

**QUOTING, QUOTING, EVERY WHERE: LITERARY REFERENCE AND ECHO  
IN DAVID MITCHELL'S *STEAL AWAY BOY***

**Murray Edmond**

David Mitchell's poetry is full of literary reference. The title of Martin Edmond and Nigel Roberts' selection of Mitchell's poems, *Steal Away Boy: Selected Poems of David Mitchell* (Auckland UP, 2010), is drawn from the last line of an early poem called 'POEM FOR MY UNBORN SON' which speaks in the voice of Yorick, the jester in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who only appears on stage as a skull in the play. The poem constructs Yorick's dying advice to his son (who is presumably presently in his mother's womb): rather than try to survive in this corrupt world by 'chanting a mime,' better to escape, 'steal away boy.' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p.48). This poem is unusual in Mitchell's oeuvre for being voiced through a character; being, in other words, a 'dramatic monologue.' Typically Mitchell writes from the position of the observer/experiencer/narrator of the events at hand: what has rather too neatly come to be termed 'the lyric I,' with a presumed pun on the word 'I' – the one who observes (the eye) is the 'I' who speaks in the poem and bears a close relationship to the mind of the poet's self, though autobiographical presumptions can be entirely erroneous. In theory, there is, at least, one intermediate position on the continuum between the 'dramatic character' and the 'lyric I,' and that is when the poet adopts a more novelistic, third-person narrator's voice, providing a seemingly objective picture without ventriloquism of voices or commentary from an observing 'I.' This intermediate position is sometimes used by Mitchell, for example in such a poem as 'yellow room' which I will discuss later. What is important to note now is that the dramatic

monologue mode involves a collaborative approach amongst a community of characters in its creation – Yorick speaks to his unborn son, albeit to suggest he 'steal away' from his community, and Yorick, the son and the pregnant mother are also present in the poem's world. Drama is a collaborative and communal art. A lyric poet writing through that 'lyric I' is necessarily without community, except insofar as the poet belongs to a community of poets, past and present, of similar mode and method. The possibility of joining or not joining this community is a question that often preoccupies Mitchell's poetry.

Literary reference, a looping of the voice out through another work and back to the work at hand, a calling out to and a response by a writer to another writer, is nothing new. Aeschylus calls out to Homer in the *Oresteia* and since then the activity has never really stopped. This looping call-and-response abounds throughout Mitchell's *Selected Poems* and its manifestations as evidence of what is happening in a poem vary. Sometimes the referencing feels arbitrary as if the poet is just checking in with the storehouse in his head. For instance in another early poem, 'day & tide,' positioned next to 'POEM FOR MY UNBORN SON' in *Selected Poems*, we read: 'i weep and walk down/the white chalk hill' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 45). The lines echo Dylan Thomas's lines, 'on the high chalk hill,/And there this night I walk in the white giant's thigh' (Thomas, p.176). But such reference ('echo' is probably the more useful designation in this case) is completely disconnected from the rest of the poem. It is as if the author were keeping in touch with his literary ghosts for old times' or reassurance's sake. The effect is to make us aware that we are reading a poet who is highly self-conscious about belonging to a community of lyric poets.

Mitchell is not presented as a literary poet by the recent *Selected Poems*. The back cover introduces him as 'a New Zealand *original* [italics mine]: poet, lover, political activist, cricketer, traveller and impresario . . . . antipodean hipster.' The life is fore-grounded at the expense of the art. The 'Introduction' admits that the poems 'are full of echoes, homages, and embedded quotations,' but assures us that 'he is never anyone but himself.' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 37) We are told that 'he consistently championed the instinctive, the innocent, the untutored utterance over that of the formal and the formulaic.' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 37.) We are warned that '[N]one of these affinities, sympathies or predilections should be overstated' but this is balanced by being told that Mitchell 'was always mindful of the long tradition of which he was a part.' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p.38)

His affinities are seen to be with Villon and troubadours, with 'poets of ancient Greece' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 38) as well as with Ginsberg and jazz and popular music. But what it means to 'never be anyone but yourself' and at the same time be 'mindful of the long tradition' is a conundrum that puzzles its way through this *Selected*.

In his praising 1972 review of Mitchell's *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby*, C.K. Stead took some delight in rearranging Mitchell's eclectic 'scoring' of his poems on the page to illustrate that these were really poems written in iambic pentameter. Stead was anxious to demonstrate that 'Beneath this determinedly modern surface, however, there beats a traditional heart' (Stead, p. 69). Having decided that the poetry was good, Stead needed to prove that Mitchell belonged to the good guys (Stead's side) rather than the enemy (silly games with layout and overblown fancy theoretical poetics): my own editorial note in *The Word is Freed* 3, which had introduced the publication of Mitchell's 'The Singing Bread' in that magazine, is dismissed by Stead as 'fatuously modish' (Stead, p. 67). Stead began the reading of Mitchell's poetry which *Steal Away Boy* largely continues, that this is the poetry of 'real life': 'His poems are reports on experience' (Stead, p. 68) and 'here was a man who had been through it, who had been through the mill, and he was still singing.' (Stead, p. 67).

