–1942) as Australia's first all-purpose mystic-poet, notably by H.M. Green. This article will assert that Neilson is a *mystical poet* (as distinct from Green's poetic mystic) in the Western Christian mystical tradition outlined by mysticism historian Bernard McGinn, yet the basis for this has been subject to a number of critical distortions which in turn distinguish twenty-first-century studies of the mystical Neilson from their antecedents.

The topic of mysticism in literature is a challenging one, but that is a reason for, rather than against, its consideration. Readers invariably have an idea of what mysticism may be and any attempt to narrow the field to a particular tradition (for example the Western Christian one here, for its demographic dominance) can be met with concerns about inclusivity (what of Eastern mysticism?) or obtuseness (why not just the influence of a St Francis or St John of the Cross?). I would argue that a more pressing question is 'what is meant by mysticism?', a definitional imperative Australian poetry criticism largely avoids. This can be done in a highly cumbersome manner, engaging the debates over definition or non-definition of Christian mysticism which have dominated twentieth-century Anglo-American scholarship from Evelyn Underhill's 'the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order' in 1911 (Underhill xiv) to Bernard McGinn's suggestion in 1991of multiple considerations for 'mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God' (McGinn xv-xvi). Ultimately it is a matter of preference, but what should be noted is that mysticism operates as a shifting notion across time and that this also applies to Australian (non-)definitions. This article will approach Western Christian mysticism as the direct, experimental, or unitive consciousness of Christ, God or 'Godhead', transcending regular modes of knowledge and language which, by implication, involves the poetics of divine ineffability.

Late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Neilson scholars possess an enormous advantage over their predecessors due to misrepresentations of Neilson's poetry and biography during his lifetime and beyond. Cliff Hanna's landmark biography *Jock: A Life Story of John Shaw Neilson* (1999) records how Neilson's poems were altered, in some cases with the author's consent, by family members, his *Bulletin* mentor A.G. Stephens, then by a series of editors including A.R. Chisholm, Judith Wright and Robert Gray (Hanna, *Jock* 293-

94). Twentieth-century Neilson criticism was further hampered by what Margaret Roberts terms 'the paradox of the naïves' (Roberts 22), the construction of Neilson as a simple, child-like innocent which Neilson himself indulged in *The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson*, posthumously published in 1978. Cliff Hanna's *Jock* combined with his *The Folly of Spring: A Study of John Shaw Neilson's Poetry* (1990) used original research to dispel this false paradox, and Helen Hewson's *John Shaw Neilson: A Life In Letters* (2001) conclusively exposes the gulf between Neilson myth and reality, whereby the figure described by Wright in 1963 as 'simple and uncomplicated' (Wright, *Shaw Neilson* vi) not only digests and critiques Christopher Brennan (the first Australian poet to lecture on Christian mystical poetics in 1904), Whitman, Tagore, Hafiz and Verlaine but also instructs one emerging poet '[d]on't be frightened of Knowledge … your world is too small. Get in touch with the great minds' (Hewson 66). Similarly, John Phillips's 1988 claim that because Neilson was too isolated to have read the French symbolists 'something akin to a miracle occurred' (Phillips 55) now flies in the face of Neilson letters citing an Australian translation of Verlaine from a journal which also contained Rimbaud's 'Voyelles' and an article on Baudelaire (Hewson 13-14, 92). Nonetheless, it is precisely these types of distortions prior to Hanna's research which reveal the assumptions behind critical discourses of Australian mystical poetry, including H.M. Green's designations of Neilson as 'a symbolist to the border of mysticism and over it' (Hewson 413, 1928), 'a mystic, an emotional as distinct from an intellectual mystic' (Moir 45, 1942), 'something of a mystic' (Green 93-94, 1950) and 'in fact a mystic, perhaps the most noticeable of all Australia's mystic poets' (Clancy 48, 1961).

