

‘I Am a Chthonic Poet’: Fay Zwicky and the Writing under the Writing

LUCY DOUGAN
Curtin University

Dorothy Green Lecture, ASAL, 2019

(I)

It is important for me to be standing here on this particular day because I feel like it is a kind of bridge. By a strange and wonderful piece of happenstance, today—July 3rd—lies between Fay’s birth date on 4 July 1933 (an auspicious date for an Americanist to have come into the world) and the date she died—2 July 2017. And I am going to be thinking about bridges today—bridges between what is on the public record and what is hidden, bridges between poetry and prose, bridges between interiority (the buried life of the imagination) and the artifact (what surfaces from that imagination), bridges from one writer’s (or artist’s) work to another, and bridges between the living and the dead.

Let me start with something Fay said to her son Karl Zwicky shortly before she died—it was just a few days before, and Karl was struck by it and recounted it in his eulogy at Fay’s funeral. She told him that she thought of herself as a chthonic poet. Of course, someone like Fay perhaps might be expected to say something like that on her death bed. And one can never really be sure about such pronouncements: are they closer to the truth because we need them to be? Aren’t they just self-dramatising? Isn’t their power part of the power of last things? Maybe, but that word chthonic struck me as it struck him—as an important clue to something.

But what? Death calls for grand summative gestures like these at a time of maximum emotional chaos, and for a long time my thoughts about Fay’s anointment of herself as a chthonic poet were inchoate; and what I felt about it was, quite frankly, a bit wary. That’s because chthonic is one of those big bardic words that can be intimidating—yet, at its worst, also self-aggrandising. And it also seemed at the same time old-fashioned, somehow belonging to another time and place, another realm—because it did: the one between life and death. Fay wasn’t given to big statements like this about her practice. If anything, she used to play all of that down. Take for instance the statement ‘now and again I write a poem’ (Digby 87) versus ‘I am a chthonic poet.’

Anyway, I let it rest: after the intense work of putting Fay’s *Collected Poems* together, with Tim Dolin, in the last months of Fay’s life, I had to let everything go for a while. But it has stayed with me, that strange Greek word with its mouthful of consonants—or rather it has stayed somewhere close by but just out of reach of me, and I’ve been stumbling as I try to follow it and understand what Fay might have meant, feeling that odd sense of excitement that shadowy things—hidden things—can incite, keeping us feeling alive and in touch with what drives us.

More than anything, it all felt a bit like a visitation from the dead: it manifested itself as a kind of acutely remembered *atmosphere* of Fay-ness: knowing her, her work, little things she

had said, as well as the experience of being with her in her home with her books and possessions, especially in the last years of her life: a day of the dead skull, a fox in a suit, a ghost dog called Muscha.

To me, she had a tremendous vitality, a penetrating eye, a sharp tongue: she could be satiric, obstinate, fractious, sometimes unforgiving, but she had a deep sense of propriety and decency. She also had a wonderful infectious laugh and loved silliness; she was caring and tender, and relished talk, about anything, and valued friendship. She was, too, vulnerable, and sometimes fretful about life, family, poetry, her own poetry, and her reputation as a poet.

Chthonic: I remembered, before anything else, the conversations we had about what it meant to sustain a creative practice as a working mother—as she had done. She had called that time subterranean. When she had launched my book, *The Guardians*, in 2015 she framed her reading of it around notions of underworlds, particularly in relation to times of serious illness or times of heavy care loads, and what these might afford a writer. After evoking the myth of Persephone and Demeter, Fay stated that

[l]iving a subterranean life can prove a fertile seedbed . . . The notion of guardianship of the earth and all its creatures comes to be linked with the low-key heroism of female survival and the love of living and living creatures. This is the pervasive theme . . . ('Guardians' np)

How is it that the most important parts of one's life are also for years almost completely hidden? For Fay to identify herself as a chthonic poet then, for me, raised feelings that I'd almost call primal about my own life as a poet and as a mother.