Perhaps we can begin a different way of reading Mitchell's work by observing that the tension between 'being only yourself' and noting 'the long tradition' is fundamental to Romanticism (Coleridge set up the terms). In this essay, I want to examine the effect of this tension on Mitchell's oeuvre and present a reading that engages with the literary nature of the poetry, which might move towards telling the story of the *writing*. In this I am going to be doing something opposite to the reading the *Selected Poems* presents, which tends to hitch the poems to the star of the life.

I will examine five poems in which the 'literary reference' is more than a 'passing echo.' Each of these poems enacts a confrontation with another work, which is embedded in it. 'yellow room' (pp. 149 - 150) quotes from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*; 'slow trip above atlantis' (pp. 72 - 76) meets Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'; 'night through the orange window' (pp. 80 - 84) comes face to face with Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty'; 'th lesson' (pp. 217 - 218) inhabits Blake's 'The Sick Rose'; and 'street of early sorrows/ship of 50s fooles' (pp. 233 - 241) draws

breath from Hilaire Belloc's 'Tarantella.' Immediately one notes that this group of four writers, three major English Romantics (Coleridge, Byron and Blake), one existentialist (Beckett) and an early twentieth-century Catholic Distributist (Belloc), may be more useful to a literary reading of Mitchell than the generalised categories of 'troubadours, poets of ancient Greece, hipsters and jazz.'

### **'yellow room' and Beckett:**

My first example of Mitchell's use of writing to confront another literary text is from Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy* where we can find the appearance of the line 'A fine rain begins to fall' which is the final line of the poem 'yellow room.' In *Molloy* this reads: 'Then in my eyes and in my head a fine rain begins to fall, as from a rose, highly important' (Beckett, p. 28). In Mitchell's poem this appears in capitals with a contraction on the word 'to': 'A FINE RAIN BEGINS T'FALL.'

I am happy to concede the obscurity of this reference and also the high probability that such a basic phrase could occur to two different writers in two different times and places. The Beckett is of course a translation from the French but translated by Beckett himself with Patrick Bowles. Edmond and Roberts' 'Introduction,' tells us, in relation to the French language, that Mitchell 'acquired a lifelong affinity with *la langue*' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 6), which is one of the affinities between Mitchell and Beckett that has encouraged me to pursue this obscurity. Other affinities include a similar preoccupation with 'silence' and 'speechlessness,' a state that sadly seems to have become a physical reality for Mitchell, who now suffers from supranuclear palsy, which renders him unable to speak. Another connection is Beckett's notoriously heavy use of inter-textual weavings and secondary material, bordering on pastiche, in his work up until *Watt* (published 1953, but written during the Second World War). Perhaps it is significant that this is something Beckett, in throwing off the thrall of Joyce, expunged from his writing. However, on the evidence of this *Selected*, Mitchell persisted with textual pastiche to the point that his condition meant he could no longer write.

'yellow room' was first published in *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* in 1971, but the 'Introduction' locates it in time and place thus: "'yellow room" (1966), in which two people sit in a café, perhaps in Sydney, perhaps in London, *waiting for something GREAT to happen.*' (Mitchell *Steal*, p. 36) It is not clear what that 1966 ascription refers to and whether the published version (1971) is the 1966 version. This is something that the editors, with manuscript access in ascribing that 1966 dating, presumably could have clarified. We learn in the 'Introduction' that many of the poems in *Pipe Dreams* were 'reworked or . . . written anew' (p. 18). Was 'yellow room' one of these? In the *Selected Poems* 'yellow room' is displaced, for reasons that are not explained, to the head of the section called 'Myths of Woolloomooloo' which is a selection of poems from the years 1972 to 1978. 'yellow room' stands out as stylistically disjunct from the other poems in this section. What can be said is that in that period from 1966 to 1971, Beckett's trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*, would have been on the reading list of many young literary *engagés*, and therefore it is possible that Mitchell knew *Molloy*.

'yellow room' reads like a series of stage instructions for an absurd drama *à la* Beckett. The flâneur, sitting in the 'café lebanon' smoking, is waiting for 'something GREAT to happen,' (lines 5 - 6) and the bored waitress, 'absent-minded/ glazed eyes gone yellow with winter,' (lines 37 - 38) has no hope of anything happening (existential character conflict) while outside the traffic provides the dramatic action as it changes from 'slow' to 'a curious palpitation' and eventually to 'jammed up ; stopped/ completely.' (lines 3 and 16 and 32 - 33) As in a typical Modernist wasteland, everything is grinding to a halt. The *mise en scène* is not as extreme as the brief illumination of a pile of rubbish plus the single gasp of breath (either of birth or of orgasm or of death) in Beckett's play *Breath*. Mitchell's world is more socialised than Beckett's wastelands. 'yellow room' is curious for a Mitchell poem because it provides one of the few Mitchell landscapes with traffic, cars and buses. One can note that Mitchell's poetic worlds are often emptied of the paraphernalia of modern life, almost Medieval in their archaism, and that 'yellow room' is an exception.

