

Critical Essays
on
KENNETH SLESSOR



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The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor

VINCENT BUCKLEY

THERE seems to be a vague and generally held notion that Kenneth Slessor is a major Australian poet. No serious attempt, however, has yet been made to arrive at a careful critical assessment of his work; the assumption hovers in the air undefended and unchallenged.

There is, at any rate, plenty of material on which to work. Slessor has published four books of poetry at various times within the, third and fourth decades of this century; most of these are not easy to come by, and the poet himself has chosen in any case to make from these volumes a selection of what he considers his most significant poems. The collection is his volume *One Hundred Poems*. The critic may follow him in regarding these as an adequate field for his enquiry.

A possible reason for the ambiguity of Slessor's position strikes us when we look at his early works, those composed (as we are told in the index to *One Hundred Poems*) between 1919 and 1926. In subject-matter, conception, and technique he is to a large extent outside the tradition of Australian poetry—and even of the English poetry of this century. The titles give us an indication—'Pan at Lane Cove,' 'Marco Polo,' 'Heine in Paris,' 'Thieves' Kitchen'; and the treatment is generally in keeping with the hint of romantic grotesquerie given in the titles. His friends probably have had something to do with all this; and, indeed, much of Slessor's early poetry, in its attempt to bring together words and the world, seems to be a marriage by proxy, with Hugh McCrae obligingly standing-in for the aspiring young poet, and Norman Lindsay mock-hercically officiating. 'Thieves' Kitchen' is a very good example:

Good roaring pistol-boys, brave lads of gold,
Good roistering easy maids, blown cock-a-hoop
On floods of tavern-steam, I greet you! Drunk
With wild Canary, drowned in wines of old,
I'll swear your round, red faces dive and swim
Like clouds of fire-fish in a waxen tide,
And these are seas of smoke we thieves behold.

The nature of the approach is obvious. No attempt is made by the poet to individualize the 'good roaring pistol-boys,' as even Villon did, or to undertake an analysis of their role in the human situation. The

conception is a cliché, and so are the various items in the picture; while the language is a sort of forced eloquence, and the subject is treated through a violent and confused accumulation of images. The only thing of value that remains with the reader is an impression of sheer zest in the picture-making, and of the desperate inconsequence of the performance.

These early poems are in a very real sense Romantic—showing the strong attraction felt by their author towards the grotesque and exaggerated elements of experience, and towards a raffish sensuousness. These qualities stand behind the typically romantic attitude to expression which has just been mentioned. It is not unusual to find such qualities and attitudes in the work of a young poet. But in Slessor's case it would be foolish to assume (as most people do) that they give way in the later poetry to a direct realism. It is true that the poetic world of the later poems is the harder and more immediate, and that a greater part of it is filled with the items of everyday experience. Yet all too often we find, even in the very last poems, the same imagery, the same forced eloquence of language, the same emphasis on a dream (or is it nightmare?) condition of life which so disturb us in the early work:

Uncles who burst on childhood, from the East,
Blown from air, like bearded ghosts arriving,
And are, indeed, a kind of guessed-at ghost
Through mumbled names at dinner-tables moving,
Bearers of parrots, bonfires of blazing stones,
Their pockets fat with riches out of reason,
Meerschmann and sharks'-teeth, ropes of China coins,
And weeds and seeds and berries blowzed with poison....

This, fittingly enough, is titled 'To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae.' The big advance that Slessor has made in the intervening years is that he here accomplishes a sort of finality to his poetic thought of which he was seemingly incapable twenty years before; and, even more important than this, he is actively seeking such a finality in his poetry. The poem in question ends:

(Look in this harsher glass, and I will show you
The daylight after the darkness, and the morning
After the midnight, and after the night the day
After the year after, terribly returning).
We live by these, your masks and images,
We breathe in this, your quick and borrowed body;
But you take passage on the ruffian seas,
And you are vanished in the dark already.

Nevertheless, this poem is typical of much of Slessor's early work; and the point should be clear that the tinge of romantic grotesquerie is not simply a foible of his early days, but is rather a recurring and directing element in his poetry. If in the later work it is less unmixt with the elements of everyday experience, it is nevertheless used there with the air of an exile yearning for his true home. All through the poetry dated from 1927 to 1939, we are liable to come upon poems which are models of exact and whimsical observation. There are, of course, occasional examples from the first volume—for example, the

Gas flaring on the yellow platform; voices running up and down;
Milk-tins in cold dented silver; half-awake I stare,
Pull up the blind, blink out—all sounds are drugged;

of 'The Night-Ride'; but they are rare. From the middle section, 'Wild Grapes,' 'Waters,' 'Crow Country,' 'Metempsychosis,' immediately come to mind; and, of course, the best of all his short poems, 'Country Towns,' which seems to have brought itself to the attention of most Australian anthologists as Slessor's anthology-piece:

At the School of Arts, a broadcast lies
Sprayed with the sarcasm of flies:
'The Great Godightly Family
Of Entertainers Here To-night'—
Dated a year and a half ago,
But left there, less from carelessness
Than from a wish to be polite.

This is not so much wit as a flash of keen observation from a man who has put himself into immediate and direct sympathy with his subject. The last two lines exactly express the diffidence of many country people in dealing with the affairs of their strolling players. Yet the distinction between wit and observation is a significant one. For a man with a feeling for the grotesque and an obviously sardonic temperament, there is surprisingly little wit in Slessor, and almost no humour at all.

The added hardness of line and imagery is certainly welcome, for it means that Slessor has begun to locate the perennial problems of man in the ordinary affairs of the men of his own time, and that he is now less inclined to try to escape in his poetry a consideration of those problems. He has, moreover, begun to approach a poetic solution to them through the world of sense-data which is the first and best repository of the artist's wisdom. Yet he is obviously striving throughout his poetic development for a realism which will not require him to abandon his bravura effects or to stifle his romantic zest. And the result, even in the best of his minor poems, is something which is more properly called 'physicalism' than 'realism'—a preoccupation with grasping, in one

desperate swoop, all the variety, all the hard physicality of sense-experience, till so much detail is brought into the poem that not only meaning but the distinctive lines of material things themselves are made blurred and indecisive. A good example of this is the much-quoted 'Last Trams' (ii).

The irony is that when so much has been given up for the thrust and spontaneous flow of images, that thrust itself tends to be deflected, that flow to become dissipated and to fade in the fine sand of words. There is, in consequence, a vague yet disturbing air of frenzy about almost all Slessor's poems—the poems of joy as well as those of sorrow. One can detect a desperation in the act of writing itself, as though each poem is an activity divorced from any spiritual serenity, an attempt to get as much as possible into the poet's picture before the whole world disappears.

It would be generally true to say that the basis of Slessor's art is rhetorical. This point, because of the difficulty of clarification, deserves an essay to itself, and it cannot be adequately treated here. His best poems are nearly all concerned with simple situations or with people. He has a truly imposing *Dramatis Personae*, of whom the most frequent former is himself, considered always ironically, mock-herotically, or with a sort of fierce disdain; for the rest, his characters are drawn from among his friends, from history and the novel, from fellow artists, and, most important of all, men of the sea.

The treatment is always dramatic in the extreme, and the language is almost always rhetorical; the words and images are not used, as they are in Browning or the early Eliot, to fix a character in his individual fullness in his particular milieu, but rather to give the surroundings, to provide an occasion for Slessor to talk about life, or to establish a note of adventure in the situation. The person concerned, one feels, is not intended to occupy the centre of the stage, but to stand in the wings, while, with repeated reference to his presence, the author strews his belongings behind the footlights. So we are less interested in Captain Dobbin than in Captain Dobbin's room, packed with the junk of past adventures; and less concerned with the exciting relics themselves than with the sea, of whose conquest they are the trophies. The graceful and moving last stanza establishes the destiny not so much of Captain Dobbin as of the sea from which he is almost a by-product, another relic:

Flowers rocked far down
And white, dead bodies that were anchored there
In marshes of spent light.
Blue Funnel, Red Funnel,
The ships went over them, and bells in engine-rooms
Cried to their bowels of flaring oil,
And stokers groaned and sweated with burnt skins,
Clawed to their shovels.

But quietly in his room,
In his little cemetery of sweet essences
With fond memorial-stones and lines of grace,
Captain Dobbin went on reading about the sea.

At its best and most sincere, this approach is extremely effective. 'Five Visions of Captain Cook,' which should be known to every Australian, enables Slessor to approach Cook's voyage from five different points of view, with accompanying changes in treatment and technique. The result is a memorable though uneven poem, with his ever-present eloquence directed by a controlling idea, and kept for the most part in subjection to definite and contrasting sentiments. (The pounding metre and generalized language of the first part, for example, contrasts effectively with the whimsical tenderness and gently varying rhythms of the third). It is worth noting, however, that this is one of the few poems in which a real character portrayal is attempted, and a real assessment of values.

With these things in mind, it is with a shock of delighted surprise that one comes upon such a poem as 'Sleep,' in which there is not only one controlling idea, but also one controlling image, with reference to which all other images are deployed. This initial control of structure allows Slessor to concentrate on rhythm and diction—allows him, as he so seldom allows himself, to be a craftsman. Thus we get a lyric which has the depth of wholly convincing statement, and which is completely rounded by the artist's mind.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With hunger waves continually....

Even in this small poem, we have evidence of Slessor's main preoccupations. A study of his recurring themes and images will show that he is probably the most 'preoccupied' poet writing in Australia today. It seems that there are themes from which he can never escape, no matter what may be the alleged subject of any of his poems; and which are insisted on so frequently and so forcefully that (if we may use a phrase which has become peculiarly a part of the American language) they attain the status of myths. Time (written often with a capital), the sea, the seafaring adventurer—these are the Slessor myths; and it is when they are combined that they are used most clearly and most effectively, as in 'Five Visions of Captain Cook,' for instance, and in 'Five Bells.' Yet there is something underlying even these basic motifs, and giving them coherence. In almost all his poems, Slessor seems ultimately concerned with the fact of flux. Time for him is not only the enemy of human

plans, and so an active force; it is also an element, into which things and people move, within which they are momentarily poised, and from which they are irresistibly borne. If a symbol is needed for this eternally destructive movement of time, then the sea will serve very well; and the significance of the sailor in Slessor's poetic world is that of man himself, adventuring forth upon the flux to which he will eventually be reduced.

When this is considered, perhaps it is inevitable that Slessor's view of the human situation should be a sensational one, that it should involve so many examples of the exaggerated and the grotesque. In such a view of life as this, Caesar's only role is to symbolize the preoccupation of a modern poet; and one's speculations will turn very often on what it would be like to have been someone else. We have Slessor's 'Metempsychosis,' for example:

Suddenly to become John Benbow, walking down William Street,
With a tin trunk and a five-pound note, looking for a place to eat,
And a peajacket the colour of a shark's behind
That a Jew might buy in the morning....

This is not an unusual view of life in modern poetry; it is an important part of the whole neo-romantic conception. It is rare, however, to find it insisted on so completely and with such intensity of focus as it is in Slessor; and he certainly does not ignore the necessity of providing himself with certain symbols of permanence, which can also be used as vantage-points from which to get a perspective on the flux of human experience. I take it the Harbour is one of these. Sydney Harbour appears so frequently in his poetry that it is an essential part of his landscape. Its role is stated almost explicitly in 'Winter Dawn' and 'Captain Dobbin,' as well as in 'Five Bells.' It is not only a point of refuge, it is also a point of view.

'Five Bells' is the poem which he has chosen to occupy the last place in *One Hundred Poems*, and it is certainly his best poem. It is, in fact, probably the last of his poems in chronological order; but it is also in a very real sense a *summing-up* of the themes and dominant images which recur in his earlier poetry. It may not be claiming too much to say that 'Five Bells' is one of the two or three best poems written in Australia.