It was just the sense I've often had that making poems—in which my felt and lived experience gets weirdly and not always consciously mixed up with my experience of language, my experience of poetic cultures and traditions, everyday cultures and traditions, family legends, and so much more besides—is not completely of this world. (I want to get to the notion of a certain kind of poet not being wholly of this world, via Rilke, a little later on.) Poets often have to 'go underground' to find poems, and poems so often emerge (for me at least) out of experiences, like early motherhood, that can be isolating, alienating, lonely—that can sometimes feel like an underworld of a kind. Poetry does—and Fay's poetry certainly does—have an enduring interest in poems as offerings to, propitiations of, chthonic powers; as enactments of, or forms of, journeys to the underworld; and in poetry as a chthonic practice.

These poetic interests reflect a wider cultural interest Fay had in the underworld: this is traceable, especially through certain preoccupations she had as she approached death. These included her love of Sibelius's *The Swan of Tuonela* (played at her funeral), a story from Finnish underworld mythology; along with her friendship with and love of the supernatural ballads of the pre-Beat Scottish-American poet and collagist Helen Adam. I would also place her attachment to Robin Robertson there for similar reasons.

But long before her death this attachment to the chthonic is a thread running through both her poetry and her journals. It is most strikingly evident in her best known poem 'Kaddish' (*Poems* 93–99), a thanksgiving offered to her father's memory and an incantatory excavation of both her parents in which the powerful mother figure is evoked as:

. . . mother of thunder, mother of trees, mother of lakes,
Secret springs, gate to the underworld, vessel of darkness (95)

It is also apparent in her professed love of Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*:

Orphée was so beautiful at that time (1949), there wasn't much beauty around then. I loved French films because they had life and energy—Attends, poète!
Trying to dredge back the lost beauty from the underworld. (*Journals* 655¹)

Just as Fay told me of subterranean experience and its potency, she also told me that everything in life is interconnected and that when things recur or return, to listen, to attend, to wait. There is almost a motif in the journals of day as prose and poetry as night (589). And there are certainly many instances in which a poet is figured as a passive recorder or receiver attuned to everything going on beneath, such as a seismograph (*Journals* 719).

Fay's attachment to her journal-keeping practice was not quite like the attachment Jean Marais's character has to the cryptic car-radio broadcasts from the underworld in *Orphée*. It excited her creatively, but it also grounded her. Often when I visited her after a period of clearly intense writing in a particular volume, Fay would dispense with small talk, offers of tea or coffee, and settle straight into a reading from latest dispatches. The journal itself is rather like a private radio channel: a charged underground network of voices, ideas, images, and reflections. In this writing under the writing, one can trace the buried coordinates of poems.

I want to think more about that now by turning to the journals and figuring them as the new space in which, after the end of her academic career, she continues to have the conversations that she needs to have, conversations that sustain both her selfhood and her creative practice. In fact, I would like to posit that the journals—this remarkable document kept from 1975 until 2017—become for her a kind of alternative or underground university significantly increasing in importance after her retirement.

From the time I met Fay in 2002 until just before the decision to embark on her *Collected Poems*, it was the journals that she truly wanted to put on the public record. Some extracts have been published in *Southerly*, *HEAT*, *Cordite*, *Axon* and *Westerly*. A significant turning point for Fay in this desire to get them into the light was a throwaway remark that Tim Burstall made in his book *Memoirs of a Young Bastard*. Seeing Fay perform as a classical concert pianist (her first training and vocation), Burstall simply says '[s]he wasn't really good but she wasn't bad' (187). Imagine that, imagine the graft of years and years of the training it takes to get to the level at which you can perform a repertoire as a concert pianist and someone with whom you are deeply in love says . . . she wasn't really good. It's a bit of a spur to action, to put it mildly. When this statement finds Fay a long way in the future from the event that engendered it—it's the journals that are the fight back, the banked-on vehicle that can attest to the very opposite: the fact that she did have what it took. She invested much in them and they became the platform for her creative life's work