'yellow room' has a little 'kick' at the end of its drama when something really does happen: whether we choose to call it 'GREAT' or not, that fine rain does begin to fall. But that is not the whole story in the *Molloy* source. The sentence has the phrase 'as from a rose, highly important'

at the end. We realise that this rose is not a flower, but the rose of a watering can or a shower head. Beckett used a very similar phrase in his 1946 novel *Mercier and Camier* (not published until 1970): 'The rain was falling gently, as from the fine rose of a watering pot' (Nixon). The fine rose is the necessary device to carry off the *coup de théâtre* of achieving a 'fine rain' on stage. This is stage rain falling – or if it were a film and we pulled the camera back, we would see it was not raining, but someone was standing above the café entrance with a large watering can. The *Molloy* quotation may be coincidental, but the similarity of Mitchell's poem 'yellow room' to a small absurdist drama, with a debt to Beckett and others of that mode, is beyond question.

'yellow room' is a drama, of the 'great reckoning in a little room' variety (Shakespeare, Act III, Sc.3, 14). In the light of this we must note now Mitchell's aversion to theatre and drama (though not to theatricality and performance) as it is recorded in the 'Introduction' where Martyn Sanderson is quoted as recalling: 'Mitchell said of Alan Brunton: *Another poet seduced by the painted whore of theatre*' (Mitchell, *Steal*, p. 31). This quotation is startling for its mimicry of the Puritan attitude of Shakespeare's time, though one wonders if Mitchell would have included the Shakespeare who created Yorick in his judgement. (The 'Introduction' to the *Selected Poems* is full of unattributed quotations from a range of people, which is one of the unsatisfactory editing aspects of the book. When and where did Sanderson hear Mitchell say this?) However, I can confirm Mitchell's vehement aversion to theatre and drama on one other occasion; when I began working with the Living Theatre Troupe in Auckland in 1971, Mitchell made it clear to me he considered such activity as a betrayal of 'poetry.' 'yellow room' tells its drama, rather than enacts it in the way a dramatic monologue would do. It is composed in that intermediate, novelistic mode between dramatic monologue and lyric I.

### **'slow trip above atlantis' and Coleridge:**

If Mitchell saw theatre as a 'painted whore', this did not mean that the poetry of the solo voice of the lyric I is an alternative free of anxiety. Such poetry itself and the role of the poet are much pondered, examined and turned over with anxiety throughout the *Selected Poems*. Because the

author is a poet engaged in writing poetry, he becomes subject of this analysis in an on-going psychodrama. I turn now to the poem 'slow trip above atlantis,' which contains autobiographical elements in that it is a record of Mitchell's return to New Zealand from Europe by ship in early 1964 while his wife, who had flown ahead, was already in New Zealand, giving birth to their child. The situation is one with plenty of scope for anxiety, as the speaker in the poem is a lonely sailor all alone on a wide, wide sea.

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' can be read as a self-portrait of Coleridge via the figure of the Mariner. 'The Rime' presents puzzles of interpretation and problems of overall coherence and, because of the poem's relative textual openness, it would be possible to extend such a reading to reveal an allegory of poetry and the poet: the Mariner is one who possesses 'strange power of speech' (Coleridge, 'Rime,' line 603) such that we 'cannot choose but hear' (line 18), so the Mariner is a kind of Orpheus figure (though not dismembered, rather preserved), and the poem explicates, through the Mariner's sin in shooting the albatross, the source of his compulsive and persuasive song. In 'slow trip above atlantis,' for a passage of some 15 lines, from 'watching the albatross come upwind' (line 39) to 'I am terrified of the albatross' (line 53), Mitchell sees himself in the role of the Mariner.

The poem is subtitled '*a prayer for my daughter 1964*' but the anxieties it explores are almost all to do with the poet's state of mind and the poem only once references the birth of the child, and then as if to dismiss it: 'this day, my daughter is drawing her first breath/ but I am pondering/ lush/ malcolm lowry / in his cell/ "9 fathoms deep"' (lines 59 - 63). The '9 fathoms deep' is a further echo of 'The Ancient Mariner'. The poem tends to become fixated on the speaker's anxious state of mind: 'I'm hung up , myself , in this late blue & white day/ but great / with hope.' (lines 97 - 98) In this fixation the speaker of Mitchell's poem is close to the compulsion of the Mariner to repeat his tale. The lack of attention to the child about to be born, or not long having been born, makes us recall other poems for children at this early stage of life, where the attention of the poem is contrastingly much more focused on the child: such as Yeats' programmatic yet contradictory exhortations in his 'A Prayer for My Daughter' ('May she be granted beauty and yet not/ Beauty . . . ' Yeats, lines 17 - 18) or Coleridge's own compassionate prayer for his son Hartley, 'Frost at Midnight' ('Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee.' Coleridge, 'Frost,' line