It is here that we find all his main individual themes brought together, but brought together at such a pitch of intensity that they are lifted beyond the status of preoccupations into a sort of vision—a vision which is admittedly tortured and obscure, a vision of dissolution rather than of resurrection, but a vision nonetheless. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that all these themes have been given a powerful focus, an intimate personal concern, in Slessor's grief for his 'long-dead friend.' His image for death is drowning, the sea is the agent not only of death but of dissolution, and Time is used for the first time as a ship's bell which,

at the same time as it rings Joe's knell, recalls him to his friend. Once again the Harbour is Slessor's point of reference, the vantage-point from which he can give coherence to his agonized meditation. It is, indeed, a perfect focus for his musings, for it has him within sight of the materials for them.

The poem proceeds from a tense, concentrated opening, in which the sound of a ship's bell ringing the night hours brings back to Slessor the memory of his friend; through certain dramatic glimpses of Joe's life, separated by Slessor's own agonized longings; to the almost wearily expansive close, an acquiescence bred of exhaustion. In the process, a concern for one man's death becomes imperceptibly concern for all mankind. It is not only an expression of grief, but also a protest against death, and a questioning of life itself. Joe's death is the death, actual or impending, of every man. And it is significant that this cosmic anguish results in Slessor's best writing about the sea. It is in 'Five Bells' that his obsession with flux and his faculty of close observation are most successfully brought together, for the theme is such that there is no dichotomy between them. The fluxive action of the sea gives free play, under his personal and cosmic grief, to his sensuality of imagery, his highly-developed tactile sense.

It is thus a summing-up of his main themes; but it also repeats many of the key phrases from his earlier poems. This, I feel, is not a mere coincidence. 'Five Bells' is, in a sense, Slessor's manifesto, the occasion for a summing-up of all he has tried to say in poetry, and of all the ways he has discovered of saying it effectively.

It is this which makes us wonder whether he will ever write again. For what is there to say that has not already been said? What poetic opportunity can be given to Slessor greater than the opportunity he has so powerfully seized in 'Five Bells'? Despite the chatter of the critics, he is not really an 'intellectual' poet. It is true that he has eschewed the easy path of Georgian nature description, and has gone his own way. But his poetry shows that he was led on that way not by the demands of his intellect continually to discover and re-create the deepest truths of the human situation, but by the romantic desperation of his pre-occupations. For all his joy, there is in all his poetry a faint background of distrust with life. In 'Five Bells,' this has been brought forward as an open protest against life. No poet of Slessor's kind can do more than this—make his preoccupations public. This is what *he* has done; but it is not what we expect of an 'intellectual' poet.

Vision of the Twenties

JACK LINDSAY

MY first recollections of Kenneth Slessor set him in an afternoon drift of golden light out of which his keen face with slightly sardonic smile glints with its own warm hues. He is fiddling about with a crystal set, the first I have seen, and keeps insisting that he has picked something up; while, below, the waters of Sydney Harbour are briskly moving in regular scalloped lines and enclosing us with a busy tangle of reflected lights. Between the failures to coax music out of the brilliant air, we talked about poetry and the absolute necessity of a magazine which would say all the obvious things that had never been said before. Because Frank Johnson knew printers and said that we needn't bother about costs, the magazine became *Vision*.

The name was given to us by my father, Norman; and his influence was pervasive in the contents. But despite the extreme immaturity of the whole thing I think it was worth recalling and analysing; for with all its faults it did express something more than our delusions and confusions. It expressed, as perhaps nothing else of the 1920's did, the prolonged crisis that Australian culture was undergoing—a crisis that went back to the early years of the century and which carried on in many ways through the 1930's, but which naively received its most characteristic utterance in *Vision*.

How may we define that crisis? Roughly, we may say that it expressed the pains of a national literature as it moved to a stable basis of its own, away from the tradition on which it had necessarily built itself, the British tradition. At every stage, from Wentworth onwards, we see Australian writers seeking at one and the same time to carry on the British tradition and to become Australian. But in the early stages the two efforts come together only in painful and temporary fusions. Kendall and Lindsay Gordon, who most fully brought in various elements of the Romantics and their successors, were unable to develop vitally the inner struggle of the poets they imitated, because they lived in a different sort of society; yet they had to do what they did, for all its second-rateness, as the first incorporation of the only available elements from the mother-culture. With Lawson the forces of the popular culture, linked in turn with popular elements in British song, came to their first satisfying head, aided into maturity by the very thing against which

with Jack on the whole aesthetic of poetry, if I am to trust my memory of such reunions in my Springwood studio.

I observe that Ken includes me with Jack in an intemperate use of ideological terminologies during the *Vision* era. This I meekly confess to. We were all badly infected by Freudianism in the twenties. It was practically an occupational disease where there was any effort to grapple with the complexities of art and life during that period, though today, happily, it is used only by the Betty Miller type of biographer, such as have never escaped from the fusty old back parlour of psychoanalytical scandalmongering.

Such magazines as *Vision* do not make movements, though movements sometimes produce magazines, of which *Southerly* is an instance. It is because of the impetus of present day Australian poetry, and the publication of Australian prose works, plus a sophisticated understanding of past expressions in both *métiers*, that the editorship of *Southerly* is making that understanding articulate. What is also of first importance, the same movement is carrying the study of Australian poetry into the University curriculum here. Without such an admirable cultural stimulus, poetry in this country will never find enough readers to support it.

As for poor old *Vision* it merely staggered for a brief period on insecure crutches and then fell down a crack in time, to reappear today spasmodically as a collector's item.

Sound in Slessor's Poetry¹

R. G. HOWARTH

IN Slessor's earlier verse, represented by *Earth Visitors*, 1926, the appeal is to eye, primarily, then to ear—little to mind. The verse of his middle period, in *Cuckooz Country*, 1932, evinces a reduction of the visual element, an increase of the aural; while the third stage, *Five Bells*, 1939, with 'Beach Burial', 1942, presents a complex enticement of ear, mind, heart and eye.

In my published *Notes on Modern Poetic Technique, English and Australian*,² I have directed close attention to Slessor's use of sound and rhythm, imagery and diction. Thus, under imagery, examples of sense-figure in his poetry are given: 'the quince-bright, bitter slats of sun (from 'Out of Time'), where sight, taste and touch are called into play together; 'smells rich and rasping' (from 'William Street'), combining smell hearing and touch. Under sound, the subtle references in 'Sleep' and 'Beach Burial' are mentioned and 'The Country Ride' is partly examined. In his own *Modern English Poetry*,³ Slessor spoke of the rhyming in the last-named poem as a variation on what had been called 'analysed rhyme' (which is really assonance, the recurrence of vowels, and consonance, the recurrence of consonants, diversified: 'trees—near', 'coat—blows', 'trees—blows', 'coat—near'; 'pockets—thickets', 'flings—songs', 'pockets—songs', 'flings—thickets'; evoking, Slessor claims, 'an exquisite and wistful overtone'). In 'The Country Ride' he has tried, he says, 'not the matching of consonants only or vowels only, but the repetition of a whole syllable, both vowels and consonants, so that it is not a rhyme but really the same word, or portion of the same word reiterated':

Earth which has known so many passages
Of April air, so many marriages
Of strange and lovely atoms breeding light,
Never may find again that lost delight.

¹ From a Commonwealth Literary Fund Lecture given at the University of Western Australia in 1952.

² Angus and Robertson, 1949.

³ Australian English Association, Offprint No. 9, 1931, pp. 10-11.

In the sharp sky, the frosty deepnesses,
There are still birds to barb the silences,
There are still fields to meet the morning on,
But those who made them beautiful have gone.

Such use of a part of a word as its rhyme (that is, repeating the rhyme, sometimes called 'rich' rhyme, e.g. 'light—delight', 'passages—marriages') is true rhyme, but is here employed consistently, plus assonance ('passages—marriages', 'deepnesses—silences'). Assonance-and-consonance contrast is to be found in Slessor's 'Fixed Opinions'.

Complete examination of 'Sleep', 'Beach Burial' and another poem, 'South Country', will reveal the skill of Slessor's technique in all its branches. I take 'South Country' first:

After the whey-faced anonymity
Of river-guns and scribbly-guns and bush,
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,
You come to the South Country

As if the argument of trees were done,
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,
All ended by these clear and gliding planes
Like an abrupt solution.

And over the flat earth of empty farms
The monstrous continent of air floats back
Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black,
Bruised flesh of thunderstorms:

Air arched, enormous, pounding the bony ridge,
Ditches and hatches, with a drench of light,
So huge, from such infinities of height,
You walk on the sky's beach

While even the dwindled hills are small and bare,
As if rebellious, buried, pitiful,
Something below pushed up a knob of skull,
Feeling its way to air.

The scene is the coast land south of Sydney reached by Prince's Highway, which runs along the ridge high above the sea. The point of view is indefinite—perhaps somewhere above Wollongong. But that does not matter particularly; it might be anywhere in this region suitable to what can be surveyed—hills, flat farmlands, a great expanse of air. In transferring landscape to words, through imagery, Slessor resorts to what I call semi-animation: that is, natural objects are endowed with half-life: the river-guns have, as it were, white unfeatured faces, the brush is able to rub and strike you as you pass, the trees argue, doubt, quarrel,

plot, take pains together; the thunderstorm bruises; the small bare hills resemble protruding skulls of living creatures underground. The 'monstrous continent of air', too, is almost animated, given life—it arches, it rains blows of light on the ridge. Personification would be too gross: Slessor suggests, half-uncovered, gives just enough for the purpose. It is the same in sound: nothing absolute, nothing quite definite. Thus part-rhyme runs throughout: 'anonymity—country'; 'bush—brush'; 'done—solution'; 'farms—storms'; 'ridge—beach'; 'pitiful—skull'; with an interposition of rhyme in the two successive middle lines of each set of four, reversed in the last set to bring the part-rhymes into succession medially. Other part-rhymes occur internally: e.g., 'ditches—hatches'; and assonance and consonance, including the part-rhymes and rhymes, wind throughout: 'whey-faced'; 'anonymity'; 'river'; 'scribbly'; 'hit'; 'guns'; 'rubbing'; 'brush'; 'country'; 'done'; 'plots'; 'pains'; 'planes'; and so on. Undoubtedly the heart of the poem is that astounding vision of 'the sky's beach', to which all below is humbly contrasted, but the sound sequences which combine with the imagery to achieve the climax repay study—yield further and further intricacies and implexities. The poem, that is, forms a minutely articulated structure. Even more extraordinary is "Sleep":

Do you give yourself to me utterly,
Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,
Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?
Yes, utterly.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With hunger waves continually.

And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,
Beat with my heart's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so—

Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,
The riving and the driving forth,
Life with remorseless forepaws beckoning—
Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

It is customary to speak of wooing sleep, to flatter her, but here Sleep,

animated if not personified, makes terms with the seeker, so that the first part of the poem constitutes question and anticipated reply: 'Do you give yourself to me utterly . . . ?' *Yes, utterly.*' Then the experience is pre-described in its completeness of reception and shelter, with the dread warning of inevitable return to the homelessness of day. The poem betrays the desperate preference of unconsciousness to consciousness; ultimately, of death to life. It has been argued that Sleep is a female personification and the yielding to her is detailed in sexual terms; but nowhere does Slessor hint at more than an intra-uterine suspension, the return to consciousness being imaged as a forced birth, the infant clinging to its envelopment and reluctant to leave. If any creature suggests itself, this is a whale—

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, have you
With hunger waves continually—

the image changing in the last section, with the sudden leap from night to morning, the transition being almost imperceptibly made to the foetus in the womb. Slessor probably had nothing definite in mind—neither, in the first place, swallowing Leviathan nor, in the second, parturient woman. The emphasis lies on the *passage* into and through sleep back to the ineluctable dailiness.⁴ The human is to resign himself entirely, 'as a child might, with no other wish'; then he will be sunken deep, merge and grow one with his custodian: the state of whole happiness. The poem may be finally an expression of the unconscious desire to return to the womb—to recapture, in physical terms, the unity we once knew, the thought-less Eden. But that, or anything like it, the poet knows to be impossible. Thrust naked and defenceless into this world, one must go on to the end.