Nineteen years before Neilson's debut collection *Heart of Spring* (1919), Neilson's editor A.G. Stephens had already associated mysticism with 'weak and feminine minds' in a *Bulletin* review of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by English poet Arthur Symons. After isolating the Literary Mystic 'brahmically contemplating his navel', the 'ordinary eating-drinking-loving-swearing individual', Stephens concludes:

> To weak and feminine minds mysticism will always appeal, and with its appeal comes the emotion requisite to the achievement of the highest Art. But while blood is red, pulses full, and brain strong, no man wittingly adopts the creed of individual renunciation, of worldly denial, and of living death. Mysticism is associated with individual decay and racial decadence. (Stephens 2)

His suspicions are numerous: mystics are introverted, effeminate, foreign, elitist and mentally insipid, the antithesis of his bush nationalist ideal in a pre-Federation Australia already involved in the Boer War and one year away from the White Australia Policy. Yet Stephens could also use mysticism in a complimentary sense, such as in his praise for one of the most popular (and nationalist) poets of the era, Bernard O'Dowd (1866–1953), as 'the stuff of prophets and martyrs ... at once learner and teacher, studying law, history, and religion, interested in spiritualism, socialism, communism, anarchism, and mysticism' (Baker 81).

Mysticism for Stephens could constitute a legitimate poetic interest for his version of patriotic masculinity, but how might this apply to the less rambunctious Neilson? In his

preface to Neilson's first collection *Heart of Spring* (1919), Stephens's misogynistic, nationalist and neo-Darwinist obsessions come to the fore as he celebrates the 'strong blood of his [Neilson's] race, and the high heart of his ancestry … it affirms the Celt … to these gifts are added vision and fancy, sympathy with humanity and the passion of a man' (Hewson 406). At the same time, Stephens also infantilises Neilson in his one reference to mystical poetry by insisting that 'the pure depth of his feeling recalls [William] Blake; his verses come like Blake's children, "with innocent faces clean"' (Hewson 407), laying the Blakean foundations for Roberts's 'paradox of the naïves' with assistance from other poets of the era and ultimately Neilson himself. Concluding his foreword with a final nationalist-Darwinist flurry, Stephens lauds Neilson as '[f]irst of Australian poets, he reflects lasting honour on the land that bred him'.

Neilson's reputation as a mystical poet increased with his four subsequent collections between 1922 and 1937. Stephens set the standard by invoking Blake and suggesting 'his poems were long meditated … in Neilson the mystery is made lucid' (Hewson 407). The pantheist poet Hugh McCrae subsequently compared his 'spiritual escapes' to Coleridge, or rather 'what Coleridge has missed' (Hewson 407-8). Poet and Verlaine translator Nettie Palmer linked Neilson's poetics of timelessness to Verlaine's '*Chansons sans Paroles'* and *Birth* magazine remarked on his ecstatic, infantile and seraphic qualities (Hewson 408). While the mystical was certainly implicit in such observations, it was not explicitly evoked until H.M. Green made the first of his increasingly confident designations of Neilson's 'mysticism' in 1928:

> He is a symbolist to the border of mysticism and over it, and simply as he expresses himself, the meaning of occasional passages is hard to fathom… his best work springs from his intimate contact with nature, or with those human emotions and instincts which are so old and deep-rooted that they blend with nature … ['The Birds Go By' contains] something that can be felt but not expressed… (Hewson 413-14)

Neilson would improve in Green's estimation to become less a symbolist and 'in fact a mystic' by 1961, while Tom Inglis Moore (1942) and John Phillips (1988) ventured similar claims, the former representing something of an anomaly in Australian criticism by contrasting what he means by 'mystic' with Evelyn Underhill's definition (Moore 70). More recently Neilson's poetics of circularity and unity have yielded designations of 'the possessed mystic' and 'mystic pastoral' by Ken Goodwin (Goodwin 86, 1986) and Ivor Indyk (Indyk 357, 1988). Other critics such as Laurie Clancy (1994) have objected that 'Neilson, as it were, has mysticism thrust upon him' (Clancy 48) and Robert Gray (1993) goes so far as to term such associations 'woolly minded', citing Hanna's discussion of 'what is apparent: Neilson's uncertainty and unease about the Divine, the ambivalence in his concept of Love, and his increasing agnosticism' (Gray 24). Yet none of these critics acknowledges that mysticism is a shifting notion, whereby what passes for mysticism in the 1990s is not the same as what passes for mysticism in the 1960s or indeed the 1920s, and none discloses, or better still interrogates, what he actually means by mysticism.