65). 'slow trip above atlantis' never attains its promised form of being 'a prayer.' 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' could have given Mitchell an *entrée* to prayer and its nature in the best Romantic sense of praying to what Coleridge in 'Frost at Midnight' calls the 'Great universal Teacher': 'He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small.' (Coleridge, 'Rime,' lines 612 - 613). In 'slow trip above atlantis' the referencing of 'The Ancient Mariner' is much more than a passing echo, yet the confrontation with the older poem fails to reach an understanding; the loop does not complete its circle, the call and response falters. Such aspects of the Mariner and his Orphic mission as compulsion and terror and loneliness pervade 'slow trip above atlantis' without leading on to the blessed release that the Mariner's telling of the tale brings. The figure of the Mariner can be read as embodying the Romantic lyric poet, his terrible journey, in which he is shunned after killing the albatross and with only the dead and strange spirits to accompany him for a large part of it, a journey without community, and the Mariner's compulsion to repeat as an anxiety about the individual lyric voice.

### **'night through the orange window' and Byron:**

The final lines of 'night through the orange window' read: 'I remember her as a fifth season/ who came unheralded/ and walked in beauty' (lines 137 - 139). The poem ends with this evocation of Byron's lyric 'She Walks in Beauty,' a poem as well-known from the Romantic English codices and general anthologies of English verse as 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' The line 'She walks in beauty' must possess almost as generalised an echo as a line of poetry as the line 'Water, water, every where,' and both poems could easily have featured in any high school classroom encounters with poetry from the time of Mitchell's schooldays. Byron's poem describes an idealised woman, of perfect beauty ('One shade the more, one ray the less/ Had half impair'd the nameless grace,' Byron, lines 7 - 8) and of impeccable moral character ('. . . days in goodness spent,/ A mind at peace with all below,/ A heart whose love is innocent,' Byron, lines 16 - 18). Even at the time of writing (1814) this high-flown portrait must have acquired a titillating aspect from its contrast with Byron's already well-established reputation for seduction and womanising (though he does seem also to have been bi-sexual in his tastes).

Mitchell's poem also presents a woman of outstanding quality: her designation as 'a fifth season' points to her exceptional qualities. 'night through the orange window,' like its source poem 'She Walks in Beauty,' describes in detail this woman's physical, emotional and spiritual beauty: 'sheaves of bright hair' (line 48), 'the slim meadows/ of your autumn skin' (lines 50 - 51), 'proud eternity of her flesh' (line 119), and 'who loved proudly/ causing wonder' (lines 121 - 122). Byron's paean gazes strongly on 'that cheek . . . that brow' but does not go further than the gaze; the poem remains steadfastly in the third person, the observer remains hidden (possibly contributing to its titillating quality in stimulating but not releasing desire) and there is no encounter, no meeting, in fact really no sense of time in the poem. Its timeless moment is in the seeing, an eternal replaying of a piece of film that captures her walk forever and for now.

'night through the orange window' attempts something much more apparently complex. It equally sets itself the task of realising 'the moment,' but of a rather different kind. The word 'moment' appears twice in the first of the poem's four sections: 'the mystery of the moment' (line 8) and 'the silence/ of the moment' (lines 15 - 16). The word occurs again in the poem's third section. The poem is a memory poem in which the poet recalls the seduction of this woman ('I have you/ as you really are.' lines 67 - 68), thus establishing the poet as a Byronic seducer, hence the acknowledgement in the final line to the Byron poem. The poem is arguably not titillating as Byron's is, because its attempt at re-arousal (for the poet) through memory involves a rather involuted gazing by the poet on himself gazing on the beloved at the *moment* of arousal and release (orgasm):

you are

death's first small lily

breathless

come in wonder

panting at the foothills

of my grey face -

And I bemused (lines 77 - 83)

The trope of the 'little death' is elaborated by the funereal lilies and the corpse-like 'grey' face of the seducer, whose 'bemused' gaze observes the ecstatic beloved in her 'moment.' There is something rather ghoulish in this. And even though the seducer has possessed the exceptional woman in some exceptional way ('I could not possess you again/ save as now' lines 71 - 72), the outcome is not a satisfaction of desire, but a conclusion somewhat closer to the loneliness expressed by the Ancient Mariner:

It is not that I am lonely  
in the world  
without you –  
but that I am lonely  
in you  
without you (lines 101 - 106)

'Alone, alone, all, all alone,/ Alone on a wide wide sea!' (lines 231 - 232) the Mariner laments in his moment of Romantic abjection.