How does Slessor gain his effect? By an overlaying succession of movement and sound that muffles and stifles thought and dazes into virtual unconsciousness, only vague sensation remaining. When analysed this process is discovered to be a pattern of assonance and consonance according with the development and the imagery used to express it. Were the poem to be transliterated into phonetic symbols the pattern would emerge clearly to the eye—better still if each sound-symbol were illuminated in a different shade of colour.

Do you give yourself to me utterly,
Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,
Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?
Yes, utterly.

First, the reply is in the very word of the question, thus reiterating the sounds. Next, 'utterly' and 'bitterly', 'flesh' and 'wish', severally, are part-rhymed, by double and single consonance. Then, an assonance of 'e' runs through this opening: 'give', 'fugitive', 'bitterly', 'with', 'wish', 'utterly'. Likewise of 'e': 'self', 'flesh', 'Yes' (the affirmative being thus aurally anticipated, as the confirmative 'utterly' was by 'utterly' and 'bitterly'); in addition, 'self' and 'flesh' form reverse consonance; lastly, 'blindly', 'child', 'might' assonate; 'body' and 'no-body', 'flesh' and 'no-flesh' rhyme; 'body' and 'no-body' and 'blindly' doubly consonate and consonate with 'bitterly'. Half-consonance (voiced and unvoiced sound), too, can be found between 'blindly' and 'bitterly'. The deeper we penetrate, the more internal correspondences are found. Slessor is, as it were, achieving a unification of language equivalent to the unification of experience through imagery—above all, symbols.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, have you
With hunger waves continually.

Here 'bear you', 'estuary', 'carry you', 'ferry you', 'burial', 'mysteriously' and 'continually' correspond, in varying degrees of assonance and consonance; 'bear you', 'carry you', 'ferry you', 'consume you', 'engulf you', 'have you' parallel syntactically; certain of these locutions match sonantly also: 'carry you', 'ferry you'; 'receive you', 'have you'; there is internal rhyme: 'cave', 'have', 'waves'; 'huge', 'hunger'; and so on.

And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,
Bear with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so—

One notices 'cling and clamber', 'clamber there', 'slumber there', 'dumb chamber'; 'bear of my blood's beat' and 'blindly in bones'; 'blindly', 'ride'; 'delve', 'dissolved'; 'bedded' and 'embodied'; 'viewless valves'; but above all a rapidly shifting assonance and consonance on few sounds—'you shall cling and clamber there And slumber there, in that dumb

⁴ Relate the lines in 'To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae':

Look in this harsher glass, and I will show you
The daylight after the darkness, and the morning
After the midnight, and after the night the day
After the year after, terribly returning.

chamber'—in a close weaving to the taut end of the shuttle—then a snapping, almost an explosion, on dissonance:

Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,
The riving and the driving forth,
Life with remorseless forceps beckoning—
Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

'Daylight', 'awakening', 'betrayal', 'awakening', 'beckoning'; 'iving', 'driving', 'life', 'forth', 'remorseless', 'forceps'; 'forth', 'birth'; 'harsh', 'birth'. Nothing could be more final.

One observes how the rhythm too assists in the effect: it is commonly known as 'strong' rhythm, that which begins with the beat: 'Do you', 'Body', 'Nor', 'But', 'Yes', 'strongest of all in 'Carry', 'Take', 'Beat', 'Blindly', 'Delve', 'Life', 'Pangs'. The rhythm bears powerfully with the blood's beat, in those very words, stressed successively. It falls heavily on 'huge cave'. But the movement lightens in 'continually', 'awakening'. That is, in sum, Slessor uses rhythm naturally, in accord with sense and sound. The poem forms a harmony of all its elements, even to the discord of the ending—the discord completes the effect intended. His art here cannot be too much admired.

Yet it was not till he wrote 'Beach Burial' that Slessor achieved the perfection of art, unobtrusiveness. You may say in defence of 'Sleep' that the subject and treatment demanded a prominence if not an obviousness of elements, especially imagery and sound, and that may be so. But perhaps the result would have been just one whit better if the elements had been less apparent. In 'Beach Burial' nothing appears, juts up, thrusts itself into notice. You can read the poem without perceiving that it is cunning fusion of sound, sense, images, feelings, rhythm, cadence and the rest (though you may feel it does not always rhyme): and read it so because it was probably so written—without conscious art, rather with unconscious mastery, no effort on the writer's part being required. That is to say, it is a spontaneous lyric compact of the most accomplished skill.

During the past war Slessor was Official Correspondent reporting in the Middle East theatre. As an observer he could feel more than anyone else the pity of slaughter which has moved the finest minds—Hardy, Owen—after great carnage or in retrospect. So, near El Alamein, in 1942, standing on the shore where rough wooden crosses marked the places in which the human fotsam of the ocean had been huddled, he conceived the poem 'Beach Burial'.

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,
Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin—

'Unknown seaman'—the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips,

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

Pity though it is to dissect such an entity, we may come back to it afterwards with renewed understanding and feeling—with heightened appreciation. I shall reproduce it again in sections, and comment:

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

May I invite you to try, privately, an experiment? Read this aloud, first the vowel sounds alone, then the consonants alone, finally the vowels and consonants together—for sound not sense. By this means you will readily discern the relations of the sounds to each other—the repetitions or recurrences, the interplay and interaction, the growing effect. It is what we feel, with a sensitive ear, in a reading for all that the stanza contains; but analysing the vocal constituents and resynthesizing them helps us to indraw the sound sequence to the full.

You notice the part-rhyme—'come' and 'foam', 'wander' and 'under'—also the full rhyme in 'humbly' and 'come'; the assonance—'softly', 'convoys', 'humbly', 'Gulf', 'come', 'rolls', 'foam', etc.—the consonance (part or entire) in 'Softly', 'Arabs', 'convoys', 'sailors', 'sway', 'waters', 'rolls'; doubled and reversed in 'sway' and 'wanders', etc. 'Arabs' and 'under' correspond in stress, as do, of course, 'come' and 'foam'. Also appreciable is the appropriate image 'convoys'.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness.

'Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire'—an exact rendering in sound and image by one who has listened to it afar and near. The rhythm, before slow and weighed to the quickening at the last—'rolls them in the foam'—now goes erect, as it were, and hurries in accordance with the haste of the necessary action of burial in a calm interval between the fightings. The pattern stamped in the first stanza, of part-rhyme and stress-correspondence, is repeated—and so throughout, with a deviation into rhyme in the fourth stanza. The second stanza is related to the first, too, in sound-recurrence: 'gunfire' with 'under', and further back, with 'come' and 'humbly'; now carried forward in 'someone'. 'M's' and 'n's' run through the four lines, together with 'b's', 's's', 't's', 'p's', etc.; 'e's' and 'o's' and 'i's' and the rest; related. The internal multiple part-rhyme 'shallows' and 'burrows' is observable.

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,

Bears the last signature of men,

Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,

The words choke as they begin—

The dominant sound now is 'i'—'driven', 'signature', 'written', 'with', 'perplexity', 'bewildered', 'pity', 'begin'; while 'signature', 'perplexity' and 'pity' are related. This sound is carried through the next section—

'Unknown seaman'—the ghostly pencil

Wavers and fades, the purple drips,

The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions

As blue as drowned men's lips,—

'pencil', 'drips', 'inscriptions', 'lips', where three rhymes occur in close succession. The images in the preceding stanza and this are noticeable: writing broken off at the start, because the writer, *signing for* the dead, does not know what to write—the words *choke* as they begin. Having inscribed 'Unknown seaman' on the cross in indelible pencil, he leaves it; after the wet season it is seen running and fading, as though drawn by a 'ghostly' pencil: the subjects are linked to their memorials by the reminder of the hue of their drowned mouths.

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,

Whether as enemies they fought,

Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,

Enlisted on the other front.

The inscription 'Unknown seaman' is repeated and pluralized in the words 'Dead seamen'—opening out to the mass once more the sound recurs sadly in 'neither', modulated to 'together', and the poem ends with a part-rhyme that seems an incompleton, because it consists of double consonance only—'fought' and 'front'—leaving an impression of final

disappearance—beyond. Thus the war imagery is continued to the last: having made land and being united in death, the sailors are re-formed, as it were, into a company of the force of the world unseem. The poem forms an infrangible unity, the most minute part of it being related to every other part, all fused into a complete whole. This is art beyond art.

The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor

FREDERICK T. MACARTNEY

WE ARE FORTUNATE in having a definitive collection of Kenneth Slessor's work in his recently issued *Poems*—however much we may regret that with this volume his output seems to cease. That was virtually so when his *One Hundred Poems* was published in 1944, for the new book consists of the same poems with only three short ones added, and two of these appeared in print some years ago. *One Hundred Poems* was divided into three periods—1919-1926, 1927-1932, and 1933-1939. The sequence of this grouping is maintained in the new volume although the divisions are no longer shown. As before, some early poems are omitted, but the contents go back as far as the author's nineteenth year, and it is surprising to find the same sureness then as in later verse.

Slessor provided a brief summary of his attitude to his work in a broadcast talk that was printed in *Southerly* No. 3 of 1948. 'I think,' he says there, 'poetry is written mostly for pleasure, by which I mean the pleasure of pain, horror, anguish and awe as well as the pleasure of beauty, music, and the act of living.' He might well have included, too, the pleasure of ideas, which he manifests in his work, not to promulgate them, for they are not of that tendentious sort but arise from an intellectual interest in things.

The poem with which the book begins, 'Earth Visitors', dedicated to Norman Lindsay, shows Slessor's affinity with that artist's sensually colourful period themes. It typifies his emergence when he was associated with Jack Lindsay and Frank Johnson in the production of *Vision*, a quarterly that ceased with its fourth issue in February 1924. An affiliated publication was *Poetry in Australia* 1923, an anthology with a preface by Norman Lindsay, which was a kind of manifesto. It rejected modernist practices, and also repudiated the pursuit of a distinctively Australian art and literature as based on 'variations in degree of rock and mud which pass for national distinctions on Earth.' It goes on to diagnose in English poetry of that time 'not only a collapse of all vital imagery in passion and beauty, but a disintegration in those forms by which passion and beauty alone can be defined.'

Disputable issues raised by these opinions need not be discussed here.

Slessor does not seem to have altogether agreed with them, for we find him soon experimenting in what Lindsay deplored as 'disintegration' of form. He was one of the first in Australia to demonstrate modernist poetic tendencies.

'The practical considerations which have guided me for many years', he says, 'have been those of form and experiment. By form, I mean that shape of a work, whether in music, words or design, which seems most nearly to reflect the shape of emotion which produced it'. This will not do—at any rate as regards poetry. In all notable poetry, form and emotion are combined in such a way that neither can be said to be the result of the other. Actually, the world's greatest works in verse have been created not by contriving form to suit emotion but by fitting emotion into existing form. Slessor postulates a 'kind of emotion which can be matched only by the paradox of disciplined formlessness'. There is no such thing. Such meaningless words are all the worse because they tend to intimidate contradiction by implying that it shows a lack of sensibility; yet fairly enough and quite modestly, Slessor offers one of his own poems, though not in its entirety, as an illustration. Its title has now been altered from 'Fixed Opinions' to 'Fixed Ideas'. It is in two parts. The first part is intended 'to show the solidity of the fixed opinions by square, heavy, rigid lines with images of solidity, squareness and rigidity'. The second part, 'by a violent contrast of form', is meant to represent 'the ceaseless ray-bombardment of mental reactions to the swarming stimuli of life, a waterfall of rapidly appearing, rapidly disappearing thoughts'. The purpose is 'to compare this fluidity with the belief that a human being can, or should, have opinions firmly cemented into place by tradition, upbringing and experience'. Here is the poem in full:

Ranks of electroplated cubes, dwindling to glitter,
Like the other pasture, the trigonometry of marble,
Death's candy-bed. Stone caked on stone,
Dry pyramids and racks of iron balls.
Life is observed, a precipitate of pellets,
Or grammarians freeze it into spar,
Their rhomboids, as for instance, the finest crystal
Fixing a snowfall under glass. Gods are laid out
In alabaster, with horny cartilage
And zinc ribs; or systems of ecstasy
Baked into bricks. There is a gallery of sculpture,
Bleached bones of heroes, Gorgon masks of bushrangers;
But the quarries are of more use than this,
Filled with the rolling of huge granite dice,
Ideas and judgments: vivisection, the Baptist Church,
Good men and bad men, polygamy, birth control. . . .