I have been calling them the journals (in the plural) but this is a single continuous work of life-writing—the record of a socially engaged poet's life in time—in which the dialogue of the mind with itself is carried on as an intimate form of table-talk—a wide-ranging, urbane conversation that sustained Fay at a time when she was beginning to feel increasingly

emotionally and intellectually alienated. ‘The world I came from is getting more and more distant, it has practically vanished,’ she wrote in 1995 (*Journals* 1000), and again in 2001:

As time goes on, you reach the point where you know you’re in a rather precarious state yourself. You become more in touch with your own weakness, vulnerability and the poems seem to turn on that feeling that it’s all about to end, a feeling of impending disaster, of personal disappointment, of late acknowledged bewilderment. (*Journals* 2148–49)

The journals are *a writing under the writing*, then, in the sense that ideas, images, and phrases are passed through it, worked on and refined, on their way to becoming poems—the notebooks are not so much a quarry as a mill—a reflection on the writing that lies under and sustains the writing life.

Fay’s journal-keeping represents a kind of witnessing. Her entries constantly rehearse interactions between the past and the present; between reaction and withdrawal; and between speaking up or staying silent—until they come to rest at a point of being able to pick up and go on. There are recurring cycles of crisis that ultimately favour a cathartic action and survival as an artist. I think that both this sense of being open to vulnerability as a poet (even when that is hard and there is resistance to it), and witnessing as a poet (the two are interconnected), link Fay’s work and the project of the journals to one of the perennial ways of thinking about the role of the poet. For her, poetry is unquestionably an Orphic vocation: ‘the journey is inward, not out’ (*Journals* 794) and the poet is has no option but to get down and dirty with the shades. It may seem at first a predictable and over-subscribed way of thinking about the role of a poet, but it has a strong lineage in which the poet’s individual voice is subdued as they take their place in an unbroken line of predecessors and successors, and take up a long ongoing conversation with the living and the dead. Ivor Indyk suggests that Fay imported from her classical training in music a Romantic conception of being an artist (‘Limits’ np). I certainly agree.

(II)

I want to consider now the endpapers of the old Everyman’s Library with its figure of Knowledge; and also the frontispiece to an edition of *Smith’s Classical Dictionary* featuring an image of Charon (Smith 109; Fig 1). Fay describes this image in a note to her poem of the same name:

I learnt first about Charon from Dr Smith’s Smaller Classical Dictionary (1868 edition), a gift from my mother . . . Living like a dinosaur without computer, the Internet, Google, Facebook, Twitter etc., I still have this faded brown canvas-textured hardback found in Hall’s second-hand bookshop in Prahran, my name and address proudly inscribed at the age of ten on its marbled frontispiece. An embossed silhouette of Charon copied from a Roman lamp adorns the cover. (‘Charon’ np)