The staging of the 'moment' of Byronic conquest is given a number of treatments in *Steal Away Boy*, each of which can be read as a variation on a theme. The early poem 'day & tide' enacts a scene in which 'seven men/ on seven small stools' observe 'the cool lady/ spoiling in the stillness/ of their regular gaze' (lines 5 - 6 and 14 - 16). The sexual gaze is again connected to the figure of a corpse (suggested by both the 'coolness' and the 'spoiling'). Perhaps we may be alerted to Coleridge's 'Night-mare Life-in-Death' with her red lips, her free looks, her gold locks, and her skin 'as white as leprosy . . . Who thicks man's blood with cold,' whom the Ancient Mariner encounters on his voyage (Coleridge, 'Rime,' lines 189 - 193). (This in turn is reminiscent of that already mentioned 'painted whore of theatre.') In the poem 'The Orange Grove,' in the same section of *Steal Away Boy* as 'night through the orange window,' the flâneur/poet, 'drinking cheap anis' (line 5), sets his gaze upon 'a young girl' (line 17) walking past, who is variously characterised as 'virgin' and 'harlot,' (lines 19 - 20) but 'no angel or muse' (line 41) and the poem

proceeds to stage her conquest, in the light of the poem's revelation that she is 'seeking the orange groves/ of delight' (lines 48 - 49). Her seducer acquires the manner of a hunter ('I have come/ disguised as death' lines 69 - 70) and his readiness is cleverly caught in an image that combines the mechanism of the clock and the coiled body of the predator: 'winding up on fine springs/ to strike' (lines 35 - 36). The scene of the moment of 'possession' (or 'destruction'), when it comes, is lifted from the genre of Romantic Gothic sexuality, though chillingly pushed into the territory of the victim's questionable willingness:

I see you shake with dread  
recognising through my mask  
the living dead

& though you scream & tear  
your cloth heart full

from out the dream & stop love's breath  
you willingly prepare for this gay death . . .

& I, bemused with light,  
come broken up  
    from out still water  
    & the town  
    to where  
        you wait . . .

& stoop for whiteness  
at your throat (lines 85 - 99)

In the poem 'Ritual' the throat makes another disturbing appearance in the moment of sexual conquest: 'th tender; much bruised flowers/ of yr throat/ close with my younger phantom face' (lines 30 - 32). In 'th oldest game,' the 'moment' is viewed with less Gothic grandeur, even with a hint of self-reflexive irony: 'she// fabricates hr little / lost moan / & he/ groans to hear it' (lines 63 - 65), though again it is the 'death' of the beloved which brings the Byronic predator his pleasure.

In 'kingseat / my song: 1969' the beloved is incarcerated in Kingseat Mental Hospital, where the poet gazes on her as she now lies beneath what the poem tells us is the murderous intent of 'the world,' represented by the marks of electric shock therapy, with the throat once more the focus of the hunted victim's prostrated life:

'save my exhausted lover'  
whose  
temples hold th scab  
of th cure  
(as of old)  
whose throat is twitching  
in her daze  
with the faint pulse of those  
th world chooses to murder (lines 122 - 130)

This poem, from the *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* collection, attempts a more complex view of 'the moment' than those cited so far, in that it links the poet's name, David Mitchell, to one of the soldiers involved in the My Lai massacre in 1969 in Vietnam, who had the same name. In this ironic coincidence, there is a moment of glimpsing the self, rather than gazing on the beloved as potential grist to the Byronic hero's mill. An incident recounted in the 'Introduction' about Mitchell throwing a chair at a tenor sax player who was reading a poem by the English poet

Adrian Mitchell (further irony of nomenclature), which had a refrain, 'Zap, zap, zap, zapping the Cong . . . ' because he (David Mitchell) thought the poem was offensive, when clearly it was ironic, shows that irony was an emotional problem for Mitchell, and the conquest scenes staged in 'night at the orange window' and 'orange grove' seem to confirm that in terms of the writing.

The two My Lai poems, 'my lai / remuera / ponsonby' and 'ponsonby / remuera / my lai,' with their contrasting female and male protagonists, the woman at home, the man on parade (both instances of stepping out of the 'lyric I'), build on the insight of the 'kingseat / my song' poem to present two powerful dramas of Western guilt. These two poems are examples of Mitchell moving away from the personal lyric voice and employing that novelistic narrative voice, as he does with 'yellow room.' Both poems gain intensity from their compression and one is reminded of Coleridge's comment on why he chopped the six final lines from the original published version of 'Frost at Midnight': 'Poems of this kind & length ought to lie coiled with its [sic] tail round its head' (Coleridge quoted in Mays, p. 456).

'night through the orange window' (and related poems of sexual conquest quoted from above) figure the seduced as a prey hunted by a predator, but they also figure the Byronic seducer as a corpse ('my grey face . . . living dead . . . phantom face'). The act of lyric intensity (and sexual release) becomes a kind of necrophilia, as if the lyric I was the ventriloquism of a death drive. This has its links to Byron, who confronted himself with the problem of poetic (and sexual) decline at the age of 36: 'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,/ Since others it hath ceased to move' but immediately alerted himself to the problem of desire and its endlessness: 'Yet, though I cannot be beloved./ Still let me love!' (Byron, 'Thirty-Sixth,' lines 1 - 2 and 3 - 4). Ever true to his own Romantic image, his solution was to turn soldier and seek death. The Byronic hero, encapsulating a central paradox of Romanticism, is headed on a path of destruction, but driven by the endless search to quench desire: he must die again and again from his own desire, a kind of impossibility that we can register in Mitchell's attempts to record 'the moment' in words.

