

NATURE AND THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN JOHN SHAW NEILSON'S VERSE

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John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942) has often been erroneously labelled by many critics in Australia as a simple singer of balladlike nature poems yet such an appreciation of his work is both short-sighted and an over simplification. His verse is not devoid of numerous defects which can not and should not be disregarded yet they do, by contrast, reveal the strength and brilliance of Neilson's verse at its very best. Neilson's background has in many ways helped to add to the general appreciation of his work as being that of the simple singer. His education in the strictest formal sense of the word was minimum and he had little contact with contemporary writers and as a result very little critical guidance regarding his work. In spite of his rural background working as a farm-hand for most of his life, the poverty and ill-health he had to fight against John Shaw Neilson has produced some of the most memorable verse ever to come out of Australia. His poetry with its clear voice, deep underrunning emotion and striking imagery is rich in suggestion and a memorable experience for any reader. Another striking and memorable factor in this poet's verse is that fact that while distanced from the main philosophic and poetic currents of his time Neilson's poems bear a strong resemblance in content and diction to European poets from the German Romantics through to the French Symbolists. A remarkable fact in a man of apparently little schooling and who lived a nomadic rural life out of the reach of any academic or literary sustenance and surely a sign of his poetic and imaginative intuition and perception. Perception coupled with a keen observation of Nature leads Neilson to a deep understanding of Man and his problems as is reflected in his concept and treatment of Nature and Death.

Nature for Neilson is not a motive for philosophic speculation as a means by which to attempt to reveal or rationalise the mysteries which have preoccupied Man throughout history. For Neilson Nature represents the physical and educative reality of creation, a reality which in turn allows the poet to penetrate the intrinsic character of Nature by means of a detailed and humble observation of it. As a result of this process the poet recognises himself to be part of Nature and thus, seeing himself as if reflected in a mirror, he comes to understand and accept the

processes at work within Man, his joys and his pains during his individual time of organic existence.

Neilson's concept of Nature is not based upon formal intellectual premises, but rather on something akin to a vital sensorial knowledge or power of thought so to speak. Neilson feels himself to be a part of Nature and this is enough for him to develop a humble but positive coherent philosophic line of thought on the question of the finitude of the individual within the context of the eternal cycle of life. He knows that the vital energy which feeds the flowers, birds, trees and indeed the whole environment which envelops his spirit and senses, is his for a certain period of time after which it will move on to other new lives, but there will be no change, nothing will perturb the natural order of all existence. Why the need to upset oneself with metaphysical abstractions, the poet seems to suggest.

Neilson's extraordinary humility enables him serenely to accept the reality which his senses perceive and which his spirit sublimates. Man is Nature's most advanced and fortunate offspring. He has an ability to think and reason beyond any other creature's capability. He is able to marvel at life and Nature, to reverse it and to recreate it in art. He is able to study it through the use of his scientific knowledge, but Man may go no further and this is the ultimate reality that the poet serenely comes to accept. It is this acceptance of a final truth and reality which gives rise to Neilson's intuitively aesthetic and simply worked poems in which he portrays that time of light, colour and life which preceeds another in which the splendour of all life is finally consumed by total darkness. The poet points out time and again that all living organisms, regardless of their species, strengths or weaknesses, achieve a moment of splendour and plenitude. Neilson constantly introduces into his poetry small delicate elements from the natural world which would often pass unnoticed or be taken for granted, thus demonstrating his desire to underline the perfection of the natural life-cycle in all manifestations of life. In the poem 'May' the mushrooms are described in the fine poetic image:

Shyly the silver-hatted mushrooms make
Soft entrance through, ...¹

and the poet opposes the gentle birth of the mushrooms to the death of the day, a death which with the turning of the daily cycle will soon come to these humble, newly born manifestations of life. Nature envelops all life however humble in her continuing processes of renewal and demise.