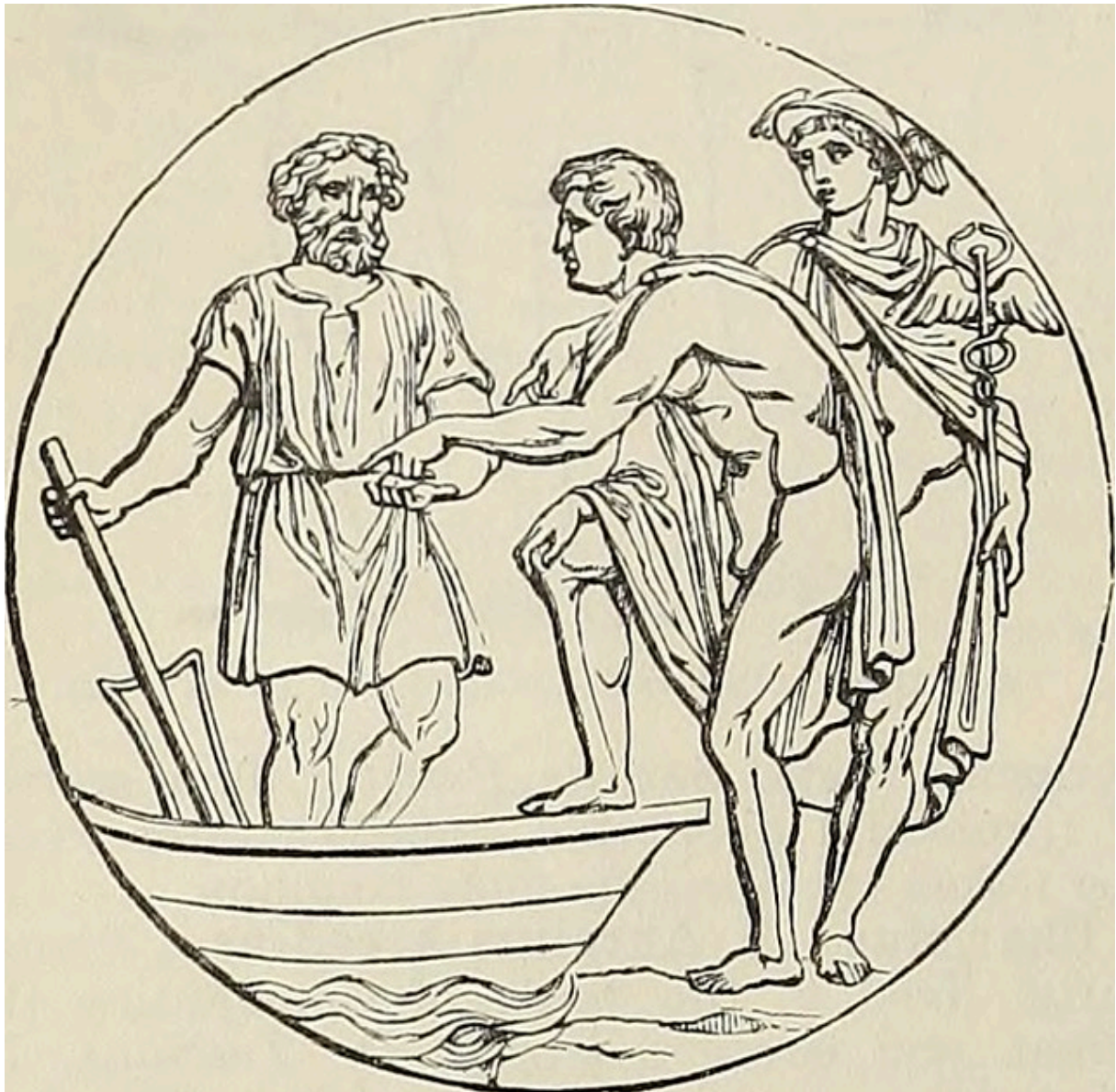


Fig 1. Charon, from William Smith, *A Smaller Classical Dictionary*.
(London: John Murray, 1868: 109).

I put these two images together because the connection Fay makes between Charon and the material book reminded me strongly of a similar connection that Margaret Atwood makes between the iconic Everyman endpapers, which show the figure of Knowledge who accompanies Everyman to the grave, and the idea that all writing (and reading) is ultimately a negotiation with the dead. In her book *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood asserts ‘all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality’ (156). And later she goes on:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. (178)

Atwood inevitably invokes Rilke’s ‘Sonnets to Orpheus,’ an important text for Fay, where the underworld journey is the defining condition of being a poet. The journey must be

undertaken, it is necessary. The poet—for whom Orpheus is the exemplary model—is the one who can bring the knowledge held by the Underworld back to the land of the living, and who can then give us, the readers, the benefit of this knowledge. ‘Is he of this world? No, he gets / his large nature from both realms,’ says Rilke of the Orpheus poet in Sonnet 6 (Part I 13).