Mitchell's poetic borrowings and literary references kept him in touch with poetry while writing poetry, as if he were consumed by a desire moment by moment to re-find poetry. Sometimes this desire, as with 'yellow room' and Beckett, provides a scenario for the observance of the absurdity of desire, a momentary relief; with Coleridge the voyage of the ship presents an image of the

compulsion of literary desire; and with the endlessly desiring gaze of the Byronic poet hero, a crisis about the reality of the lived or written life, as if writing oneself into the grave. Perhaps such a crisis may have given rise to the *cri de coeur* at the end of the later poem, 'Dark Fire': 'beyond ART & desire/ to where my eyes meet her eyes' (lines 139 - 140). The destructive search for the moment remains as compulsive as the Mariner's desire to tell his tale, but is unable to find his redemptive, reawakening outcome: 'A sadder and a wiser man,/ He rose the morrow morn' (lines 623 - 624).

### **'th lesson' and Blake:**

William Blake's short enigmatic poem, 'The Sick Rose,' speaks about when desire goes wrong. The poem never loses its enigma because the terms of the relationship between the 'Rose' and the 'invisible worm' are not established; we know only that the worm, 'That flies in the night/ In the howling storm' 'finds out' the Rose's 'bed/ Of crimson joy' and the result is that the worm's 'dark secret love' destroys the Rose's life (Blake, 'Rose,' lines 1 - 8). The destruction of joy by love is the enigma established in the poem's short compass; to be eaten by desire is to disappear.

Mitchell's poem 'th lesson' invokes 'The Sick Rose': '& on each petal/ of that rose// th slow worm lay/ soft curl'd.' The archaic orthographic form of the past participle and the inverted syntax may represent an attempt to sound poetic in some vaguely 'antique' sense (as in the faux Medievalism of the Gothic). 'th lesson' opens with the arrival of an 'attic' messenger accompanied by 'his sirens,' hinting at something Greek, and this messenger brings 'a heart' and it is from this heart that the Rose suddenly 'blew.' 'Blew' in itself is an arbitrary echo of Wordsworth's, 'To me the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears' (Wordsworth, p. 139, lines 197 - 198). No connection between the 'attic messenger' and the re-staging of 'The Sick Rose' is made, before suddenly our attention is drawn to a book which contains 'what Delphi told' (meaning, presumably Pythia, the Delphic oracle) and the poem fades, like an echo, with the oracle's news: 'th passing &/ th passing &// the passing of/ a world' (lines 22 and 23 - 26). It is not possible to know what world is indicated, whether the world of classical Athens or the world of Blake's poem. The desire to make a poem falters and dies and the carefully evoked

reference of Blake's poem, that begins life as a literary echo, grows enormous and appears to devour its precursor. The triple knell of a death - 'the passing & the passing & the passing' – hovers over the poem's victim. We might say that the evoked Blake poem has the poet by the throat and he is rendered speechless, 'taken,' so to speak, in all senses, literary, sexual and mortal. The poem has all but disappeared; it is there, but its existence is that of a corpse. That desire of the lyric I 'to tell what i/ must say' (lines 9 - 10), as 'th lesson' puts it, has found its fulfilment in the silence that comes after the overpowering encounter with allusiveness.

### **'street of early sorrows ship of 50s fools' and Belloc:**

Hilaire Belloc's 'Tarantella' must have been a gift to the Choral Speaking movement of the first half of the twentieth century. Belloc may have written it with such Verse Choirs in mind or he may have been inspired by the novelty and power of this way of presenting poetry. At primary school in the 1950s our class regularly gathered at the front of the classroom to recite en masse Vachel Lindsay or Charles Kingsley. We never did 'Tarantella' (arguably the poem's themes were a little too intriguing for 10 - 12 year olds). It is not inconceivable that Mitchell, at Teachers' Training College in Wellington at the beginning of the 1960s, might have had to conduct a choir of students, if he had not already recited it at Wellington College.

In its extended first 'half,' 'Tarantella' enacts, through its sound and rhythm qualities, the scene of a girl dancing a wild tarantella in an inn in Aragon in the Pyrenees: 'The girl gone chancing,/ glancing,/ dancing,/ backing and advancing' (Belloc, lines 19 - 22). To the description of the inn and the dance are added the lines, 'Do you remember an Inn,/ Miranda?' (lines 1 - 2), which are repeated 6 times in the first 28 lines of the poem, a fine challenge for any choral speaking group to play variations on. The final 12 lines (a briefer second 'half') write the epitaph on the passing of the world of the Inn and the Tarantella (each worthy of Germanic capitalisation in Belloc's composition): 'No sound/ In the walls of the Halls where falls/ The tread/ Of the feet of the dead to the ground' (lines 34 - 37). The moment has gone. The fine high time Miranda and the speaker of the poem had once had will come 'Never more' (line 29). Belloc's literary echo of Poe ('The Raven') is a nod to another poem built out of insistent rhythmic and verbal patterning.

