

## The Case of THE CASE: A Future Summary of Jonglian Poetry, Using Fictional Devices

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You're in the asylum. You're inventing the arse out of Australian poetry. With a brainwave from Baudelaire you hushed Harpur down a sidestreet. 'GO MY TENT,' you say, 'LET MEDICINE POISON MY.' You gave Brennan his Chinese grounding. He was too hung up on distribution, reputation, and leaving experiments for his biographer to find. It's easy to distribute one book, you said, 'MY EASY DISTRIBUTE BOOK MY.'

There would be no 'SHOUTING' but for you. The first giant comma discovered by archivists is yours too. The triple and the quadruple hyphen – yours. There would be no bell-shapes in Slessor but for you: his poem would fall apart into words. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is your American tribute. In 1865 the next poet after you was still mucking in the river. The Irish were in the wilderness, in an English theme park called Hell; they had rather be Chinese-Irish than British.

The Aboriginal branch (that is, trunk) held out for the German and French: if we have to be European, at least let's be sophisticated about it, they reckoned: cushion the blow. They could have been Chinese ... Non-Indigenous poets from then on took the English language, but left English poetry alone. It's perhaps lucky you said 'MY ENGLISH FRIEND.' A song turned up at one point about Shakespeare being Aboriginal; flying an Aboriginal plane.

The British tried to teach Tennyson in the schools. The students put on snoring demonstrations. The Chinese folk tradition had become too strong: the minister capitulated. You did this. You were a 'construction start' machine with your own language. While novelists jumped on the typewriter, later the word processor, poets held out for scanners. Many made just one book. Before scanning there would be queues at the State Libraries going down the street.

But this was all in the future. You made it with just one book, *THE CASE*. You put the room plans in, the maps. We read poetry with this splacing now. We probably wouldn't have the word 'splacing' but for you. 'CRANKEY NONSENSE' might be pejorative if not for you. (You let Ned Kelly have the sentence, that unlovely thing. 'SENTENCE DONE ALREADY MY,' you said.) 'SOUND VISION +,' you said. Bowie agreed. We learnt Cantonese syntax from you. We Girl became 'WE WOMAN WE MAN,' in Judith Wright.

The doctor comes in and sees you making history. He torments you, he wants to be in history. He is always spelling his name, but you don't write his name. Even on the outside you knew you

would become Jong Ah Sing – you told the police and the judges: ‘POETRY LAW MY.’ And soon enough came Lawson, saying ‘WATTLE STAIN BLOOD YOU,’ and Paterson, chorusing, ‘MATILDA WALTZING MY.’

But these two were too much tune and rhetoric. Your true descendent was Jong Shaw Neilson. Jong Shaw, of Scots Objectivist descent, believed poetry could be created from a dialogue between Jongian-Australian and English tradition. He didn’t see why Tennyson had to be turned into ‘the other.’ In vernacular parlance, The Other meant Tennyson for quite some time. Though he had no such struggle himself, Neilson saw weaker poets – virtual sticks really – struggle with the production of a tradition (of Jongianism) only decades old. Yet he saw that this tradition gave Australian poets an advantage over other English speaking countries that had succumbed to the lure of newspaper English. Readers of newspapers in other countries would protest at the use of this language being used in poems. ‘What’s the story?!’ they’d cry. ‘Editorialise at least!’ they would add. Australian poetry, being written in Jongian-Australian – or Jonglian – didn’t have to have these confrontations – that apparently could be traumatic for some. Readers came to Australian poetry as a relief from the bun-coloured realism of the papers. For the pleasure of listening to reams of Jonglian.

Everyone knows the history of course. But familiarity can lead to complacency; complacency to viciousness. Consider Jong Shaw Neilson’s poems, and how he introduced colour into Australian poetry – we take it for granted now – and even think of black and white poetry as being kind of cool – but it was actually a revolution: one that paid homage to the tradition. In Neilson’s poem ‘BLUE CRANE NEIGHBOUR MY,’ Neilson graphically mapped the territory that was his, and the territory that was the crane’s. Like Lawson and Paterson he’d learned from you: the personal – the ‘MY’ – goes last. But it came close to religion in Neilson. And when it came to writing about the land – the ‘LAND MY’ – it came close to the Indigenous for a moment.