Similarly in his survey of underworld journeys in modern poetry, Michael Thurston argues that ‘the utility of the Underworld descent for modern poets ought to be obvious. . . the descent and the invocation—have at their hearts the contemplation of tradition itself’ (10). For Rachel Falconer, ‘*katabatic* narratives offers contemporary writers a positive structure for representing the process by which a self is created out of adversity’ (5).

In Fay’s statement about her poem, there is a division between two worlds: new technologies versus the faded brown cloth-board hardback. The material existence of the book lovingly and exactly described has more life in it (for her) than a whole cultural turn she does not understand—to which she can find no bridge.

In the poem ‘Charon’ (*Poems* 382–83) there is a charge between masking and unmasking. In the first stanza we are in a somewhat grim (deaths, soldier ants) but otherwise ordinary suburban day until ‘and yet (the strand of memory unscrolls)’ (382). The bracketing here alerts us to not only a temporal change but also a change of mode. It simultaneously evokes a skein falling between ordinary life and performance (a long-ago school play) and the sense in which memory in this poem is created via a metaphor of a material text—the scroll.

The register changes abruptly from its suburban setting to Charon’s voice calmly demanding his fee in Latin. In a common Fay poem move, the gravity of the Latin is swiftly undercut with a comic description:

Beatrice Short, BA Hons.
ramming a rolled-up map of
Imperium Romanum into poor dyslexic
Margot Dumbrell’s rib cage. (382)

The scroll of memory activates into a comic map (implement of school room torture—both the physical rolled up object and no doubt Latin itself) but it keeps unscrolling to the pivotal opening line of the next stanza: ‘our fathers were at war’ (382). Much is achieved with this quiet, flat and unadorned statement. Our fathers were at war and we were play-acting. Our fathers were at war and here is real death . . . here is the bridge back to Charon ‘a grubby bugger meanly clad / in our abridged Aeneid’ (382): (abridged and a bridge) between times and selves.

In the last three stanzas of ‘Charon’ the interplay between memory, identity and the sense of the material presence of printed text gathers in strength and complexity. The poet recalls that her mother would have preferred her to play ‘a prettier role’ like Persephone but the child ‘was dark and death-drawn early’ (383).

Part of the allure of the ferryman is related to a dynastic proverb: ‘Have it but pay for it,’ connecting to the coin that Charon demands and also to funerary rites of covering the eyes with pennies. The words ‘rub,’ ‘graven’ and ‘stubborn head’ resound off one another to suggest a mixture perhaps of coins themselves, engravings, rubbings, and finally the kind of engraving one might find in an edition of a classical text.

There is a lot of bravura in this poem, an armour of learning. But there is also ultimately an unmasking, with ‘nothing grasped between this world / and the next’ (383). The tonal change in the last stanza of ‘Charon’ leaves the reader in an ambiguous space. The voice has not quite returned to the ordinary day but nor has it completely left its world of classical allusions: ‘there’s water between us, I’m here / on the bank’ (383) The poem’s final destination is the word face which lends its ending a sense of both facing up to things and being, again, unmasked. ‘Charon’ is not just a display of cultural capital. It is an ongoing struggle with something terrifying and real.

I want finally to turn to the case of a poem that arises directly from the journal—that writing under the writing. I have entered it only at discrete points. Midway . . . because ‘midway through this life’ etc etc. I also entered it just after 9/11 and by doing so I fell upon the entries that reveal how Fay moved towards her anti-war poem, ‘The Young Men’ (*Poems* 305).