Frail tinkling rush
 Water-hair streaming
 Prickles and glitters
 Cloudy with bristles
 River of thought
 Swimming the pebbles—
 Undo, loosen your bubbles!

But for the prominence the author gives to this poem as a vindication of what he calls 'disciplined formlessness', it need hardly have been mentioned at all, for it is not characteristic of his work. It has no obligation of symmetry, euphony, congruity, or consistency, and would be quite unintelligible but for its title, which indicates a series of objects symbolizing fixed ideas, leading to what I had always taken to be an exhortation against them; but I cannot find in it, either as to form or content, the effects the author expounds, except to the limited extent possible without that help. The haphazard of its atmospheric intention is betrayed from the start, with a vista arousing not conservative associations but a sense of newness like a glimpse of an up-to-date cafeteria or chromium espresso-coffee contraption, with an adjoining marble 'pasture' where people eat. Similarly, the phrase 'dwindling to glitters' looks like a misplaced line of the second part, which offers 'a violent contrast' of short lines depending on 'the mercurial "y" sound of the vowel, as in "din" and "in" itself, for an effect of "fluidity" as opposed to the 'sensation of solidity' which the first part is supposed to induce. As for the form of the poem, Slessor supports it by pointing to Michael Drayton's well-known love sonnet as suitably expressing its kind of feeling in a form which, he declares, would not suit the feeling of 'Fixed Opinions'. Here he argues for an unconventional form by taking the conventional view that the sonnet is limited to certain kinds of themes, though there are convincing instances to the contrary. One particularly to the point is Rimbaud's 'Voyelles'. Its feeling is so far from that of Drayton's poem, and so much closer to the feeling of 'Fixed Opinions', that Slessor's comparison must be discarded as arbitrary. If the form of his poem can be imagined as recognizably disciplined, its sonnet-like focus and two-part division suggest that medium as particularly suitable. He also says that he means by experiment 'a considered breaking of rules where the fracture can suggest even a shadow of the effect desired', such as 'the emotional effects obtained by avoiding a rhyme, approaching a rhyme, or by subtly altering it'. One example he gives is from his sequence of poems on music. He suggests that in part X 'the remote, unfinished, frustrated feeling of some of Chopin's music is perhaps expressed . . . by means of half-rhymes which echo with their vowels but not their consonants'. Far from sensing any such effects, and though I am a life-long music-addict who claims to know his Chopin, I did

not know, until I read the words just quoted, that the poem related to that composer, and I have found this to be invariably so with musicians and music-lovers I have tested. Moreover, though the true rhymes in the poem cannot possibly be missed, I did not know that the other lines had any comparable intention, as (to take the opening stanza) in the coupling of 'colour' and 'water':

Nothing grows on the stone trees
 But lanterns, frosty gourds of colour,
 Melting their bloody drops in water
 Over the dark seas.

Such notions of rhyming, since they permit any similarity of sound instead, put an end to the technique of rhyme. This is shown by Louis MacNeice's classifications of three-quarter rhyme, half-rhyme, quarter-rhyme, analysed rhyme, and 'ghosts of rhyme'—at which point, presumably, the rhyme is dead and gone and visible only to people who believe in ghosts.

Turn now to an undoubtedly successful poem of Slessor's with similar pairings of sound, the one entitled 'William Street'. It is in regular form, with one or two slight variations such as are common in traditional poetry, and its stanzas are neatly clinched by a refrain. It presents commonplace things seen along a street, for instance:

Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,
 In pawnshop windows, bumping knee by knee,
 But none inside to suffer or condemn;
 You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Does anybody believe that the very slight difference between the sound of 'en' and 'em' produces any 'emotional effect' that would be absent if the consonants were the same?—except that, if you are sensitively accustomed to legitimate rhymes, the other sort make you wince as when a note of music is sung flat or sharp instead of true. As the word 'condemn' is used untidily, since it could mean either condemning or being condemned, would there be any loss (might there not be a gain in sharpness?) if the line were changed—say, to 'But none inside to suffer now as then'? If, however, you change the adjectives in the refrain, there is a distinct loss. Why? Because the utter contrast of their meaning, not anything else, makes them the right words. Their similarity of vowel-sounds counts for no more than if they happened to rhyme exactly. Rhyme, or these substitutes for it such as are commonly found in attempts at verse by ignorant people, though it may be onomatopoeic as unrhymed words may be, produces of itself no emotional effect except the pleasure of its euphony. If this were not so, Shakespeare's finest passages might be suspected of lacking subtleties that rhymes or remnants of them could have added if the poor fellow had only known it.

It would of course be quite wrong to suggest that Slessor is indifferent to the traditional form and technique of poetry. He is careful to say that: 'The traditional grammar of rhyme, metre and formality must be learnt by any poet as earnestly as the pianist learns his five-finger exercises. But he must not be shackled by academic rules once he has learnt their discipline'. The actual outcome is that about two-thirds of his hundred or so poems are traditional in form and technique, a sixth combine traditional and experimental usages, and the other sixth are experimental in a more outright way. Of these last the more memorable are perhaps 'Sleep', presenting the subject allegorically as gestation and birth; 'Sensuality'; 'North Country', known chiefly for its ironically graphic sixth stanza; and 'Last Trams'. As for the similar modicum of poems only partly experimental, among the best is 'The Night Ride', expressing a railway traveller's impressions of a stopping-place at night. Another is the wartime 'Beach Burial', one of the three additional poems in the collection. The opening stanzas typify the rightness of its detached yet sympathetically ominous tone:

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness.

A much longer example of the mixing of old and new usages is 'Captain Dobbin'. It is an engaging picture of a retired sea-captain who 'sails the street in a brick villa', amidst treasured tokens of his former life. It opens in a manner differing neither in tone nor rhythm from prose, and there is much else of the sort as it goes on—unrhymed and unmetrical sentences and phrases separated to do duty as lines of irregular length. This is the most monotonous kind of verse I know, though here it is propped into something like recognizable form by slabs of iambic pentameters. It is hard to see how (repeating words already quoted) the 'fracture' of the metre 'can suggest even a shadow of the effect desired' that would be lost by using metre throughout as in part. One of the functions of metre (which, as Slessor himself shows, need not be merely metronomic) is, especially in an unrhymed poem, to sustain by its incantation passages otherwise not felicitous at all. To slump lamely into obvious prose and pretend it is verse is a violation of both. It skates glibly over the fact that verse is an artificial kind of writing that depends on its conventions for its intrinsic effect. The charm of 'Captain Dobbin'

arises from the pretence of its subject and in no sense from, but in spite of, the pretences of its form.

This is made plain by the treatment of a similar theme in 'Five Visions of Captain Cook'. Sections I, II, and V are in blank verse, and show how adaptable the persuasion of its beat can be without going outside traditional usage. Take the active scene of Cook's death at the water's edge in an affray with Hawaiian natives:

And then the trumpety springs of fate—a stone,
A musket-shot, a round of gunpowder,
And puzzled animals, killing they knew not what
Or why, but killing . . . the surge of goatish flanks
Armoured in feathers, like cruel birds:
Wild, childish faces, killing: a moment seen,
Marines with crimson coats and puffs of smoke
Topping face-down; and a knife of English iron,
Forged aboard ship, that had been changed for pigs,
Given back to Cook between the shoulder-blades.
There he had dropped, and the old floundering sea,
The old, fumbling, witless lover-enemy,
Had taken his breath, last office of salt water.

Sections III and IV are in regular stanzas. The former is deservedly one of Slessor's best-known poems. It magically evokes a sense of Cook's adventure and background by the cosy tick-tock of the timepieces in his cabin:

Two chronometers the captain had,
One by Arnold that ran like mad,
One by Kendal in a walnut case,
Poor devoted creature with a hangdog face.

Arnold always hurried with a crazed click-click
Dancing over Greenwich like a lunatic,
Kendal panted faithfully his watchdog beat,
Climbing out of yesterday with sticky little feet.

Part IV, on the other hand, is a rather stilted poem. It begins with a by no means explicit or suitable loquacity, and the use of the archaic word 'wonted' in the second stanza is all the more incongruous in a line rhymed in the latest fashion; and, since 'emotional effects' are supposed to be obtained by 'subtly altering a rhyme', such devices must share the blame when, as here, they are part of a lapse from grace.

Take now 'Five Bells', generally regarded as Slessor's most impressive poem. It comprises some 130 lines of blank verse (except for casual rhymes in the brief introductory passage), with no variations of metre throughout that cannot be paralleled in, say, Shakespeare. It is an elegy on the death of a friend, 'Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells?'

The poet, overlooking Sydney Harbour, and hearing a ship's bell during the night watch, thinks of his friend, now

Nothing except the memory of some bones
Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud;
And unimportant things you might have done,
Or once I thought you did; but you forgot,
And all have now forgotten—looks and words
And slops of beer; your coat with buttons off,
Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales
Of Irish kings and English perfdy,
And dirtier perfdy of publicans
Groaning to God from Darlinghurst.

With that complete aptness of form and living diction, the poem reviews commonplace circumstances that memory endears; and this is done not sentimentally, but deeply, and the more so for its realistic rejection of conventional consolations.

There would have been no need to say so much about Slessor's experimentation but for the customary emphasis on it and also his own almost exclusive concern with it when asked to talk about his work, though he does not blame the reader who cannot acknowledge its intended effects. The proportion of it in his book, as we have seen, is not large; that it attains anything not possible by traditional form and technique is doubtful; it seems to tempt him occasionally into an ambiguity not characteristic of him; and it derives from practices started and continued by other poets as does traditional verse in the ordinary course of things. This is not to say that he lacks originality. I hope that is clear. Any poetaster can alter, loosen, or discard the traditions of verse much more easily than he can master them, escaping their test, and thereby almost any other, by repudiating them; for, as Slessor remarks, these are 'experiments in anarchy of which poets today know very little except by intuitive feeling', and intuitive technique is anybody's whim. I do not want to spoil any poet's fun by stopping him from keeping up with the Sitwells or whoever might set the fashion for the time being, and in any case there is not need to be dowdy. I merely deny that new tricks mean anything fundamental.

Quite another thing is the relaxation of metre and diction that Slessor practices, as illustrated already, in common with poets of our time. This is seen no less in the first poem in his book, 'Earth Visitors', than in the last one, 'Five Bells'. You may dislike or see no particular reason for the lengthening or shortening or rumping of lines here and there, but it amounts to little more than the stimulus of discord or *trabato* resolved or compensated in the course of the prevailing concord or rhythm. As for diction, though the earlier poem is of the costume or period sort, it is worded in no 'prithae' manner, but is as natural (even in the final

symbolical visitation of Venus) as the confiding contemplation that makes 'Five Bells' convincing and indeed affecting as an expression of feeling in modern circumstances.