Neilson was not the first post-Jongian poet to use maps. Paterson decorated the edges – in a Beardsleyan style – of ‘SNOWY RIVER MAN GO’ with a rough sketch (rough in terms of accuracy I mean, not style) of the Snowy River country where the Man came from. (It’s hard to believe there was just one copy in the State Library for decades – that people would drive for hours from the bush to come and see – when it’s now reprinted in every schoolchild’s ‘POETRY MY’ reader). The deviation from the actual place of the poem goes unnoticed: that is, Paterson had mapped where the Man came from, and not where he ‘GO,’ and famously inked in a black shape in the centre of ‘MATILDA WALTZING MY’ to represent a billabong.

Most take it for granted now, but Gilmore’s ‘NATIONALBREADITY,’ which traced a map of Australia as a high-tin loaf, was thought most odd at the time, with its off-cut Tassie. Even now, hardcore Jonglians maintain that Australia most resembles a bag of rice. Neilson – though he brought mapping practice back to the local – took the radical step of making his map blue. It was Neilson himself who modestly pointed out that Jong had no access to coloured inks in Yarra Bend Asylum. Critics still argue over whether this colouring was a progressive or reactionary move; those of the latter position saying, that by colouring the representation of place, Neilson established a separation between the representation and the black and white text – simplified by some as an alienation: of place from language. This debate obscures Neilson’s achievement in making the crane present in the poem in a new way. Similarly, in his orange-coloured orchard map, Neilson brought the tree and its fruit to the page, assisting the admittedly powerful

language, with its Buddhist-like injunction: ‘LISTEN MY LIKE ORANGE TREE.’

Ah Sing, you’re just text now. Moving through the bloodstream like a ripe strawberry runner. You’re the Chinese life force of Australian poetry. Today it seems natural, though few of us speak Chinese; but in private, in the poetry groups that meet in the northern suburbs, and the larger towns, a form of Jonglian is also spoken. And this speaking feeds the latest poetry. A minority of poets remain, that say English is not just for newspapers, that English poetry proves this. They walk out of their cowshed highrises in stanzaic dimensions quoting this or that British poet. They even try to get the Aboriginal poets to form a coalition, but the Aboriginal poets write poems in French and German about flying planes: like Baudelaire, like Goethe.

At the Sydney Olympics the world of Jong finally reached the rest of the Chinese and non-Chinese world. Dancers reenacted the knife fight over the black hen: that resulted in the ancestor of Australian poetry’s asylum sentence – that is, your sentence. The dancers remote-operated toy planes that spelt out words in the distinctive Jonglian mode: ‘GO COUNTRY MY’ and ‘NEXT MY GO HIM BUTCHERSHOP BUY SUET.’ This performance blew the Chinese Chinese poet Ouyang Yu’s mind. He followed the first line, ‘GO COUNTRY MY’ and decided to leave China, but he had no idea what the second one meant. The GUIDE TO THE JONGLIAN POETRY OF AUSTRALIA in his aeroplane seat pocket, explained that suet was a dearly symbolic substance to Australian poets, and that each year at the poetry festivals, the symbolic knife fight was reenacted over an icecream container of suet, and that there were yearly competitions sponsored by butchershops to write the best ‘suet poem.’ (Chinese Australian restaurants always offer suet on the menu, but it’s a faux pas to order it: it won’t actually be served.)