Notions of Western Christian mysticism fluctuated significantly during and after Neilson's lifetime. Judith Wright (1975) asks: 'Was Neilson a mystic then? Towards the end of his life, his friend Frank Francis suggested to him that his poem 'The Orange Tree' had that

quality. He laughed and said he did not know what mysticism was' (Wright, *Because* 90). Yet, as H.M. Green notes, this hardly disqualifies him (Green 93-94). The naïve persona Neilson constructed was not given to such bold claims and, like Neilson's 'eye trouble', this construction was chiefly a psychological defence which spared him literary scrutiny while giving the literati precisely what they wanted: a mystical innocent, O'Dowd's 'peasant saint' (Hewson 102-3), Louis Lavater's weaver of 'mystic breath' (Moir 47), Wright's '[a] feeler rather than a thinker' (Wright, *Because* 90). One exception was A.D. Hope, who found Neilson's verse to be 'mannered and literary. It employs the idiom of a refined bookish culture; its rhythms are studied and of epicene delicacy' (Hanna, *Folly* 6). Nonetheless even H.M. Green was guarded about Neilson's status as a 'mystic' until 1942, and Christopher Brennan qualified his own poetic relationship with mysticism by claiming to have gone beyond it (Brennan 162).

Neilson, for his part, possessed neither Brennan's prodigious scholarship nor O'Dowd's public bluster, and any association with mysticism without these patriarchal checks and balances risked critical emasculation. As it was, in 1926 Robert Crawford wrote 'there seems to be something lacking in his [Neilson's] verse—the measure of a man. 'Tis so often like a girl's whimpering … Australia's big poet (when we get him) will be more than this' (Hewson 141). Neilson's own response was initially self-deprecating ('there seems to be an overdose of the tearful in my little book … His contention that I lack the measure of a Man is to a certain extent true' [Hanna, *Jock* 301]) but being regarded as 'what schoolboys call [a] "cissy"' after years of physically punishing labour became a source of resentment in his later years:

> When my first book came out, *The Bulletin* critic [David McKee Wright]… said I was effeminate. I thought that was very amusing, especially after all the years of toil I had put in with my father and brothers trying to scrape a living from a farm in the Mallee… (Hanna, *Jock* 278)

Even with his increasingly subtle approach to divinity after the early zeal of 'When are the Angels Nearest' (c.1893), Neilson risked falling foul of gender and nationalist expectations in post-Federation Australian criticism. To have exacerbated this by association with a mysticism all too easily conflated with mental haziness, personal weakness, deficient femininity or racial inferiority, particularly by his own agent and editor, would not only have contradicted his poetic persona but spelt professional suicide.

Neilson was raised a Scottish Presbyterian, but one whose youthful ambitions to know God were sorely tested by hardship, death, infatuation and agnosticism. In the post-Federation period, Neilson's poetic and religious identities were in a state of turmoil. The re-orientation of Neilson's early poetics of divine love towards a temporal equivalent can be seen in 'Triolet 2' where God 'left us Love, the mystery' (Roberts 662) followed by intimations of heaven in love, kisses and dark eyes ('Surely God was a Lover', 'Early Kisses', 'The Window to the Heavens', 'Her Eyes' [455, 33, 631, 346]). Neilson's first, heretical break from Christianity comes in his apotheosis of Florence Case, a young Sea Lake woman with whom he was clearly besotted:

> What should I know of God? he lives so far
> In that uncanny country called the blue.
> Sweetheart, I cannot worship moon or star,
> I'll worship you.
> ('The Worshipper', 635)

When the relationship sundered, possibly due to religion (Case was Catholic), Neilson was devastated and affected by the same 'nerves' that had debilitated him after his sister Maggie's death in 1903 (Roberts 67). Strange and severe representations of divinity ensued. 'To the Thick Darkness' (c.1915) warily attempts a reconciliation with the 'Jester, merciless with the dead':

> Always I feel you as the breath
> Of a dull tyrant in the dew:
> I have been questioning long—is Death
> But a poor journeyman for you?
>
> … Oh, Jester, merciless with the Dead
> That as a hastening child I knew,
> In the impatient deeps ahead
> How shall I make a friend of you? (937)