It is no less so with the period poems generally. There are about twenty—such as 'Nuremberg', etched clearly as seen from the 'high, sun-steeped room'; the atmospherically similar interior of 'Heine in Paris', portraying the stricken poet, tended by his devoted 'Mouche', with so much to remember now towards the end, yet all amounting to little more than 'A cadence or two of love, a song that had stroked men's ears'; then there is the long but never dull verse-dialogue in which Laurence Sterne's dallying brings him the girl's angry dismissal of him as 'The Man of Sentiment'; also the delightful lyric of 'Rubens' Innocents', 'those tumbling babes of heaven'; the more flippant charm of 'La Dame Du Palais de la Reine'; 'The Atlas' series of 'Cuckooz Contrey', a term taken from an old map and meaning 'regions unexplored'; and notably the 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' already described.

The 'Music' series can perhaps claim indulgence for its attempts to pass beyond description to equivalents of an art, to the condition of which, as Pater put it, all other arts aspire, though they do so in vain. Slessor observes the Australian countryside in half a dozen poems, chiefly perhaps 'Country Towns' of the days before every farm had its motor vehicle:

Country towns, with your willows and squares,
And farmers bouncing on barrel nares
To public houses of yellow wood
With 1860 over their doors,
And that mysterious race of Hogans
Which always keeps General Stores.

Who else would have thought of the aptly teasing generalization of the last two lines in that quotation?

Slessor's more specifically philosophical moods seem to imply that he would agree with Thomas Mann that there are no answers to ultimate questions. He looks up to the sky in 'Stars':

But I could not escape from those tunnels of nothingness,
The cracks in the spinning Cross, nor hold my brain
From rushing for ever down that terrible lane,
Infinity's trapdoor, eternal and merciless.

Much the same is his confronting of mortality in 'Five Bells' and the ironical rather than expectant finale of 'The Old Play':

Play us not false;
Be cruel, O Gods,
Not fabulous.

So he turns to life's actualities now or in the past, not in any sociological or moral sense, but inclining towards vivid themes or making them vivid when they are not especially so, and the result is a body of poetry that gives him a high place in the literature of our country.

Kenneth Slessor*

T. INGLIS MOORE

AMONG Australian poets Kenneth Slessor emerges today as the finest craftsman of them all. He has mastered poetic form most completely, using it with the greatest brilliance and originality. In his skilful hands it moves like a gentled brumby, still vibrant with high mettle yet responsive to the light touch on the rein or the pressure of the knee. In his *Five Bells* each poem has its own individual shape and moves to its own distinctive rhythm. These fit the conception so closely that we feel the poem could have been written in this way only, and in no other. Subject and treatment have merged into the happiest of unions, integrated seamlessly, compelling us into conviction that the unity is indissoluble.

Slessor is, of course, far more than our dearest technician. Explorer of many lands, he has returned home the richer for each voyage, his poetry laden with glittering trophies. As an early romantic he wandered into exotic courts of Kublai Khan. Later, as a more experienced and sceptical traveller, he looked in on Laputa and Cuckooz Country and grew cynical in the waste land of Ezra-Eliot. Finally, with the way chartered by those two sturdy Captains, Cook and Dobbins, he arrived home as a realist to win his richest cargoes by listening to local trams and five bells struck across Sydney Harbour.

He enjoys, indeed, a variety of qualities. Gifted with an exceptional acuteness of the senses, he renders both inward feelings and outward objects with a nervous sensibility or intensity of perception akin to those of D. H. Lawrence. He gives even the inanimate chronometers of Captain Cook an almost Dickensian vitality by witty and vivid re-creations. As a satirist he can compass a Swift-like savagery. As a lyricist he modulates his rhythms to novel yet fitting effect, catches the tempo of colloquial speech, and launches his lines off with dynamic dactyls. He surprises with wholly original images, and delights with the sharp pungency of pictorial words, so that we come upon rivers 'shambling over the straw-coned country,' hear 'Cannons that cry Tirduf, Tirduf,'

*This essay is based on a fuller study which will appear soon in *Nine Australian Poets*, a revised and expanded form of the author's *Six Australian Poets* (the two other additions being Dame Mary Gilmore and 'Furnley Maurice'—Frank Winnot.)

are left 'blinking at beaches milked by suck-mouth tides, foaming with ropes of bubbles,' and see the Harbour with its flying gulls and dead bodies where 'Time flows past them like a hundred yachts.' Finally, we have Slessor the tragic poet of disillusionment, for ever pressing his face vainly against those earthly windows allowing him to see a reality of beauty which the glassy barriers prevent him from passing beyond to have and to hold. He is a grim Calvinist stressing our doom of predestined mortality. Again and again he flies the Jolly Roger at his mast-head, with the skull and crossbones grinning balefully as reminders of our common fate. He insists on facing, with an inflexible realism, the reduction of life to nothingness by the twin powers of Time and Death who are symbolized by the ever-flowing, irresistible sea.

Despite all these qualities, each forceful in its way, Slessor's poetry is most striking in its inherent sense of form. He is an architect building his constructions with a special genius for poetic design. This is only to be expected, perhaps, since no other Australian poet has concentrated on experimenting in form as continuously and effectively as Slessor has done throughout his poetic development, drawing on all the resources quarried by modern techniques. Certainly none has displayed such creative originality in constructing novel forms fitting their special functions so felicitously.

Here my conviction is deepened, too, by the absence in his best work of any birth-marks tokening the pangs of poetic travail. The poem arrives as if without labour, as if it were a Topsy that had not been born at all but 'just growned'. Each piece is idiosyncratic, bearing eyes, hair, and quirk of nose different from the features of other children sprung from the fertile marriage of Slessor's intellect and sensibility. Yet there is no doubt about their ancestry. Other influences have entered into their composition, as varied family strains enter into any child, but these have been absorbed. The poems are Slessor's own, stamped with his individual idiom. No other poet in this country—or elsewhere, for that matter—would have so worded, shaped, and cadenced such striking achievements as his 'Five Visions of Captain Cook', the superb evocation of 'Sleep', or that surprising and satisfying elegy, 'Five Bells'.

His genius for form shows itself undeniably, moreover, in the fact that he is always in the *Five Bells* collection the master, and not the servant, of his form. In the earlier *Earth-Visitors* and *Cuckooz Contry* volumes he had often, like Browning, let the verse run away from him and cut its own pyrotechnic capers for the sheer fun of the fireworks. In these first and middle periods of development he makes the pre-occupation with form too patent, and even when the subject is treated with robust exuberance one senses that the performance is dictated by the head, not the heart. The influences on the formal side, too, are noticeable. In these respects Slessor never attained the natural gusto

combined with extraordinary originality of poetic design which made Browning unrivalled in all English poetry as the master of creative originality in verse form and treatment. Slessor borrowed, adapted, and combined until he finally wrought out his own constructions. Browning never had need to borrow, and invented his own verse patterns with a fecund singularity. Slessor worked his way towards a similar singularity, arriving at the highly individual patterns of the *Five Bells* pieces via the experiments in *Cuckooz Contry*. In the later poems, his cometary rockets, his roman candles and catharine wheels, fly, whirl, and blaze in gallant display, but now he touches them off, not for their own brilliant sakes, but to use that brilliance to illuminate some subject in the most suitable fashion. Thus each piece is more than a brief burst of bravura flashing; it is also, and intrinsically, an illumination. It is a memorable revelation, with the form made one with the theme, whilst the earlier intellectual detachment has disappeared to give place to the quivering sensibility of passion and a deeply felt philosophy of tragedy.

After his gift for creative form, the most notable aspect of Slessor as a poet is the development already mentioned. He is three poets at least, as he himself indicated by dividing his final collection, *One Hundred Poems*, into three sections covering the periods 1919-1926, 1927-1932, and 1933-1939. These divisions correspond to the three main books of each period: *Earth-Visitors*, *Cuckooz Contry*, and *Five Bells*, published respectively in 1926, 1932, and 1939. The first of these was largely a reprint of *Thief of the Moon*, published in 1924, whilst the second contained the 'Five Visions of Captain Cook', which appeared in 1931 in *Trio*, by Kenneth Slessor, Harley Matthews, and Colin Simpson. It is interesting to note that *One Hundred Poems* reprinted twenty-five out of the thirty-six poems in *Earth-Visitors* and the whole of both *Cuckooz Contry* and *Five Bells*, so that it contains practically all Slessor's poetic work. Also may be mentioned *Darlinghurst Nights*, 1933, illustrated by 'Virgil', which contains witty, sophisticated verses on such ladies as Kimono Cora and Cucumber Kitty. This book shows the skill of Slessor's craftsmanship in light verse, but need not be considered in any serious study of his poetry.

Each of the three main books published before the general collection represents a decided advance upon its predecessor, and the *Five Bells* clinched Slessor's claim to the front rank of Australian poets as a whole. The *One Hundred Poems* stands alongside R. D. Fitzgerald's *Moonlight Acre*: these two volumes are the most important in our contemporary poetry. They show that Fitzgerald and Slessor are the two practising poets in Australia today who have a calibre clearly higher than those of their contemporaries. After them, as Mr. H. M. Green points out rightly in his *Fourteen Minutes*, 'among Australian poets of the present generation there comes a gap,' although this gap is filled by

Douglas Stewart with his *The Fire on the Snow* if we take verse drama into account.¹ I disagree with Mr. Green, however, when he regards FitzGerald as 'the leader of the Australian poets of today,' with Slessor undoubtedly next after him. Rather the two poets go together as equals, each first-class in his own field. Both are modernists, intellectuals combining romance and realistic elements. Both have distinctive imaginative force and verbal energy. FitzGerald is the weightier, with deeper philosophic content, closer thinking, and more robust affirmation of life, but Slessor is the more original craftsman with keener wit, richer colour, and sharper sensuous tang. As both poets are only in their early forties, they should go on producing and progressing, and any final estimate can only be made upon their fully completed work, even if that work already stands out above other contemporary poetry by virtue of its unquestionable maturity.

In reaching that maturity of thought and expression, Slessor went through three stages which displayed, along with separateness and progression, a common thread of continuity, so that we watch the unfolding of an active, experimental mind. In this regard it may be said that nothing is more absorbing than following the artistic and spiritual journeyings of a complex, developing poet. In our own time, for instance, Yeats has made that astonishing journey of his from the beautiful, mist-wavering Deirdre and Cuchulain of a melodious Celtic Twilight to the sharp economy of *An Acre of Grass* and the hard actualities or condensed symbols of such later poems as 'Easter, 1916' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'. It is a far cry, too, with T. S. Eliot from *The Waste Land* to *Murder in the Cathedral*. Amongst Australian poets we have Brennan's change from the grand but often laboured solidity of *Lith* to the easy fluidity of *The Wanderer* sequence, the progression of O'Dowd from the inflated rhetoric of *Dawnward?* to the inspired simplicity of *Alma Venus*, and the conventional minor lyrics of Furnley Maurice developing into the free-verse realism of the satiric *Melbourne Odes*. In such developments we note trends from romanticism to realism, from luxuriance to incisive economy, from conventional 'poetic diction' or rhetoric to a contemporary, individual idiom. These three trends, I think, are notable also as progressive changes in Slessor's poetic development, reflected in his various periods.

In the first (or *Earth-Visitors*) stage, the young poet of twenty-five years is largely romantic in theme and literary in diction. The luxuriance comes in his spirit and subject, however, rather than in treatment, since he displayed from the first a gift for craftsmanship and a disciplined sense of design. Indeed, the instinct for form creates effectiveness

for pieces slight in content. The best poems here show traces of workmanship, but move easily and decisively, giving us the vivid painting of 'Rubens' Innocents', the skilful blending of single rhyme, double off-rhymes, and internal assonance in the stanzas in Section X of 'Music', depicting suggestions raised by Chopin. Even better is Section VIII of 'Music', inspired by Wagner, which commences with a blare of horns in a verbal scherzo and then, in the second stanza, drops into a lovely adagio with melodious, if over-deliberate, variations on a recurrent theme, whilst the tonal music is secured by the voweling and variations in rhyme, the rhythm is highly original, the ripple of the anapaests strangely slowed by the closing spondee in alternate lines which comes like a strong hand suddenly placed on the shoulder of someone hastening in flight.