Dense associative strands of reading, thinking, watching, listening and living go into the making of this poem and I can only briefly gesture at those here. The poem is a *nekyia* in which the dead speak to the poet in her dream. Via dream logic, the poem tells the poet to keep doing what she does, to listen and to bear witness even when she feels she has reached a point of profound cultural alienation:

. . . Tonight maybe your book and candle,
 night light burning infantile, shoes tucked
 beneath will douse your eyelids closed
 with ash . . . (305)

How hard—can you imagine how hard that must have been? It is a hard shape for which all writers eventually have to find the words or as Fay puts it in her journal: ‘a kind of cultural lament for what has been lost’ (*Journals* 2149). It is a very ‘Gutenberg Elegies’ moment that informs this poem: ‘I devoted most of my life to literature and have reached a point that we’ve lost whatever it was we set out to achieve’ (*Journals* 2149). Fay writes that she ‘feels like a bursting cemetery speaking to ghosts’ (*Journals* 2151).

This ‘bursting cemeteries’ passage leads her to two poets she admires: Yehuda Amichai and Wilfred Owen. They are evoked for very clear reasons as vulnerable poet-witnesses and as artists who shun poeticisms and sentimentality. ‘The Young Men’ echoes Owen’s own *nekyia*, the poem ‘Strange Meeting,’ in which a living soldier meets the ghost of an enemy he has killed only to be told: ‘whatever hope is yours / was my life also’ (Owen 35). In Fay’s poem this is echoed in the line ‘our dreams were yours’ (*Poems* 305).

But what truly shakes this poem out in the real time of the journal is Fay going to see Denys Arcand’s film *The Barbarian Invasions* (which now seems a very dated and problematic film in many ways). She must have seen it quite soon after its release on the 1st of April, 2004, because by April 12 the draft of the poem appears. She called Arcand’s film ‘very close to the mortality bone’ (*Journals* 2180).

The Barbarian Invasions comes to mean so much to Fay, becomes, in fact, entirely emblematic of the times and her own personal experiences in this period of her life: hospitalisation, fear of loss, fear of loss of intellectual tradition, fear that the world she knows is passing, is beyond recognition. Fay is dealing with a very fraught intersection: the height of her expressive powers (late poems) coincides with an experience of profound cultural and

intellectual alienation. I have a strong hunch that the moral beauty of the son (the character Sebastien) in this film motivates the poem ‘The Young Men.’ At one point in the film, a character exclaims to Sebastien, ‘you perfect young man!’ That last line of the poem—‘young men, you dear young men, I’m listening’—the surprise of it and the force of its maternal tenderness—is the line she is happiest with in the draft (*Journals* 2182).

As a coda I want to talk briefly about Fay’s poem ‘Aceh’ written several years after ‘The Young Men.’ In the early weeks of 2005, in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Fay was invited as one of WA’s ‘Living Treasures’ (a status she felt ambivalent about) to write a public poem about the disaster, and to read it at the opening of the Perth International Arts Festival. She declined. It was too soon, she thought. This was ‘not a time for poems’ (*Poems* 304)—was it? She changed her mind and wrote ‘Aceh,’ a poem that is poetically unadorned and rhetorically urgent, and intent on letting ‘silence speak’ (304). In keeping with these sentiments, Fay held to her resolve not to read it herself. It was only because an SBS sound recordist was in the audience by chance, and captured the reading, that it found its way back to her, and she heard it for the first time, as if it had truly come out of the silence. People were indeed listening despite all her sense of loss, all her fears and also her reservations about technology. This is close perhaps to the gentle irony in *The Barbarian Invasions* of Sebastien’s mastery of the world (both in terms of earning power and technological skill—the very things his dying father, dismissed historian Remy, derides) delivering Remy a blessed death and the chance to see his daughter one last time via video link.

Fay identified with the statue *The Caller* by Gerhard Marcks, a work inspired by witnessing a person calling across the river to a ferryman. Of it she wrote:

The mouth yawns open and stays tight and wide like a Greek tragic mask. Poets in this country are excrescent. You can say what you like because nobody listens. Or maybe ‘hears’ is the correct word. (*Journals* 710)

I am still getting used to Fay being an archive and not a living being. I am still trying to bridge that space. I’m cupping my hands and calling across the river too. Close by to here, I think of her words about the Swan: ‘that great consoling stretch of water’ (‘Neither’ 155). Living and dead, poets teach other poets how to be poets. How to wait in that long queue. I am still trying to tune in and listen (or hear) as best I can.