A series of poeticised visitations from 'a pure voice' ('My Prisoner', 415), 'my friend Night' ('The Black Friend', Roberts 467) and a portentous whisper ('There Came a Whisper', Roberts 637) reveal Neilson's increasingly desperate need for spiritual go-betweens or *intermediaries*, a need ultimately fulfilled by his trees and birds, rather than the Christological poet-singer of 'He Was the Christ', 'The Lover Sings' or 'The Uneven Player' (Roberts 115, 206, 904). Hanna (1999) summarises Neilson's double-bind thus:

> The fusion of pagan and Christian religious beliefs clarifies Neilson's confused attitudes towards the Deity. The metaphysical darkness of Jehovah/Lucifer is opposed to the God of light, who is a blend of Christ, the sun, and spring. At noon, or summer, the benevolent God becomes satanic. The ensuing debilitation and death attest to the Presbyterian creed of the corrupt heart, with its guilt and "thunder-blue" God. The childhood battleground endured in this way to the end. (Hanna, *Jock* 148)

Although Hanna overstates Neilson's apparent paganism—his speculative work on Neilson's 'Dionysian' influences disregards Yeats and the circular poetics of Ecclesiastes—the self-defeating nature of Neilson's adult metaphysics is undeniable. Good and evil tragically reinforced one another on simultaneous daily, seasonal and lifelong cycles where an often nostalgic Spring or Christ of light would redeem an innocent Eden-world, only to suffer the Fall into corruption again and again. Neilson was ultimately unable to transcend this and his subsequent consolations 'we live by the folly of spring' ('The Bard and the Lizard', Roberts

1045) and 'the green is the nest of all riddles' ('You Cannot Go Down to the Spring', 1168) cannot divert the agonies of 'Rob Me No More' (759, c.1930) where, as Hanna (1990) asserts 'Neilson has moved beyond Christianity', albeit in a confused manner (Hanna, *Folly* 131).

Neilson's status as an Australian Christian mystical poet relies upon his direct, experimental, and unitive consciousness of God transcending regular modes of knowledge and language through the intermediary roles of girls, birds and trees. In a letter to Neilson in 1938, Mary Gilmore observes 'you have, more or less, done what the old Spanish poets loved to do: and that is you have written poems indivisibly one, and yet divisibly two … Accidental, but more the curious for that' (Hewson 354). St John of the Cross, one of the pillars of Spanish poetry, delighted in a metaphysics of paradox in his *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, while by contrast Neilson endured a paradoxical metaphysics which from the 1920s disrupted his Christianity, let alone Christian mysticism of any kind. Yet in poems such as 'The Orange Tree' (c.1919) and 'The Gentle Water-bird' (c.1924), Neilson constructs girls, birds and trees as spiritual guides to bypass these disruptions.

In his earlier pursuit of 'mystery' Neilson occasionally constructed himself as an intermediary or conduit for others. In 1912, he wrote to Mary Gilmore 'I may be the means of suggesting to you something I cannot understand myself' (Hewson 57) and in 1914 'there seems indeed to be a mystery behind many things' (59), yet as his spiritual crisis deepened, his own intermediary role became progressively externalised. In 1930 he comments 'there always seems to me something baffling about birds, as there is something baffling about trees … In the way they lift us. It is hard to describe in words' (194). 'The Flight of the Weary' (Roberts 824, 1925), an escapist, utopian poem where woes are abandoned for 'beloved October', demonstrates Neilson's ideal representation of trees through the prophetic tones of Isaiah 35:5:

> The silent shall speak, and the ears of
> The deaf shall be shaken with sound—
> There shall be a forest and lovers
> Shall make it the holiest ground.
>
> … Our God shall be drowsy and think out
> His thoughts like a beautiful tree,
> And you shall be weary, how weary,
> With all that is weary with me.

Holy, hymn-singing birds complete the picture, just as they are available in 'Stony Town' (779, 1927) to confirm 'that the eldest Song is a forest thought / And the Singer was a tree'. Whether Christian, pagan or a fusion of the two, the image of the forest as a divine mind persists.