If the strength of the *Earth-Visitors* stage lies in its form, the weakness is equally apparent in its content. As an intellectual Slessor is in revolt against Georgian romanticism; his dramatic poem 'The Man of Sentiment' uses the figure of Laurence Sterne to flay sentimentalism. He indicates his alternative when the singing girl Catherine tells Sterne she will leave him for lustier lads who will clip her with hotter lips. Thus sentimentalism is rejected for sensualism, and this first stage of Slessor is a sensual one, with stress on the erotic. It is the period dominated by Norman Lindsay and Hugh McCrae, the heyday of that brief journal *Vision*. Love and beauty are exalted in a cosmopolitan universe where Slessor dreams with Heine in Paris, sees Dürer gravitating at intaglios in Nuremberg, paints the courts of Kublai Khan, drinks of nescience with Lao-Tzu, and renders the music of Wagner and Beethoven, Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. It is an exotic world, highly coloured, tenanted by gods and kings and fabulous philosophers, by 'good roaring pistol-boys' and 'good roistering easy maids'.

Thus Slessor has scraped the gilt off the conventional romantic ginger-bread only to concoct luscious confections of his own which are equally romantic. This ruffling world of drinking and wenching is unreal, and the wenchs of *Vision* are essentially visionary. Their very plurality proves it, since, as Chesterton put it in his analysis of Shaw: 'Every man falls in love; and no man falls into free love.' The wenchs are ready-made—as abstract as Norman Lindsay's monotonous, callipygous, unindividualized females—and the wenching is bloodless make-believe. So, too, the Kublai Khans are rococo fancy, skilful painting technically but philosophically only symbols of escapism.

Far more significant in *Earth-Visitors* are the verses revealing Slessor as the modern artist, the first gleanings of the lode which was to pay most richly in later workings. Even at this first voluptuous feast in the halls of *Vision* the poet was deeply conscious of the skull grinning mouthlessly on the banqueting table, and this grim *memento mori* is the constant

¹ It is now filled, or even closed by Judith Wright with her recent volume, *The Moving Image*.

element in all his work, giving it an undercurrent of bitter continuity. The images of death—the skull, bones, and ghosts—are favourite motifs reappearing at every stage of his progress until they culminate in *Five Bells*. A number of poems in *Earth-Visitors* form variations on the old theme of Ecclesiastes, 'Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas'. Poems like 'The Ghost', 'Heine in Paris', 'Taoist', 'Next', 'Turn', and 'Winter Dawn' all repeat the same voicing of vanity, and cry of love and beauty, like the leaves in 'Mangroves', 'in vain . . . in vain . . . in vain. . .'. In 'Stars' he builds up a romantic picture of the stars as 'flink-boys of Venus' and candles of beauty only to smash it by an abrupt transition to himself despairingly beating them off with their 'bottomless, black cups of space between their clusters':

But I could not escape those tunnels of nothingness,
The cracks in the spinning Cross, nor hold my brain
From rushing forever down that terrible lane,
Infinity's trap-door, eternal and merciless.

This is Slessor speaking from mind and heart, uttering a cry of emotion that is worth a score of artificial pieces like 'Thieves' Kitchen' and 'Marco Polo'.

In his second stage, represented by *Cuckooz Contry* and covering the years 1927-32, Slessor is essentially the intellectualist, and the satiric note grows stronger to stress the constant theme of frustration. Instead of McCrae and Lindsay, the influences have become those of Swift in regard to outlook and of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in respect to form. It is significant that poems are entitled 'Gulliver' and 'Ghubbubhrat' (a title taken from *A Voyage to Laputa*), while both 'The Atlas' section and the 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' reflect Swift's combination of the satiric and fantastic in voyages of exploration. The exotic land of Cuckooz Contry—a name derived from an old manuscript map—resembled the romantic one of *Earth-Visitors* at first blush, and some of the properties are similar, but it is conceived, not in lusty voluptuousness, but in dry, ironic terms. With the highly sophisticated wit, too, goes a grimmer sense of bitterness felt at death and human vanity. The bizarre was rendered in *Earth-Visitors* with obvious relish in its strange sights and sounds, but here it is rendered partly for its own picturesque-ness but also because it symbolizes psychological truths. 'The Sea-fight', for instance, evokes a grim picture of the 'old, patient, baleful, spying Sea', and here, vividly imaged, effectively underlined by a grumbling assonance, Slessor voices that symbolism of the sea as image of time, death, futility, and rescence which recurs in the later 'Out of Time' and 'Five Bells'.

In the section of *Cuckooz Contry* called 'The Old Play' Slessor uses a favourite image of the world as a theatre and life as a stale farce

in the spirit of cynical sophistication used by Pound and the earlier Eliot. Every now and then, however, the real Slessor bursts into this nonchalance and smashes its brittle elegance with a passionate cry of despair. Thus the unity of this section is cleft by the incongruity between attitudes fundamentally contradictory—the flippant cynicism which is a negation of feeling in its treatment of life as a sorry jest of frustration and the deeper disillusionment which utters a vibrant Swift-like protest at its sorriest. On the whole, the Pound-Eliot attitude is predominant, whilst the modernist forms derive patently from 'Ripostes', 'Mauberley', 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', and 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Biestein with a Cigar'.

Easily the best poems of *Cuckooz Contry*, to my mind, are those in the Captain Cook series, 'Captain Dobbin', and such realistic pieces as 'Country Towns'. Here Slessor tackles life at first hand, although the romantic element enters in with stories of an adventurous past in exploration of perilous seas and strange shores. Here, in a highly flexible free or blank verse, romance and realism are blended to make a new and potent draught. Here the old frustration, cynicism, and bitterness are gone; instead a fresh, strong wind of healthy purpose and hard-won achievement blows through these tales of hardy mariners. There is great gain, too, in ease and naturalness as Slessor delineates Captains Dobbin, Home, and Cook or pictures Cook's officers calmly pointing their sextants at the sun:

I've never heard
Of sailors aching for the longitude
Of shipwrecks before or since. It was the spell
Of Cook did this, the phylacteries of Cook.
Men who ride broomsticks with a mesmerist
Mock the typhoon. So, too, it was with Cook.

If the varied themes and forms of *Cuckooz Contry* denote a Slessor still trying out his powers, in *Five Bells* he sails into his home port triumphantly bearing his own idiom. In his first stage he was partly derivative, despite his good craftsmanship, while there was weakness in subject matter; in his second he was brilliant but artificial, frankly experimental, responsive to influences until he charted his own passage in the Cook series of poems; in the third stage he is completely himself, rich with assurance in his subjects and master of his medium. The two trends I mentioned earlier are seen in their fulfilment: realism of theme and incisiveness of treatment. There are only twenty poems in *Five Bells*, but almost all are notable. Half-a-dozen of them—'Five Bells', 'Sleep', 'To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae', 'Last Trams', 'Out of Time', and 'Sensuality' should be included in any anthology of Australian poetry if space be available—together with 'Five Visions of Captain Cook'.

Five Bells represents a culmination of previous work: the climax of a varied but gradual development. It hardly contains a poem which does not have affinities in idea or form with previous poems. The title-piece, for instance, emerges logically from 'The Seafight', 'Waters', 'Captain Dobbin', and the Cook series, the latter being anticipatory in form as well as in the association with the sea. The only verses in *Five Bells* which strike up new paths, instead of advancing along tracks previously blazed, are 'Sleep' and 'Sensuality', direct transcriptions of perceptions of a type not attempted before.

This last volume shows Slessor as two poets with two dominant moods and themes, both developed from earlier work in a natural continuity. One is the sensualist, translating sense impressions into words with a fierce intensity and a delicate precision. But this time the perceptions are realistic excerpts from experience instead of excursions into imaginary worlds. Now he writes of William Street, local trams, and Sydney Harbour instead of Tartary courts and Cuckooz Contry. The other poet is the intellectualist who has matured into a grim philosopher of time and death. The macabre touch, always present, has become stronger. The sense of desolation, again, is sharpened by the fact that it is aroused by actualities. The philosophy is not only asserted, but felt and expressed in amazingly concrete terms; the hard clarity of the intellect works in images and sense-words burning with emotional heat.

If *Five Bells* is notable as a continuation which is also a progression, it is even more striking in the felicity and originality of the forms employed. Each of the verses is forceful with its own freshness of form, so that we find it, in a phrase of Keats, 'coming continually on the Spirit with a fine suddenness'. As R. D. Fitzgerald put it brilliantly in a review article on *Five Bells*: 'There is always unexpectedness; a new poem is always a new experience.' Take, for example the poem 'Sleep', which must be quoted in its entirety to reveal its superb technique:

Do you give yourself to me utterly,
Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,
Not as a fugitive, blindly and bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?
Yes, utterly.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With hunger waves continually.

And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,

Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so—

Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,
The rising and driving forth,
Life with remorseless forceps beckoning—
Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

This poem is a cunningly contrived lullaby, an incantation invoking sleep with all the abracadabra of modern verse devices. Dissonances such as *estuary*, *mysteriously*, and *continually* are mingled with internal assonance such as *blindly*, *ride*, and then reinforced by internal half-rhymes such as *carry you* and *ferry you* or *clamber*, *slumber*, *dumb*, and *chamber*, and even by internal full rhyme such as *cave* and *lave*. The effect of such an intricate counterpoint is an emphasis on the repeated and varying vowel sounds, giving a curiously hypnotic effect, the hypnosis being especially effected by the deep-noted drumming in *chamber*, *slumber*, *dumb*, and *chamber*—like the soporific, bass-keyed buzzing of bumble-bees. So, too, the first stanza gives the settling down on the pillow, the *Yes, utterly* signifies the point at which the will makes the final resigned acceptance of sleep's invitation, followed by the gradual flowing into slumber until mind and senses are completely engulfed. Then the last stanza pictures, with equal exactness, yet with fitting brevity, the awakening, with the unwilling hauling forth into the world of wakefulness denoted by the labour of the harsh consonants, like the loud glaring of intrusive sunlight on the sleep-drugged eyes.

On top of all this, Slessor, piling Ossa on Pelion, makes the rendition more complete by the imaging of sleep as a return to the womb of the unconscious, moving from surrender to sleep's embrace to the union rendered by the sharp driving *Yes, utterly*, and then to the conception of the stream-borne seed, the pre-natal growth, and then, finally, to the travail of awakening, with the hard voweling of *rising*, *driving*, and *life* giving the repeated cry of the labour pains, completed with the last effort of the parturition in the spondee consonantal harshness of *harsh birth*.

The whole is more than a mesmeric incantation or the mastery development of an image by all the resources of concept, sound, and rhythm; it is the very spirit of sleep itself called into being, creation at a high pitch. Form and content have blended indissolubly, leaving a creative act modern in method but universal in its terms. No wonder Hugh McCrae said that 'Sleep' was the best poem in the *Five Bells* volume and it 'might be bound up with poems by Donne, and not sink'. I know of no poem in any anthology of modern verse which

offers a more memorable sense-transcription or develops an original image with greater fullness and mastery.