Mitchell, in turn, nods to Belloc's 'Tarantella' in 'street of early sorrows ship of 50s fools,' a poem about first love and its forever lost magic: 'anna// do you have, in mind/ an inn?' (lines 122 - 124). Goethe, whose early novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) became a model text for Romanticism and the sufferings of first love for Romantic males, commented in his later autobiography, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth* (1811 - 1833), that 'The first love, it is rightly said, is the only one' (quoted in Nixon). Mitchell's poem, the 'Introduction' tells us, evokes youthful memories of his first love, Anna Mirams, who went overseas and found someone else ('y never did come back . . . you were leaving me the hard ship,' lines 65 and 67), so that the relationship lingers as a source of pain and some resentment many years later (it is not clear, but the editing suggests this poem is probably written close to 30 years later). The poem ends with a series of questions that seem to be crying out for a reawakening of the past (in contrast to the finality of Belloc's 'Never more'):

did you ever have a harbour  
like a dream like a find!  
like a street like an inn;  
anna did you ever have  
a ship in mind? (lines 230 - 234)

Belloc is not considered a significant or 'serious' writer now (or perhaps even then), however his work was connected to a strand of Modernism, which included writers and artists of more significance, and which continues today in modified ways, as for example in certain aspects of 'eco-poetics.' Belloc was a Distributist. Distributism was a political and artistic movement, like the earlier Arts and Crafts Movement from which it sprang. The Arts and Crafts Movement, in broadest terms, was essentially anti-industrial and for the revival of traditional craftsmanship, often drawing its imagery from Medieval or folk sources, while also promoting social and economic reform and experimental communities. Distributism went further and was more fundamentally conservative, advocating Medieval-style guilds and small yeoman-like

communities. It probably had greater political influence in the United States than in Great Britain, but its best-known artistic members were in England where G.K. Chesterton, Eric Gill and Hilaire Belloc formed an eccentric phalanx of Distributist Catholic intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. When Belloc was President of the Distributist League, along with Eric Gill, the other Vice-President was T.S. Eliot. At the heart of it was that dream of re-creating a golden age community from the past in the future. In relation to the terms of the community of the dramatic collaboration and the opposed solitude of the lyric voice, it is singular to come across, in Mitchell's poem 'la condition humaine (man's estate)' (pp. 231 - 232), a vision of community and collaboration: 'here's balance & possession & economy/ . . . here's harmony & logic & enchantment/ here's algebra & opera & plainsong' (lines 32 and 37 - 38). The kitchen garden politics and village green entertainment could come from a Distributist tract. But by the end of the poem this vision turns back on itself as the poet casts himself out of his communal paradise:

& who would not live long here in mount eden  
& close his heart & mind & balls & face  
praise god; the Baptist church & television  
& protect our real estate; this lovely place (lines 51 - 54)

### **a conclusion and . . .**

When Mitchell abandons the communal for the lonely lyric voyage, he makes a choice that clarifies a preoccupation of his writing. Mitchell's poetry, like Eric Gill's sculpture and typography, is neither iconoclastic nor radical in that way that, in Modernism, the cacophonous communalisms of Dada or the Surrealists or the various Futurists were. There is confusion in *Steal Away Boy's* 'Introduction' between artistic movements and a bohemian lifestyle. Eric Gill may have been an anti-industrial Catholic Modernist, but his lifestyle was arguably more bohemian than F.T. Marinetti's or Tristan Tzara's or André Breton's. Mitchell also lived a bohemian lifestyle, but that does not tell us anything per se about his artistic practice. Mitchell's practice shows him to be a Romantic Modernist, drawing on Romantic literary sources, and, far

from being an untutored natural genius, Mitchell emerges as quite opposite to Ian Wedde's description in the 'Introduction' ('a timely poet, an exceptional and original talent around which poetry swung into a different dance,' p.19). Rather we have a writer persistently referencing the literature of Romanticism and Romantic Modernism, sometimes to the point that this allusiveness exhibits an anxiety about influence that resembles a death drive. The 'Introduction' tends to promote a version of the Romantic myth of untutored individual genius at the expense of reading the work for what is actually there in the writing and, in doing so – ironically, since this Romantic myth hides the Romantic practice - ignores the influence of Romantic and Modernist texts on the poetry.