A hasty reading of Neilson's work does not allow the casual reader to appreciate the extent to which the poet manages, as a result of his understanding of and penetration into the natural world, to simplify or to avoid the intellectual tangles of reason when attempting to plumb the mysteries and origins of creation. His poems, on occasions extremely cryptical and personal as are 'The Orange Tree'², 'The Lover Sings'³, 'The Gentle Water Bird'⁴, often mislead the reader into believing them to be either insufficiently developed and confused, or mere poetic thoughts or abstractions without a generative nucleus. Nevertheless, after repeated

readings the same reader discovers that in order to understand Neilson in depth he will have to dispense with all intellectually acquired knowledge and abandon himself to the poet's subtle rhythms, allowing himself to be carried away. He must learn to listen to the voices of the trees and birds which talk to the poet until he himself in turn becomes receptive to the cyclical harmony which Neilson recognises throughout the natural world. Once the reader has reached such an understanding of the inner complexities of Neilson's verse, which he must sense and feel rather than intellectually dissect, he will discover the true voice behind each poem. A voice which will lead him through a landscape to a truth which remains in the mind like the memory of a dream. What has really happened is that the reader is taken on a journey through the many and varied landscapes of the mind. Such landscapes cannot be defined, they can merely be perceived and felt, becoming as personalised in each reader as they originally were in the poet himself.

It is through just such a process that the reader comes to penetrate and understand the underlying meaning in 'Strawberries In November'⁵. It is not the delicate description of the strawberries which surprises in the poem, but the parallelism between Man and the fruit which the poet establishes so subtly. Faithful to his belief in the rhythms and movements present in the natural world the poet underlies the reality of the inexorable cyclical movement in which both Man and fruit are involved. The poet's contemplation of the small plants provokes within him a state of abstraction and he recognises in the fruit the physical shape of the human heart and also its vulnerability. Red, plethoric with life like the strawberries, the human heart will eventually succumb to Time, the determining factor within the cycle which demands a constant movement of renewal and decay. The same principle which gave the plants life will bring about their decay and death:

The red sun knows no pity,
It calls on the grass to die,
It spares not lake or river,
For it needs them in the sky.⁶

In this poem the appearance of the divine figure is most interesting. God is present throughout his creation manifesting himself in all levels of existence. This presence establishes a harmonious dependence on and communication with the creator. If the poet is part of this creation and recognises a god to be present in it, then the strawberries must also recognise it, thus we see how in two simple lines Neilson synthesises all his thought:

They pray to the green heavens:
"Are we not timorous too?"⁷

With the subtle use of a single adjective the poet has created a vital, sublime symbol for the strawberries "vegetable creed". Their prayer cannot be heard

It should be noted that the natural world described by Neilson does not correspond to a particular geographical context, not to the formal details of its elements. Trees, birds, flowers are all referential departure points for the poet to establish the underlying bonds of the relationship between Man and Nature. Day and Night thus become the clock by which the poet may visualise and comprehend the cycle of all life. Each Natural element affords him a valuable lesson about the nature of the inter-relationship between Man and his world.

If, as has been said, death is a natural action performed by the individual and which constitutes the guarantee of the continuity of life, what exactly is Neilson's concept of death within the Natural world and cycle of life?

Neilson's vision of the role of Time in the physical existence of each individual becomes the corner stone of his poetic-philosophic meditation on death as an inherent factor in the cyclical rhythms of the universe. The periods of light, associated in Neilson with life and Love, will be succeeded by periods of darkness in an uninterrupted and harmonious cyclical sequence. The concepts life-death, day-night do not represent in Neilson's thought a struggle between opposing elements, but rather a noncontentious interrelation and interdependence inherent to the cyclical rhythms of the universe. Thus the concept of death is for Neilson nothing other than a moment in the perfect circular movement of the life cycle which turns eternally on itself.