This article, unfortunately, is too brief to contain an adequate appreciation of Slessor's qualities as revealed in *Five Bells* and, indeed, in *One Hundred Poems*. There is, for instance, the easy command of a wide variety of forms, modernist and traditional alike, and the technique used to such effectiveness in 'Last Trams', 'Sensuality', and the poem to McCrae. However dazzling its virtuosity, each technique is always ancillary to the poem's purpose, convincing us that the formal dress is the only right wear for the thought. Equally striking is the assurance of the rhythms, expanding and contracting, curved or cubed at the stress of the emotional intonation, compassing a strength and flexibility beyond those of any other Australian poet. This rhythm is dynamic and sinewy, often launching off with explosive dactyls, shunning the conventional anapaest like the plague, avoiding both the metrical sing-song of romantic verse and the rhetorical roll cultivated by Wilnot and Baylebridge. In nothing is Slessor more contemporary, too, than in the colloquial character of his later rhythms, since many of the later poems are not songs but colloquies—dramatic monologues charged with Browningsque ease and liveliness. Since rhythm derives from emotion, moreover, Slessor's rhythmic vitality is an undeniable testament of his sincerity of feeling, disproving the claim of Mr. Brian Elliott that the poet lacks passion. Such a charge is curious, indeed, in face of Slessor's unusual keenness of nervous sensibility that reveals a laceration of nerves quivering under the thrusts and stabs of existence. Often he becomes a faquir lying on a bed of nails which tear the flesh; a flagellant anguished beneath the harsh whips of life. This agony of intrusion into flesh and mind alike is conveyed by frequent images of ruthless knives, as well of needles and skewers, conveyed with a fierceness of feeling that turns at times to brutality, so that McCrae can call Slessor a 'poet of beauty and cruelty'.

Another quality of Slessor is his continuous and admirable concreteness of language, rich in colour sense, highly pictorial, tinged with sensuous imagery. Like Blake, he abhors the abstract in Spectre or Emanation; he practises the belief of Benedetto Croce that 'Art is life within the four corners of an image'. Thus many of his lines, brilliant and vivid, glitter in the memory, such as these in 'Out of Time':

I saw Time flowing like the hundred yachts
That fly behind the daylight, foxed with air;
Or piercing, like the quince-bright, bitter slats
Of sun gone thrusting under Harbour's hair.

... Out of all reckoning, out of dark and light,
Over the edges of dead Nows and Heres,

Blindly and softly, as a mistress might,
He keeps appointments with a million years.

The gulls go down, the body lies and rots,
And time flows past them like a hundred yachts.

or these, from 'Five Bells':

Why do I think of you, dead man, why thierv
These profitless lodgings from the flukes of thought
Anchored in Time?

But I hear nothing, nothing . . . only bells,
Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time.

Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,
There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait—

Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales

Of Irish kings and English perfidy,

And dirtier perfidy of publicans

Groaning to God from Darlinghurst.

Finally, turning from those elements of style and form in which Slessor so excels, we come to his philosophy and find that his work reveals, first, an acute relish of life with its beauty and love, and second, a sense of frustration which passes into resentment, and finally an angry despair at the victory over life won by time and death, a victory which reduces reality to an irrevocable nothingness. Each of his three main volumes ends in pessimism: *Earth-Visitors*, after all the roistering and wenching, closes with frustration, the dissolution of life, and the passing of the bells of Music; *Cackooz Contry* finishes with a desolate appeal to the man-made gods not to leave us 'crying in emptiness'; *Five Bells* concludes with the title-poem as an elegy on a drowned friend, gone beyond recall, unable to make himself heard beyond death, with five bells ringing a forlorn evangel of nothingness across the Harbour.

'The true disciple of philosophy,' said Socrates in the *Phaedo*, 'is likely to be misunderstood by other men; they do not perceive that he is ever pursuing death and dying.' This pursuit of death is Ken Slessor's main preoccupation as a poet; it ends in nescience, and he emerges as a grim nihilist. Like Brennan, he is essentially a tragic poet, beset by doom, and his finest poem is the elegy, *Five Bells*, where the tension so finely maintained throughout is clenched at last on predestined emptiness. Brennan in his desolate eye blew a trumpet of defiant will; Shelley could find, after his pursuit of death in his poetry, the comfort of a pantheistic immortality voiced in *Adonais*. But the tragedy of Slessor strikes deeper in that he finds no comforting defiance or immortality in his night of disillusionment and despair; there is only the tortured bitterness of a realistic, clear-eyed acceptance of the annihilating dooms wrought on man by time and death.

Slessor Twenty Years After

Why The Poems Survive

A. D. HOPE

SLESSOR'S reputation is established and the qualities on which that reputation stands need no defining today. It is perhaps more interesting to consider the reasons why these poems, mostly written between the First and the Second World Wars, have survived their era, when so little of its poetry is read today, and when the particular school of which Slessor was the most brilliant representative is now little more than a literary curiosity. For if the movement which is associated with a group of writers and artists in Sydney in the twenties, a movement of which Jack and Norman Lindsay were the most characteristic figures, is now as dead as *Art Nouveau* and as out of date as Imagism, there is no doubt that Slessor's poetry is neither dead nor out of date, even if it looks old-fashioned in the setting of contemporary methods and styles. Slessor was not yet twenty when he became a member of this curious little Renaissance and he took its colouring thoroughly. The only thing that distinguishes his earlier verse in the pages of *Vision* from the rest of that vociferous and rather pansy production is that they are well written and most of the other contributions are over-written, pretentious or merely adolescent. Looking at them forty years later the writers and artists associated with *Vision* seem to have been animated by a commendable wish to get away from the stock-tail and bowwangs school, the great mateship picnic, and the literary canons of Clancy's Thumbnaill Dipped in Tar. They wanted Australian writing to re-enter the European tradition of letters, but to re-enter it with a character of its own and not merely as a provincial imitation of contemporary artistic fashions.

They were plainly influenced by those later symbolist poets who, seeking new material for poetry, ransacked all literatures, all mythologies, anthropology and mysticism to form delicious amalgams of allusive reference and evocation. But the Sydney group produced something very different from the symbolism of Stuart Merrill, Francois Viel-Griffin and Gustav Kahn. They were anything but allusive and only superficially erudite. They looked for the material of poetry in a conglomeration of the picturesque commonplaces of romantic reading. A very odd layer-cake it turned out to be. On a foundation of minor

classical mythology—Pan, the satyrs and the centaurs and the nymphs engaged in perpetual games of sexual hide-and-seek, Venus and Cupid, Aristophanes and Petronius—they erected a Middle Ages compounded of Boccaccio, Provençal courts of love, the thieves' kitchens and willing wenches of Villon's Paris and a pantomime version of the Arabian Nights. The Renaissance supplied them with Rabelais and Brantome's *Femmes Galantes*, Marlowe's brawling taverns and Shakespeare's Bawdy, the seventeenth century with periwigs and trollops and buccaneers, the eighteenth with Chinoiserie, the spice islands, nabobbery and Macheathery and Hogarthery, and an aristocratic society of the 'shind and stap-my-vitals school, and ending with the bucks, bruisers and dandies of the Regency and a touch of Baroness Orczy to show that the French Revolution had arrived.

But by now, of course, Australia had been settled and the whole of this curious civilization was transported to Botany Bay where all its inhabitants rubbed shoulders with Currency Lads and Lasses, rum-rebels and bushrangers, while Pan and the satyrs continued to tumble a juicy nymph or two under the eucalypts. Later immigrants continued to arrive from the Paris of Murger, Columbine and Pierrot, set up their stage and the Australian *Vie de Boheme* was complete. Norman Lindsay painted it and the poets versified what he painted.

It was all very exciting and virile, emancipated and assertive, but it smelt of theatrical effects and fancy-dress balls rather than any serious concern with man and his world; there was a forced raffishness about its doctrine of the Life Force that made it both absurd and tawdry; it was amorous, clamorous, sleazy, rumbustious and touched with the essential vulgarity of intellectual pretensions that fail to make their claims good. And yet it represented something important, the first conscious movement of immaturity towards a mature literature, the first movement of provincialism towards autonomy.

Slessor's earlier poetry, like that of R. D. FitzGerald, shows the influence of this school. It was unsuited to FitzGerald's genius and temperament and he soon escaped from it. To Slessor it was congenial enough for him to stay in it and to transform it into something genuine, lasting and alive.

In the first place he had a gift for the expression of the essential texture, shape, character and sensual impact of objects which allowed him to transform the merely ornamental imagist effects of the school into something different, a revelation of the metaphysical essence of the sensual. In earlier poems, they are often mere heaps of shining words for heaps of shining treasures meant to dazzle and astound. But as the essential Slessor emerged, one feels, more and more that an old map, a chronometer, an Australian country town, or corpses on a Mediterranean beach, are presented with a sort of ecstasy of perception which, as

Aldous Huxley says of the flower he observed under the influence of mescaline:

I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement, I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.

Poetry has this power, too, and it is superior to mescaline because it directs the imagination as well as illuminating it, and the first secret of Slessor's poetry is the power of illuminating the miracle of naked existence.

The second is a humanity which saved him from the shallowness of his school. Genuine love soon supplants its seedy amorosness, a manly vigour its animal virility, and a genuine sense of character its taste for theatrical personality. Quite an early poem, *Heine in Paris*, shows this command of the heart which is essential to poetry of any permanence. *Captain Dobbin* and *Five Visions of Captain Cook* are his outstanding successes, in what is very close to the art of Browning, the Browning of *Men and Women* and the dramatic monologues. (It is no longer necessary to apologize for praising a poet by comparing him with Browning and I intend the comparison as high praise.)

But Slessor's great triumph was to take the unpromising material he found to hand, to accept the romantic farrago and create a genuine poetic world. In one of the poems in *the Atlas* he describes the Dutch cartographers' reconstruction of a Netherlands port:

Fox-coloured mansions, lean and tall,
That burst in air but never fall,
Whose bolted shadows, row by row,
Float changeless on the stones below—

Sky full of ships, bay full of town,
A port of waters felled brown:
Such is the world no tide may stir,
Sealed by the great cartographer.

O, could he but clap up like this
My decomposed metropolis,
These other countries of the mind,
So tousel'd, dark and undefin'd!

It is possible to sum up a poet's achievements too neatly and glibly, but if asked to say what Slessor has succeeded in best, I should say that it has been to create a genuine country of the mind for poetry out of material which seems only fit for charades and to have demonstrated that for Australia such a country is as suitable a source of creation as the native landscape.

Kenneth Slessor and the Grotesque

A. C. W. MITCHELL

VINCENT BUCKLEY has observed of Slessor that he is 'a man with a feeling for the grotesque', and that the element of the grotesque is 'not simply a foible of his early days, but is rather a recurring and directing element in his poetry',¹ but he produces no other evidence to support his contention than to detect a 'hint of romantic grotesquerie' in the titles of Slessor's poems. Max Harris also finds in Slessor's poetry a penchant for the grotesque,² and Charles Higham³ and A. D. Hope⁴ support the view by inference. Close examination shows that Slessor's poetry is in fact characterized by this element of the grotesque, an element which appears in the early poems (primarily those written in the early nineteen twenties) as a garish and superficial ornamentation, a precious style, and a deliberate search for the unconventional, but which he learns to control and utilize with considerable effectiveness about the time he writes 'Captain Dobbin'.

A likely origin of this grotesque element can be found in Slessor's association with the 'Vision' school, despite the fact that he himself discounts the significance of this association. His poetry shows the influence of this school in a number of ways. One of the dominant influences on the group was the art of Peter Rubens, either directly or through Norman Lindsay, and it becomes evident that Slessor's imagery is in part a conscious imitation of the grotesque as it appears in Rubens's paintings and consequently in Lindsay's sketches and etchings. The fact that two of his poems are directly concerned with Rubens suggests that Slessor had some knowledge of Rubens's art. Secondly, many of the attitudes of the 'Vision' school can be traced back to the English nineties. Charles Higham has emphasized in his discussion of Slessor's poetry that

... the resemblance to the London literature of the eighteen-nineties is clear: the emotions foppish and desiccated, the physicality puerile and diffused, the discipline imposed rather than operating from within⁵

¹ *Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian* (Melbourne, 1957), pp. 113-14.

² Max Harris, *Kenneth Slessor* (Melbourne, 1963).

³ Charles Higham, 'The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor', *Quadrant*, vol. IV, No. 1.

⁴ A. D. Hope, 'Slessor Twenty Years After', *Bulletin*, June 1, 1963.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 67.

study, but one must be guarded from the temptation of experimenting for an experiment's sake; the only justification for any innovation is the success with which it fills a need. The emotion of a poem must make the experiment, not the experiment the poem.