I am indebted to Karl Zwicky, Fay’s son and Literary Executor, for his kind permission to quote from Fay’s work; to Anna Quick, Fay’s daughter, for her astute and gracious comments on this piece; and to my friend Peter Bryant for helping me to locate the image of Charon in *Dr Smith’s Smaller Classical Dictionary*. A version of the discussion of Fay’s poem ‘Aceh’ previously appeared in Zwicky and Dougan ‘Crawling.’

NOTES

¹ The unpublished Journals are held with the Zwicky papers in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, where at the time of writing they have not yet been added to the Library’s online catalogue. Comprising thirteen exercise books and spiral-bound notebooks, they cover the years 1975–2017. Fay added continuous pagination, although she mispaginates a number of the later volumes.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- The Barbarian Invasions*. Dir. Denys Arcand. Perf. Rémy Girard, Stéphane Rousseau and Marie-Josée Croze. Pyramide (France), Miramax (US), 2003.
- Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. London: Faber, 1994.
- Burstall, Tim. *Memoirs of a Young Bastard: The Diaries of Tim Burstall*. Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2012.
- Digby, Jenny. *A Woman's Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1996.
- Falconer, Rachel. *Hell in Contemporary Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- Indyk, Ivor. 'Fay Zwicky and the Limits of Scorn.' Parramatta, 2017. *Writing and Society Research Centre*.
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/writing_and_society/events/writing_and_society_seminars/2017_seminars2/ivor_indyk_on_fay_zwicky_and_the_limits_of_scorn
- Owen, Wilfred. *The War Poems of Wilfred Owen*. Ed. John Stallworthy. London: Chatto and Windus, 1994. 35–36.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 'Ist er ein Hiesiger?': *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Trans. David Young. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1987, 12–13.
- Smith, William. *A Smaller Classical Dictionary*. London: John Murray, 1868.
- Thurston, Michael. *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Zwicky, Fay. 'A Writer's Journal: February 1992 – August 1993.' *Southerly* 54.3 (1994): 6–30.
- Zwicky, Fay. 'Journal 2004–2005.' *HEAT* 12 ns (2006): 209–34.
- Zwicky, Fay and Lucy Dougan. 'Crawling Across Tram Tracks: Extracts from Volumes 5 and 6 of Fay Zwicky's Journal.' *Cordite Poetry Review* (2014).
<http://cordite.org.au/essays/crawling-across-tram-tracks/>
- Zwicky, Fay and Lucy Dougan. 'Plain Speech: Extracts from Fay Zwicky's Journals.' *Axon: Creative Explorations* 5.2 (2015). <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/author/fay-zwicky-and-lucy-dougan>
- Zwicky, Fay and Lucy Dougan. 'Ambushed by Hope: Extracts from Fay Zwicky's Journal.' *Westerly* 62.1 (2017): 19–27.
- Zwicky, Fay. 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep.' *Lines in the Sand: New Writing from Western Australia*. Eds. Glen Phillips and Julianne van Loon. Swanbourne: Fellowship of Australian Writers Western Australia, 2008. 153–56.
- Zwicky, Fay. 'Reflections on "Charon."' Southbank, 2013. *Australian Book Review*.
<https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2013/100-may-2013-no-351/1457-charon>
- Zwicky, Fay. 'Lucy Dougan's "The Guardians."' Crawley, 2015. *Westerly*.
<https://westerlymag.com.au/lucy-dougans-the-guardians/>
- Zwicky, Fay. *The Collected Poems of Fay Zwicky*. Eds. Lucy Dougan and Tim Dolin. Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2017.