Prior to this, in 'The Orange Tree' (Roberts 878, c.1919), trees operate as ways to deity rather than deity itself and the key which allows Neilson to overcome his insufficiencies is

not to renounce ability in the manner of Keats, nor to listen *to* in the manner of Henry Kendall's 'Dedication: To a Mountain' (1880), but to listen in union *with*:

> Listen, the young girl said. For all
> Your hapless talk you fail to see
> There is a light, a step, a call,
> This evening on the Orange Tree.
>
> Is it, I said, a waste of love
> Imperishably old in pain
> Moving as an affrighted dove
> Under the sunlight or the rain?
>
> Is it a fluttering heart that gave
> Too willingly and was reviled?
> Is it the stammering at a grave?
> The last word of a little child?
>
> Silence, the young girl said. Oh, why,
> Why will you talk to weary me?
> Plague me no longer now, for I
> Am listening, *like* the Orange Tree [my emphasis].

If mysticism is considered in a generalist, non-theological context, here it is achieved: a communion with 'a light not of the sky', 'no voice, no music … but it is almost sound', 'a light, a step, a call'. Yet there is more to this poem which strongly aligns it with a Christian mystical consciousness. In his autobiography, Neilson explains that beyond the vibrant orange trees he witnessed under evening light, 'there was also something which I tried to drag in, some enchantment or other. I have seen prints of Botticelli's wonderful picture "Spring" … It has lovers, it has maidens and greenery and I think a robber in the background' (Neilson 106). Botticelli's painting gave some creative impetus to the interplay of romantic, even faux-naïve, poet and the young girl who brokers the unitive state. This interplay also allowed Neilson to test his own metaphysical obsessions: 'Is it of East or West?', 'The heartbeat of a luminous boy', 'a mad escapade of Spring', 'Does the compulsion of the dew / Make him unknowable…?', 'Is it… a waste of love?' and finally

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

Neilson receives his answer: not yes, not no, but listen *like*, become one *with*. It is a reply that shares its inherent negations with sixth-century mystic and author of *The Mystical Theology* Pseudo-Dionysius as follows. First Pseudo-Dionysius:

> The supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual. Again as we climb higher, we say this. It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding … There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. (Pseudo-Dionysius 141)

Now my interpretation of the young girl's underlying poetics of renunciation in 'The Orange Tree':

> The light, the step, the call is neither East nor West, nor the heartbeat of a luminous boy. Nor is it a mad escapade of Spring, nor waste of love, nor fluttering heart that gave too willingly and was reviled. It is not the stammering at a grave, nor the last word of a little child. It is beyond assertion and denial.

Pseudo-Dionysius did, of course, refer his initiates back to the scriptures, but, as Hewson (2001) demonstrates, the same can be said for Neilson:

> In biblical depictions of divine manifestation, three phases are common. First, the dramatic revelation, often a fire or bright light associated with purification, followed by 'the call' and then the communication of a consolation or task. With this in mind, Neilson's evocation 'There is a light, a step, a call this evening on the Orange Tree' is analogous to Moses' epiphany [the burning bush of Exodus 3]. The impatient tone of the young girl in the final stanza of 'The Orange Tree' recalls God's exasperation at Moses' failure to see that God would provide all the answers. It is not surprising that Neilson should write in the same poem 'Plague me no longer now', when we consider the subsequent involvement of Moses and Aaron in a series of plagues [Exodus 10]. (Hewson 30)

To the biblical connections in 'The Orange Tree', Hewson adds a second, ecclesiastical link to Neilson's Christianity, that of the Presbyterian Church's 'most famous symbol' of the burning bush on church documents and interiors, including those of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Penola, South Australia, which Neilson attended to age seven (Hewson 30). There is also the possibility of a third, poetic connection through Andrew Marvell's poem of praise 'Song of the Emigrants in Bermuda', contained in Neilson's copy of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*:

> He [God] gave us this eternal Spring
> Which here enamels everything,
> And sends the fowls to us in care
> On daily visits through the air.
> He hangs in shades the orange bright
> Like golden lamps in a green night…

As Hanna (1999) observes, Neilson's line 'And soon the little globes of gold / Sat in the orange tree' also appears in 'Julie Callaway' (Roberts 372, c.1907), written while Neilson was mourning his sister Maggie's death and the idea of the vision of light may have derived from 'an experience of one of his sisters—probably Maggie—at a revivalist meeting' (Hanna, *Jock* 200). Later, in 'The Loving Tree' (Roberts 541, 1915), 'the Orange tree is the sweetest tree / The loving blood is there'.