Before concluding, I may mention briefly the innovations of Robert Bridges. In his great "Testament of Beauty", Dr Bridges calmly refuted the ignorant critic who has accused him of a conservative dwelling in the past. Indeed, this Poet Laureate, who had been regarded by some as hopelessly old-fashioned, was responsible for some of the most daring innovations in modern literary history. I do not refer merely to his abandonment of capitals at the beginning of his lines. I mean instead the new system of spelling which Bridges introduced, a system of spelling admirably suited to the proper pronunciation of poetry, which automatically causes the reader to stress the proper syllables and to skim over those which are intended to be passed rapidly.

In conclusion, I would like to quote two recent semi-definitions of poetry. One is by Humbert Wolfe, an enterprising defender of orthodoxy, who says: "Poetry is to the rest of literature what the violet light is to the spectrum. It is the last and loveliest colour, and points to something invisible beyond itself. The rest of literature points to poetry." The other is by Edith Sitwell, an equally adventurous champion of modernism, who says: "Poetry . . . is the result not of reason, nor of intellect. It is the flower of magic, not of logic." Here, at least, in an admission of poetry's lawless beauty, orthodoxy and experiment meet. I have inflicted a long and possibly tedious examination of this beauty on you, but I cannot help feeling the hopeless despair of a chemist who endeavours to bottle the sunset in a test-tube.'

*Australian Literature**

KENNETH SLESSOR

IT is fourteen years, I think, since I was given the honour of responding to the toast of 'Australian Literature' at a previous dinner of the Australian English Association. That was in 1930, and it was held, I think, in this same hall.

By chance, a few days ago I came across a copy of the address I made on that occasion. Looking at it again, over a space of time in which many unsuspected changes have taken place, both in Australian literature and in myself, I am slightly astonished at the fine immoderation of the terms and views which I had the almighty nerve to express in 1930.

For my part, I had more hair then, and less waist-line. As for Australian literature, it had, I think, more illusions then, and less uncertainty. In fourteen years it has produced works quite comparable to—in fact, I believe, in some respects even more important than—most of the works produced during the thirty years of this century which went before. But to make the dogmatic statements which I made fourteen years ago would require more bravery or carefree faith than I now possess.

Yet certain fundamentals of those views, which were expressed with a positiveness I wish I could feel today, remain unshaken in my mind. Notably, the appeal to literary values, rather than to literary museum-keeping, on which ground I assaulted such a standard anthology as *The Oxford Book of Australasian Verse*.

The importance of cultivating our values, of preserving and defending them, is still a vital one. Much can change in fourteen years, but values do not change. The great fundamentals of all the arts persist from age to age. They persist with a deadly and silent permanence which is at once maddening to the literary anarchist, treacherous sometimes to the literary conservative, and the final argument for good or bad in writing as in painting or in making music. That is, at least, one verity which the passage of the years has proved.

It is to such a movement as this Association, and to its members and to those who share their interests, that the responsibility of cultivating

*An address given at the Twenty-first Anniversary Dinner of the Australian English Association on November 23, 1944.

and preserving our Australian values must largely belong. But those who should be most actively concerned with this eternal vigilance are our critics—I mean, our critics whose words are published. There are many other very good critics whose words are never published, and therefore lost as a major influence. Sometimes we hear the phrase: 'A self-appointed critic.' But if a critic cannot appoint himself, who can? Every reader is his own critic. There is nothing in the National Security Regulations, I believe, to prevent anyone at all from criticizing. In fact, I believe that a reader or student who does not criticize is not properly reading or studying.

But the critics who are really what you might call the Home Guard in the field of literary values are the critics, professional or semi-professional, whose judgments are printed in newspapers or magazines or broadcast over the air, so that they reach the eyes and ears and minds of thousands of others. We have been fortunate in Australia on the whole, I think, with our critics of this kind. Although I have violently disagreed with many, there is not one Australian professional critic in my knowledge who has not a foundation of sincerity. For my part, I have never quarrelled with a critic's honesty. And a basis of sincerity and honesty for criticism is a great thing, no matter how we may disagree with the technical views which are built upon it.

It would be hard to estimate what an enormous influence for good is exercised over contemporary Australian writing, and the writing of the future, by such a critic as Mr. H. M. Green, or by critics such as Mrs. Nettie Palmer or Mr. R. G. Howarth, or by a dozen other writers whose names are less familiar, but whose serious analyses and examinations appear in various magazines. It is possible, from this perspective, to realize also how the currents of the past were swayed by such men as A. G. Stephens, in his less erratic phases, and Bertram Stevens.

The professional critic has not so far had an easy time of it in Australia. His position has been nebulous, his means of living by his work uncertain and sometimes impossible. There have been few periodicals willing to give space to him. Even today, far more attention is paid in daily papers to criticism of painting and music (most of it extremely good) than to criticism of Australian writing. The implication is that the average reader (of whose mentality some newspapers take a rather scornful view) is more directly responsive to painting and music than he is to literature. A big step forward will be made when newspapers are induced to examine current Australian literature as severely as they scan the fields of art and music.

When I deal with this matter of values, too, I find that my indignation on the subject of *The Oxford Book of Australasian Verse* has kept pleasantly warm since 1930. *The Oxford Book* still seems to be designed more on the lines of a museum or a mausoleum than on the lines of a living record of

Australian poetry. The motives and ideas of the editors—their understanding of poetry, their sense of good or bad, major or minor—in short, their values—still seem to me to be quite distorted and mysterious.

We find, for example, that *The Oxford Book* begins with a couple of literary curiosities by William Charles Wentworth and Sir Henry Parkes. If they had been written by John Jones, ticket-of-leave man, or by Henry Higgins, pork butcher, they would certainly never have been revived. It follows that their inclusion in the anthology has been dictated by historical or sentimental reasons, and not by the merciless and completely unsentimental yardstick of pure poetry.

We find thirteen pages of Adam Lindsay Gordon, fourteen pages of Henry Kendall, six pages by a worthy gentleman named Frank S. S. Williamson, six pages of Archibald T. Strong, nine pages of Furnley Maurice, and fourteen pages of cement-like quality by Bernard O'Dowd. In contrast, there are only three short pieces by Leon Gellert, three short pieces by the incomparable Hugh McCrae, four short pieces by Christopher Brennan, two short pieces by Robert Crawford (a writer who has never been given the appreciation which is his due) and two short pieces by that true poet Mary Gilmore.

That *The Oxford Book of Australasian Verse* should be sold publicly, and circulated among many people who are taught or encouraged to regard it as an accurate record or directive of Australian poetry, is an appalling menace to Australian poetry. That is merely my own opinion, and it is, of course, a highly biased opinion. But until the Australian reader of poetry gives up the idea cultivated by *The Oxford Book*—the idea that Adam Lindsay Gordon or Henry Kendall or other canonized gentlemen are touchstones of the slightest poetic significance—we shall, I am convinced, be cursed with a continuance of false values.

At the risk of being prosecuted for treason, I may go farther and say that the stubborn insistence of many authorities—not Mr. H. M. Green or Mr. Howarth—on the point that Henry Lawson is a great Australian poet, and not (as he is) a great and superb writer of Australian prose sketches, is a monstrous injustice both to Henry Lawson and to Australian literary standards. Every time Lawson is referred to popularly or loosely as 'the poet Lawson' is a perpetration of an idea which damages Australian poetry, depreciates Australian prose, and hinders Lawson's genuine claims to greatness as a writer.

Now, from this lookout point which I have adopted—the perception, the appreciation and the cultivation of poetic values—what is to be found in current poetry in Australia today? I think that, first of all, we find a surprising and increasing nucleus of contemporary writers of poetry whose work in every way upholds and does honour to those values. It would be idle to mention them all now—I think of such writers as Robert Fitzgerald, Douglas Stewart, Kenneth Mackenzie, Harley Matthews,

Clive Turnbull, Ronald McCraig, John Quinn, David Campbell, Paul Hasluck, Ian Mudie, Flexmore Hudson, Rex Ingamells, Rosemary Dobson and a number of others.

Because I was a war correspondent for four years, some people have asked me whether I think this war has produced the Australian war-poetry which they evidently consider it should. But what war has ever really produced war-poetry as such? Can we name any war-poem—and by war-poem I do not mean poems such as 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' or Rupert Brooke's idealistic sonnets—can we name any war-poem which has a permanent place in English literature?

The great poems have been inspired by such everyday and unwarlike things as rainbows, field mice and the cries of birds. How many have been written to bazookas or wump-guns? Is it fair, therefore, to expect some abnormal rush of good poetry merely because nations are fighting each other?

Today, as I suppose in any period of unrest, a great number of our old ideas of life and thought and expression are being assailed. This is inevitable, and I think healthy. There is confusion, too, and there has always been confusion. But none of the Australian writers I have just mentioned denies or discredits the foundations on which English poetry—your may call it traditional poetry, if you wish—has been so gloriously established.

They have developed from these foundations, it is true. They have sometimes developed in a manner which may have seemed incomprehensible fifty or even fifteen years ago. But their work defends and vindicates and asserts again the same principles of beauty, of rhythm, of integrity, and of the English tongue, which have moved English poets from Chaucer to Flecker, and from Keats to Yeats.

Hard work is one of those principles—and any school of writing or of any other art which pretends to have found a means of bypassing the necessity for damned hard labour and long thought on the part of the artist is a false one. I am glad to find any school or movement established in Australian writing which, however strange its technical machinery may appear, stands firmly on the fundamentals I have mentioned.

One contemporary Australian school appears to favour a return to the language and imagery of Australian black men. It would, in my personal view, be as reasonable to suggest that an Australian painter should restrict himself to carving kangaroos on the walls of caves—or that, to lead a truly Australian life, we should take up our abode in bark huts and paint our legs with clay.

Yet, if these writers keep their honesty and sincerity, and refuse to betray the faith in which English poets have worked, according to their own lights, since English poetry began, I would emphatically refuse to condemn them.

The attack on our values does not come from sources such as this. The insidious campaign against our minds, against our integrity, against our self-respect as civilized human beings, comes from far deadlier and baser quarters. I do not wish to labour this point, or to insult the intelligence of this audience, by dwelling too long on the catalogue of degradation to which Australian readers and writers and artists have been subjected even within the last six months.

I feel I can mention the case of Mr. Max Harris, for whose ideas and methods of expressing them I haven't the faintest sympathy. I think his views on poetry are entirely misguided. That is my personal privilege, and it is the privilege of anyone else to think that his views are entirely right. But my indignation and sense of revulsion were just as great as those of any of Mr. Harris's warmest admirers when I read the news that Mr. Harris had been fined in a police court for what a police magistrate considered an indecent publication.

The kind of literary censorship which depends upon the views of magistrates or the sensitive aesthetics of policemen is always wrong. It is melancholy to see courts, policemen and legal processes invoked by a fanatical minority to settle points of taste in this manner.

In Sydney, we had the equally nauseating spectacle of an earnest and hard-working painter called upon to dissect the processes of artistic creation in the witness-box. On another occasion, the police force was called in to settle the quarrels of another minority when a landscape was exhibited at a recent show in Sydney. Several authors of my acquaintance have been forced to submit to moral censorship by limotype operators, printers, composers and booksellers as the price of having their books published. That is the kind of attack on values, by ignorance, prejudice or fanatical intolerance, which constitutes the greatest danger to Australian literature and art today.

It is against this increasing enemy that bodies such as the English Association should stand—and I am glad to think that most of them do. I must congratulate this Association on the anniversary of its long and splendid history which is celebrated tonight. The English Association has been, and can be, a force which will defend the beauty and truth of the English tongue against all those who endeavour to degrade and dishonour them. Its value to literature in Australia will always be tremendous—for, in a paraphrase of Walt Whitman, to have great writers, we must have great readers too.