Was this your ideal – how it turned out? Was this your way of getting out of the asylum? Couldn’t you have entered the doctor’s soul and become the William Carlos Williams of Australian poetry – instead of the page-yawping Walt Whitman? There is no such thing as silence, John Cage said, and he wasn’t even in an asylum. Your maps of the goldfields, your diagram of the asylum layout, belie the concept of space in poetry – there is no space. Space is elsewhere if anywhere – but not in an asylum, and not on the goldfields: walk out your tent, and find yourself in a knife-fight. You missed out on outdoors 1870s, 80s, 90s Australia – you missed the rise of the barbecue, the shift to anarchy on the stations. No ‘WALTZING MATILDA MY’ for you – but there was Jong for them, for the Germans, the Norwegians even.

‘JUST BOOK ONE MY,’ you said, and your words still echo in the marketing and literacy campaigns of the twenty-first century. Paterson and Lawson met because of your ideal, in the queue at the State Library of Victoria. This meeting lead to Lawson and Paterson’s famous poetry battle: over the jolliness (Lawson) versus the melancholia (Paterson) of Melbourne. Shaw Neilson was conceived in the queue and named Jong in your honour. The contemporary Jonglian poet, Patrick Jong, (formerly Patrick Malley), considered his name change a ‘work.’

You could have been gold: you could have been six foot under fillings or McMansion bathtaps, but you chose language.

Ever-mindful of the body as our culture is, we knew your hand wrote *THE CASE*, as much as your mind. An imaginary portrait of your hand won the Archibald Prize. Prints sold like pianos; soon every home had one. A writing hand, flecked with gold soon became the ideal in men and

women. The visual poetics of *THE CASE* began to spill over, breaking the bounds of poetry, into the decorative arts of posters, greeting cards, and general advertising. There were the songs: 'GIRL WITH THE JONGIAN HAND' and 'BOY WITH THE JONGIAN HAND.' A combination biopic (Tom Cho as the young genius) and Jong phenomenon doco won Cannes' 'Most Poetic Film' award. All this certainly could not have happened. It seemed to contradict the idealism, the purity, of 'JUST BOOK ONE MY.' Though of course it was the concentrated energy of this one work that generated all that followed. This was the Australia that Ouyang Yu flew into, and found hard to make sense of.

Picture the functionary, a person, delivering the book to the State Library. His name was Henry Fergie. He had made an appointment (or not). He was offered, he accepted a cup of tea, (or not). He was in the new building; it was twenty-something years old. He has brought a book: it was English, but not-English, the writer was Jong. No one, not even librarians knew who Jong was then. Only Fergie knew. Fergie probably wrote verse himself, of a ballady lyric kind. ('Asylum in a Sheep-Field,' or some such pastoral theme.) Minor stuff, he knew it himself. But at least it was communicable to the many non-Chinese and non-German Australians. The Jong book was more interesting, of course. But would anyone ever read it? Doctors perhaps – doctors doing lunatic research. He took a last look before handing it over. 'MY GONEAWAY' 'GO RIVERS EDGE.' 'MY MAKE SPOIL LAMPSHADE.' For some reason he pictured a woman in bed writing, a lampshade on her head. He was thinking of a poem titled, 'Thoughts on Madness While Delivering a Madman's Book to the Library': it was perhaps too large a theme, it sounded like the beginning of a novel.

Now that planes are used less for flying and more for literary activities, some planes are used for translation centres. The recent play 'SUMMER GO PAGE 17,' not only takes place in one of these planes but was staged in one. The play derives its directions from Jong's text; the plot deals with translating those same directions, and textual conflicts between Chinese and English translators of statements from page seventeen, such as 'VERY LITTLE MEN WALK' and 'NEW HOUSE SIDE ACROSS.' It's set during summer and the plane gets hot – in the play and in reality. The play features a silent chorus playing Jong's punctuation marks. There are also scenes that are a sequence of soliloquies, where each of the translators goes home to a crowded scene and relays their summer of translation to friends or family. Typically the characters perform these scenes with sleeves rolled and a jacket or cardigan slung over a shoulder. The suggestion that the character is some kind of pilot, or decoder of spy messages, is not unusual.