This biographical context prompts the question whether or not 'The Orange Tree' seeks to preserve Maggie or indeed *her* illuminated Christianity, which Neilson might have felt superior to his own. 'The last word of a little child' in 'The Orange Tree' is especially crucial here: Maggie's last moments, shared only with her brother, are related by Neilson himself thus:

> I suppose we talked for something over an hour and I thought she began to look tired. All at once she said 'What is wrong with the light it is going dim' [sic]. I knew the end was near but did not have the heart to rush away at once and waken the others. Presently her head went back & she said, 'I think, I think' very faintly. (Hanna, *Jock* 118)

Here is the fourth connection to Christianity, the familial connection. It indicates the potential for a different kind of unitive experience in the poem, that of the living and the dead, Neilson and his sister's memory, even their Christianities or mystical experiences. 'The Orange Tree' thus contains biblical, ecclesiastical, poetic and familial links to Christianity in addition to its mystical poetics of divine illumination, singing silence and transcendent unknowing. It demonstrates direct, experimental and unitive consciousness of God transcending regular modes of knowledge and language through girl, poet and tree respectively. More than an iconic poem of the ineffable, it is an iconic Australian Christian mystical poem.

The spiritual intermediary in 'The Orange Tree' is the tree, but it is also the girl who urges the poet to listen for 'a light, a step, a call'. Throughout Neilson's corpus there are strong associations between young girls, angels and birds. Early objects of affection are—quite tediously—angels ('To Mary Jane', 'To Sarah Ann' [Roberts 256, 264]), but more substantial angelic allusions are conferred on the figure of Maggie in 'The Sacrifice' ('White for the grave … Love looks for light—the old hope climbs and clings', 233) and begin to manifest in later child-sky poems such as 'The Little Girl of the Sky' (389). During Neilson's Melbourne period from 1928, young mothers leave him 'with God in a reverence' ('The Road to the Hospital', 1088) and 'school girls hastening through the light / Touch the Unknowable Divine' ('School Girls Hastening', 761). However, the young girl of 'The Orange Tree' has greater powers to move between the temporal and eternal in the context of Maggie's death. Imbued with this quality, she also assumes the principal power of Neilson's birds to 'carry the voice … tell the matter' (Ecclesiastes 10:20). Ecclesiastes 12:4 speaks of the days of trouble where men 'shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low', a further link between transcendent birds, girls and music from the King James Bible, about which the poet wrote in 1941: 'Since early childhood the Book of Ecclesiastes has seemed to me the greatest poetry' (Hewson 396).

For Neilson, pounding out his metre as he walked to and from manual jobs in the amplified silences of the Mallee, watching the wings of blue cranes 'so long until I saw only the sky' ('The Poor, Poor Country [2]', Roberts 881), birds were the great intermediaries between God and man, creations biblically exempt from The Fall. This is made explicit in 'The Birds Go By' (800, c.1927?) where 'After the flight and the fall, the defeat of the pilgrim … I dream they bear to the dead the thoughts of the living'. As Margaret Roberts shows, in various drafts this was also 'who knows what they bear from the dead to the living' and 'the dead can take hold of the living' (802), clearly showing Neilson's dream of birds as the poet's link between worlds. 'The Birds Go By' is also the poem singled out by H.M. Green to support his initial 1928 judgement of Neilson's symbolism 'to the border of mysticism and over it' as it contains 'something that can be felt but not expressed' transcending regular modes of language (Hewson 413-14).