As a result of the uninterrupted flow of the natural cycles which Nature offers Neilson he comes to recognise that individual existence is only a transitory period within the time and laws of the universe enabling the poet to accept the fact of individual death with serenity and, more importantly, it enables him to recognise in the reality of this individual finitude the affirmation of the essence of life. Far from offering an attitude of submission and conformity, Neilson puts forward a serene and balanced vision of death within the natural harmony of the universe. Only the individual is the protagonist of the transition in which an existence in space and time becomes an existence in essence. The energy which fed him, the light of life and Love which illuminated his time of existence will continue to exist, eternally transmitting itself, appearing new and splendid in each new being:

Wise men perish, and old dreams go;
 But many, the great and the wise,
 Have told the truth to our golden Youth
 That a lover never dies.¹³

Love, the creative life-force which guarantees the continuance of all life will never die. Its flame burns eternally throughout the universe.

Why should one commence a metaphysical battle against the absolute and irrefutable truth of the universal laws dictated by Nature? Man, like every living organism, dies in spite of the transcendence he endeavours to give to his existence. Nothing is changed, no disruption occurs when the individual ceases to exist. The natural order of things continues and it is this uninterrupted harmony which

enables the poet to discover the path to spiritual serenity. It is true that Man perishes as an individual, but this same Man carries within him at his birth the seed of a future generation, therefore it is neither incongruous nor absurd that Man should be born to die if he is able to conquer his pretension to individual transcendence as the poet seems to have done. Neilson, as a result of his constant observation of and immersion in Nature, is able to recognise and accept the transitory characteristic of all individual existence and thus finds comfort in the certain knowledge of the permanence of life within the universe beyond the bounds of his own personal timespan.

The assurance of the continuance of life is testified to and confirmed by the natural world which surrounds the poet giving death a Meaning, converting into a necessary factor to prevent individual existence from becoming a static condition. How can one imagine a world in which once all manifestations are created nothing undergoes change of any sort? What would Man do if faced with a static physical eternity? In such circumstances could Man continue to generate future generations without entering into conflict with the geographical limits of the earth? Would he in this case cease to reproduce and submerge himself into a state of individual impenetrability? The poet does not digress into such philosophical queries. The eternal essence of life appears to simplify his line of thought. The vital impulse, its permanent presence proved, is what really concerns this poet who seems to understand that our lives would cease to be a possibly marvellous shining performance without the certain and ever present risk of death. Using as a departure point this serene and balanced cosmic vision Neilson recognises in Man's "day", in his testimonial time of existence the opportunity which is given to him to fill it with a whole gamut of colours, joys and sorrows, shadows, dreams and realities which shape the meaning of a life.

In his introduction to *The Poems of Shaw Neilson* Chisholm summarises Neilson's simple yet profound cognizance of death:

I cannot think of Neilson's way of viewing the cycle without recalling a profound saying of Nietzsche's in *Beyond Good and Evil*. "It Behoves us to leave life as Ulysses left Nausicaa, blessing it rather than in love with it". Both Nietzsche and Neilson have thus put their finger on one of the most important implications of our mortality. Man has become what he is, largely because he is mortal. He has realised that day does not last for ever, and that it is therefore not something to which we should cling passionately... The cycle goes on, and we enlarge ourselves by accepting it calmly.¹⁴

The poet knows this and thus the old sun-dial in his poem 'The Day Is Thine' repeats unwearily:

Only the day, the day is thine

and:

The day, quick-perishing, is thine¹⁵

The nostalgic lyrical tone which pervades the poem is balanced by the insistence with which the poet repeats the possession of this complete and intransferable day during the course of which it is possible to reproduce the marvels of the universe, to develop oneself, to transform oneself and finally harmoniously to fade away. Once the reader has managed to fully penetrate the poet's thought he finds himself persuaded to admit to the validity of the line of argument in Neilson's poetry and to the importance and value of possessing this "day" of which the poet tells us. The knowledge that death will end any transcendent dream makes it possible that until death's arrival life may acquire full meaning and on relinquishing one's hold on it one may be able to say:

Wrapt in the yellow earth
 What should I fear?
 Sour hate and shallow mirth
 Never come near.
 Shape me no epitaph!
 Sugar no Rhyme!
 I had the heart to laugh
 Once on a time.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that in general when Neilson uses night as a conceptual symbol of death he defines it as the "twilight time". The choice of this non-aggressive darkness to represent the "black" point in the universal cycle of life and light is another of the poetic successes brought about by Neilson's extraordinary sensitivity. Death, as a universal concept of transition, cannot be expressed by means of total blackness or darkness. To do so would be to submerge it in a state of total absence of light and life, however short, and the poet knows and senses that such a moment of absolute vacuum does not exist. He knows that death forms part of the process of life and that only the individual becomes submerged in total darkness. As a result the corpus of his work reveals death as:

Death is abroad... Oh, the black season!
 The deep - the dim!¹⁷

Dimly we taste the old
 The pitiless meal of death¹⁸

In thy dim death thou shalt not suffer pain.¹⁹

Neilson's work if considered as a whole is a definite affirmation of the universal essence of life in clear and serene contrast to the natural process of individual death. Life, the poet reiterates is powerful and visible in all creation. Between the state of non-being before birth and that entered at death Man undergoes the marvellous reality of being, for a definite period of time, the receiver and carrier of the energy and strength which feeds the universe. This real and

profound knowledge of existing and of feeling alive between two identical poles of non-being is what gives transcendency, action and power to Neilson's work overriding any formal deficiencies his verse might reveal. One of the key beliefs in Neilson's work is that life must be lived fully and with total awareness whether it be a life of plenitude or bitterness.

In his poem 'Old Nell Dickerson' the above belief is made clear:

Bitter and black was all my life,
But wear no black for me.²⁰

Old Nell is aware of the bleak colours which have pervaded her life. Her time of solitude is now finally over. What is the point of concealing a reality behind social rituals when, if fully understood, this reality need not cause anguish? The poet appears to be telling readers that death, relieved of all metaphysical transcendence, may be seen as a rest in sleep after a life time of action and successes, or as a time of oblivion and repose after another of anguish and failure. Thus Neilson impregantes his poem not only with peace but also with life. Nell has died, but the day far from being sad and cloudy is "green" and "wild",²¹ Young and old, children and adults, all the phases of life form the funeral cortege that bids farewell to Nell walking:

Mournfully behind the
heart no one ever knew.²²

Showing their grief for a person who knew what it was to share her heart, but clothing themselves in happy bright colours as Old Nell had requested with her knowledge that dying was merely the final end of one life.

Notes

1. Neilson, John Shaw; 'May' in Chisholm, A.R. (ed.), *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p. 143.
2. Neilson, John Shaw; 'The Orange Tree', *Ibid*, pp. 62-63.
3. Neilson, John Shaw; 'The Lover Sings', *Ibid*, pp. 73-74.
4. Neilson, John Shaw; 'The Gentle Water' Bird, pp. 67-68.
- 5-8. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Strawberries in November', *Ibid*, pp. 257-258.
- 9-12. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Along a River', *Ibid*, p. 69.
13. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Green Lover', *Ibid*, pp. 109-111.
14. Chisholm, A.R. (Ed.), 'A Study of Shaw Neilson' in: *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*, *Ibid*, p. 32.

15. Neilson, John Shaw; 'The Day Is Thine', Ibid, p. 201.
16. Neilson, John Shaw; 'From a Coffin', Ibid, p. 108.
17. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Song Be Delicate', Ibid, p. 65.
18. Neilson, John Shaw; 'The Hour of Parting', Ibid, p. 72.
19. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Heart of Spring', Ibid, p. 60.
- 20-22. Neilson, John Shaw; 'Old Nell Dickerson', Ibid, pp. 153-155.