The controversy surrounding 'SUMMER GO PAGE 17' in theatre and literary critical circles revolves around the presentation of the character of Jong. Different directors have introduced him during different acts. One, for example, had him enter as a silent ghost that took a place at the translation table. He remained expressionless during the translator arguments. Another had him enter at the end of the play: rampaging like a maniacal dragon through the plane, tearing up the translators' work, even burning it with his breath. The controversy relates not so much to these different interpretations of the direction 'Enter Jong,' but to the presentation of him as mad/not-mad. Some commentators, both within and without the poetry world, have maintained that the whole of Jongian literature was a farce based on the symptomatic illiteracies of a schizophrenic. Others professed dismay at what they referred to as 'amateur' or 'waiting room' diagnosis. (Professionals also disagreed about Jong's sanity, or, more commonly, refused to comment).

This being Australia, there were of course hoaxes perpetrated in order to discredit Jong, and the tradition derived from his book *THE CASE*. Some critics claimed that the Chinese tradition received too much attention, and that the English, though marginalised, was just as worthy. Then there was the perspective of the Chinese Chinese poet Ouyang Yu, who claimed our ‘bastardised, deracinated tradition had no real relation to Chinese poetry anyway.’ Still, if Jong’s ghost was bothered, would he still be here or would he rather have hopped a snowboat or steamshovel to Beijing by now?

Some say Jong didn’t actually die, but was released in the great insane Federation amnesty of 1901, and made his way to the Indigenous aeroplane towns of the Western desert. Others, that he appears in the State Library whenever people come to look at the original of *THE CASE*. It’s even said that he once appeared swooping over Melbourne in an improvised airplane: run on reconstituted rust and baling twine juice, and destroyed the State Library, the City Library, and bombed the Yarra with sucked-up colonial classics, before hitting the South Yarra and Prahran libraries, scorching punctuation all the way down Chapel St, where authorities established he was just a bat caught in an antique Safeway bag. The State Library still stands today, as popular with the airline magazine crowd as ever, and if you order a blanc flat (or caffe mit milch) at the Library cafe, as like as not the barista will design a quadruple hyphen or a couple of giant commas in your foam.

All narratives are derived from archives of course; all are more or less feverish in their drive to establish a reality/world where the narrator’s obsessions are tangible. In the case of the story of *THE CASE*, the story’s reliance on poetry as a foundation – despite allusions to a newspaper world of fact, and buildings and aeroplanes – the Yarra for water’s sake – means that tears (rhymes with bears not beers) soon enough appear, and the story begins to founder. The Jong award for innovative scholarship evaporates, and Australia’s membership of the Chinese Commonwealth begins to look doubtful. John Forbes starts seeming less Confucian and A.D. Hope more human.

Australia’s reputation as a poetry paradise has usually meant that we got the ‘right kind’ of refugee. The visual nature of our poetry, with its capitals and handwriting and maps, made it look like a home, a shelter. Some took this literally: refugee and other homeless readers began living in the libraries. Their resultant reading meant they soon knew more of Australia’s (and world) history (in the broad sense: not just the history of history) than those living outside libraries. These ‘librarists’ became a new kind of critic, often starting their careers writing in the margins of the library books, adding sheaves of commentary to the archives. Many started this practice as children (this was the inspiration for Wright’s essay ‘The Critic as Adult’). Much recent public discourse originated in these commentaries, and Jong’s *THE CASE* played a part, with its credo, ‘MY FREEDOM MY BODY,’ and the haunting phrasing of ‘MY LIKE MARRIED MY NO LIKE MARRIED.’

An abstract case means to ‘FALL MY’; a concrete case is to ‘HOLD MY.’ The fall of Jong is held in his book. His fall – from Chinese into English – was held by a language of his own invention. His book and the tradition of Chinese Australian poetry it led to, and that we know as Jonglian, are held by us, the public. May we continue to fly in planes made of Jonglian words, and all fall into poetry, and be held by it. That is an idea that can be seen, and recreated: a ‘POETICS MY.’

**WORKS CITED**

Jong, Ah Sing. *Diary* [manuscript], 1866-1872, held State Library of Victoria.