Birds for Neilson were a lifelong obsession. In 'The Flight of the Weary' there are two varieties, the hymn-singing forest birds and the water birds, and in later works a third type emerges in flightless hens and peacocks. All have angelic or saintly qualities, unlike wicked ravens, curlews and mopokes (Roberts 727, 1175, 871). Forest birds are resplendent intermediaries between heaven and earth, God and man. The smoker parrot is 'not of the Earth, / He only falls below' ('The Smoker Parrot [2]', 895) and the red lory is implored 'Do thou from thy look-out to Heaven, O Lory, come down' ('To the Red Lory', 936). They are also sweeter singers, at one stage inciting the poet's ire in 'Song in the Yellow' (767): 'How shall a poor man sing / When all the birds compete?' Neilson confers ideas of unbridled holiness on forest birds such as 'the cackling kingfisher with throat a-quiver / Eager to sing for us a morning hymn' in the rather Hopkinsian 'Along a River' (308, c.1906). Neilson's kingfisher is not only his friend, but is also unafraid of 'the wicked foe' in the sky who would become indistinguishable from a wrathful Jehovah. 'The Song and the Bird' (592, originally titled 'The Bird is Bold') develops this crucial relationship:

> He hath his Heaven got,
> For Love he shakes the tree.
> Happy he heedeth not
> The many gods that be.
>
> … He fears not wind or sky,
> He counts not moon or year,
> Or the many men who die,
> Or the green wheat in the ear.
>
> He knoweth the false and fair
> And the deeps of deep things:
> How shall I know this bird
> Who sings and sings and sings?

As in 'The Orange Tree', one answer might be to listen *with* the bird which is already in its Heaven, ignores the animistic 'gods that be', doesn't fear 'the foe' of wind and sky, exists *beyond* cycle and season, and knows truth and the deep. The bird serves as an intermediary Neilson as seeker and singer in its divine reality and sweeter song.

Water birds, such as the cranes who disappear into the heavens ('The Poor, Poor Country'), are also Neilson's friends unafraid of God, but in 'The Gentle Water Bird' (Roberts 831, c.1924), the 'courtly crane' is explicitly constructed as an intermediary sent to reveal the mysteries of God:

> One day there fell a bird, a courtly crane:
> Wisely he walked, as one who knew 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.
>
> … Sober apparelled, yet he caught the glow:
> Always of Heaven would he speak, and low,
> And he did tell me where the wishes go…

Like the orange tree, the crane catches a divine glow and exudes a silence that is almost sound. Yet the crane goes further, he actively instructs the poet 'till the dark fear was lifted far away' and Neilson's paradoxical metaphysics are temporarily overcome. There is a direct communion 'for many a day' and the poet is adamant 'he did tell me', though in keeping with the poetics of ineffability he can only 'half define / All the quiet beauty of that friend of mine'.

The porous identity of the crane yields at least three readings in a Christian mystical context. In the first, the crane represents God ('not terrible and thunder blue— / it was a gentle water bird') whom the poet knows and communes with in an allegory of mystical union. In the second, the crane represents Christ who 'knew of pain', pities the suffering, sings of little children and literally suffers the Fall to tell the humble the way to heaven. The Christological reading is further supported by references to the Creation (Genesis 1:20) for which Christ was theologically present (John 1:2):

> Kinsfolk of his it was who long before
> Came from the mist (and no one knows the shore)
> Came with the little children to the door.
>
> Was he less wise than these birds long ago
> Who flew from God (He surely willed it so)
> Bearing great happiness to all below?

If the crane is Christ, then the same themes of mystical union apply. But there is also another 'friend' in the poem who might equally be Christ:

> Sometimes when watching in the white sunshine
> Someone approaches—I can half define
> All the quiet beauty of that friend of mine.

If the crane represents God, the revealed 'Someone' might be Christ, and if the crane represents Christ, the revealed 'Someone' might be God or the spirit of Christ, even an angel given the 'white sunshine'.

Neilson's assertion that the crane 'flew from God (He surely willed it so)' lends itself to a Christological reading, but also a Franciscan one in the context of his letters. Two months before Neilson sent 'The Gentle Water Bird' to Mary Gilmore he wrote to Kate Baker: 'I daresay you know Katharine Tynan's poem "St Francis and the Bird" [sic]. Very beautiful is it not?' (Hewson 127, dated 25 May 1924). Tynan (1861–1931), an Irish Catholic poet and friend of Yeats, opens her poem in a manner appealing to Neilson ('Little sisters, the birds / We must praise God') and concludes:

> Now depart in peace:
> In God's name I bless each one;
> May your days be long i' the sun
> And your joys increase.
>
> And remember me,
> Your poor brother Francis, who
> Loves you and gives thanks to you
> For this courtesy. (Tynan, 19-20)