### **. . . an afterword: The Voyage of the Work**

*Steal Away Boy* contains 66 poems that have been selected, the 'Note on the text' (*Steal*, pp. 251 - 252) tells us, from a substantial manuscript collection covering the years from 1957 to 1994, a 37 year long voyage of writing. The poems are not dated, but the ordering is broadly chronological, divided into seven sections. The first three of these sections, containing just 16 poems, cover the period up to the publication of Mitchell's only book prior to this one, *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* (1972). Five of these poems were published in magazine or chapbook form in 1969 or 1970, very close to the publication of *Pipe Dreams*. The last three sections, covering a period from 1972 to 1994, contain 32 poems, though one of these, 'yellow room,' was also published in *Pipe Dreams*. At the centre and heart of the collection, a section unto itself, 18 of the 38 poems from *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* have been republished. The editors note that Mitchell wrote 26 poems in 1971 (*Steal*, p. 251). Even 'night through the orange window,' first published in *Argot* in May 1963, was put through the compressor for *Pipe Dreams* and came out as the 40-line 'white room' rather than the 139-line original. The period after *Pipe Dreams* is described as a 'period of doubt and uncertainty' (*Steal*, p. 26), culminating in Mitchell burning a quantity of manuscripts. And thereafter Mitchell's productivity dwindles, doubtless at some point due to the onset of supranuclear palsy. The overall effect of this selection and its structuring is to put greatest store on the poetry in *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby*. That work occupies a central high ground in a

voyage that begins with a slow and fragile apprenticeship and declines through doubt and uncertainty towards, ultimately, silence.

Because *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* is of such import to the whole oeuvre represented by this book, it is worth considering the circumstances surrounding the publication of that book. Stephen Chan undertook the editorship of that volume and set up his own publishing house, The Association of Orientally Flavoured Syndics (which never published anything else), to publish the book. In the 'Introduction,' Stephen Chan notes that the poems in *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* 'were reworked or, in some cases, written anew . . . the final manuscript was better than anything I had expected' (*Steal*, p. 18). Around the same time that Chan was editing *Pipe Dreams*, in the years from 1969 - 1972, Mitchell published poems in a Poets Co-operative chapbook edited by fellow poet Mark Young and in the magazine *Love/juice* also from the Poets Co-operative; in *The Word is Freed* edited by Alan Brunton, by myself and by Russell Haley; in *Argot* magazine out of Victoria University; in the New Zealand Students' Association *Arts Festival Literary Yearbooks* edited by Arthur Baysting and by Stephen Chan. In terms of the discussion of individual poems above, we can note that over this period (1969 - 1972) Mitchell was part of a community of poets, and that the poems from that time went through the collaborative process of editorial scrutiny and feedback. Chan's comments point to how Mitchell's work benefitted from that editorial feedback.

This point can be extended further to say that round that period Mitchell was no longer alone, all alone on a wide, wide sea. By one means or another the drama of community had come to him or he had come to it. The poetic activity of that time existed in an era without Festivals (apart from the Students' Arts Festivals) and without Readers and Writers Weeks, which meant that writing and the arts in general were vastly under-served compared to what is available today. Nevertheless, it was a graced time for poetry. Contrary to the claims of the 'Introduction' (see p. 19) that a poetry book that was bought and read was unusual, there was an excitement about poetry and poets in the years from 1968 to 1975. James K. Baxter and Sam Hunt locally were sufficiently widely read and public enough figures that you might read about them in the newspaper or see them on television. Alister Taylor's hip populist publishing house (*The Little Red Schoolbook* [1972], *Down Under the Plum Trees* [1976], the *New Zealand Whole Earth*

*Catalogues* [1972, 1975, 1977]) saw fit to include such poets as Hunt (*From Bottle Creek*, 1972) and Elizabeth Smither (*Here Come the Clouds*, 1975) in its list. But the graced time extended beyond New Zealand (and back to New Zealand). Poetry readings, such as they were, ceased to be solemn occasions of the cultural elite, and became part of the activity of a wider anti-establishment movement. One might recall Anne Sexton touring with a rock band, to evoke something of the new-found integration of the poetry reading. One might also recall W.H. Auden's horrified recoil from Sexton reading at the Albert Hall in 1965 and note that the transformation of the poetry reading did not carry with it all literary subscribers, though it gained other new subscribers – this split brings us back to Karl Stead's desire to claim Mitchell's work as having 'a traditional heart.'

It is not apparent from the story told in the 'Introduction' that after 1972 Mitchell again received consistent input from a literary community. This loss is evident in the selection of poems in *Steal Away Boy*. The poetry readings he organised at the Globe pub at the beginning of the 1980s gave him an audience and a venue, but not a critical looping back into his own work, not a collaborative call and response. As we have seen, his poems often call out for that response, sometimes to the point of trying to bury themselves alive in that response. The evidence of this selection is that Mitchell's encounter with community in the years from 1969 to 1972 was beneficial to his writing, culminating in the single volume, *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby*. After that, while he was still actively engaged in writing, Mitchell's poetry never again received the double benefit of an editorial presence and an active and progressive literary community that challenged and enhanced his practice.

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