At the end of 'The Gentle Water Bird' the crane departs, and 'Someone' approaches in white sunshine. The crane's monastic 'cloak of grey' is another distinguishing feature, but beyond this it is impossible to separate Christ and the medieval mystic renowned for his *imitatio Christi* to the point of stigmata. Alternatively, as A.R. Chisholm suspects, Neilson's writing may simply resemble 'the deep and abiding sense of mystery' (Chisholm 6) of St Francis found in the saint's words in Celano's *First Life*:

> 'My brothers, birds, you should love your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble ["a courtly crane"] among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you never sow or reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part.' At these words, as Francis himself used to say and those too who were with him, the birds,

> rejoicing in a wonderful way according to their nature, began to stretch their necks, extend their wings [see 'he puts out his wings for the blue' in 'The Crane is My Neighbour'], open their mouths and gaze at him. (Celano 278-79)

Convergences between St Francis and 'The Gentle Water Bird' (and 'The Crane is My Neighbour', [Roberts 1050, 1934]) are matched by innovative divergences, such as Neilson's reversal of Francis's instruction for the birds to worship by having the birds instruct him. This reversal is based on experience:

> I didn't just make it up about that bird … It seemed so confident and happy without any fear. It wasn't frightened of God like me. That's what gave me the idea for this rhyme, and my first idea of right religion too. (Hanna, *Folly* 23)

Yet even if the crane is read as neither God, Christ, nor Francis (can), it still leads the poet to consciousness of the presence of a holy 'Someone' beyond ordinary modes of knowledge and language. 'The Gentle Water Bird' in these four ways can be read as a Christian mystical poem, making explicit what is implicit in 'The Orange Tree': a way from God, to God.

Regarding his flightless birds, Neilson in a 1923 letter repeats the Franciscan notion that 'tiny things close to the earth have special value' (Hewson 108). In 'The Hen in the Bushes' (Roberts 837, 1930), Neilson turns away from the crane's skies:

> Call me the man seeing
> Too much in air,
> Low by the little hen
> Love it is there.

The motherly hen, despite the threat of the 'Old Tyrant', knows humility and proximity to *terra firma* confer holy qualities in keeping with the logic of the 'small voice' of 1 Kings 19:17. 'Love is a Microbe' (395) asserts this, as does 'To a Lodging House Canary' which, unlike Blake's caged robin putting all heaven in a rage, simply whistles away, being as 'close to the Maker' (922) as the urban poor of 'The Poor Can Feed the Birds' (1079). A late unfinished poem 'To the Peacock's Lady' (1156, 1939) serves as a fitting conclusion to both Neilson's intermediaries and his tangled metaphysics:

> Your Lord is rich, he loves the sunniest weather;
> I doubt not that he gives to God a praise
> For all good things—he jumbles them together,
> Moonlight and orange leaves and golden rays.

> I often wonder much as one who strays
> Which road is God, which road should we be choosing?
> The guides are everywhere and all confusing.

Neilson's adolescent ambitions for prophesy resurface ('I shall be prophet in this courtyard shady') but in one who lost his 'road' in a scenario no better than that of 'The Earth Born' ('I cannot tell which way I ought to turn'). Ultimately all Neilson can do is revisit his earlier themes of the crane, forgiveness and orange trees with one addendum 'the world is well, it needs not any cure', an embattled consolation far from the certainty of Julian of Norwich's 'all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well' (Caspar 143) and a stark reminder that Neilson's birds could also support his agnosticism.

The case of John Shaw Neilson is integral to the study of Australian Christian mystical poetics. 'The Orange Tree' and 'The Gentle Water Bird' serve as prime examples of Australian Christian mystical poetry through the use of intermediaries to transcend dysfunctional metaphysics. Unlike Ada Cambridge (1844-1926), the first Australian poet to comprehensively demonstrate direct, experimental, or unitive consciousness of Christ, God or 'Godhead' transcending knowledge and language, Neilson was critically feted as a 'mystic' which in turn reveals the nationalist, literary and gender implications of public recognition as such in post-Federation and post-war Australia. These implications and their consequences are of vital importance for decoding the cultural and critical anxieties that have denied Australians permanent recognition of their own Christian mystical poetry.

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