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Kenneth Slessor’s Poetry

By HUGH McCRAE

“The quince-bright bitter slats
Of sun...”

This man, the most alive of us, whose aching songs create sharp joy, forces acknowledgment. Not too late, but in his primal strength; and, light as Ladas, springing on the way. Instead of Time dulling him, he has brightened Time, and held it sunwards, glittering and keen. Poet of beauty and cruelty: he has no compeer to-day.

Despite of nascitur non fit, Slessor was both born and made. He had poetry in the quick, fostered by the “maker.” He was (he is) the “maker.” Genius developing itself. The flower—simple; then complicated. Soon to become ripe, rich, strong—energetically original. Not the ghostly appearance of poems (vaguely restricted emanations), but actual line-upon-line solidly existent stanzas. What has been written suffers and enjoys with its master... wilts or shines in sun or rain.

Once, traipsing arcades of experience, he acquired the bizarre, the odd, the artificial; using them a little; afterwards throwing them away. A necessary stage, full of interest. Now he tastes the world with well-trained senses; inner eye and ear helping the pen, like Aaronic rod, blossom to poetry. Sometimes, there is blood upon the blossom. The pen becomes a horn of his brain... bull-strength behind it—a Taurine poet.

Or else, more strangely, he superimposes one picture upon another: the solidity of life, as in Last Trams, fading under incubi.

Last Trams are manned by Charons, members of the well-known transport family. Tickets are death certificates. A squeezed-up passenger watches, through his reflected face in the window, terraces (that tireless word, monotonous as monotony)—

... terraces
Filled with dumb presences,
Lobbed over mattresses,
Lusts and repentances,
Ardours and solaces,
Passions and hatreds
And love in brass bedsteads...
Lost now in emptiness,
Deep now in darkness,
Nothing but nakedness,
Rails like a ribbon
And sickness of carbon,
Dying in distances.

At last,

... They rattle into void,
Stars of a film without a plot,
Snippings of idiot celluloid.

What shall we say of Joe, "long dead," "who lives between Five Bells"? A real man, they say, who tumbled into Sydney harbour twenty odd years ago—on a dark night, in pouring rain—and was never seen afterwards.

The nerves, naked. Morse signals over shrugged-up shoulders of waves.

Night and water
Pour to one rip of darkness, the harbour floats
In air, the Cross hangs upside down in water.

The appearance of the dead man. Memories that fasten about him.

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 perfidy,
And dirtier perfidy of publicans,
Groaning to God from Darlinghurst.

A long cry—that—"to God from Darlinghurst"!

The description of a walk on a lunatic night:

in slab-dark,
So dark you bore no body, had no face,
But a sheer voice that rattled out of air.

A voice that spoke beside me in the bush,
Loud for a breath, or bitten off by wind.

Again,

In Sydney, by the spent aquarium flare
Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper,
We argued about blowing up the world.
How drunken it is. How the words fuzz, grow double, swell up and crack to sparks and ashes in a cahotage of gloom.

A terrible finale. The poet, conjuring up malevolent Rapunzels, thus apostrophizes the dead:

The tide goes over, the waves ride over you,
And let their shadows down like shining hair.
But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend,
Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;
And you are only part of an Idea.

The drowned man, speechless:

All I heard
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal,
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,
Five bells.

The best of this best book is "Sleep," which might be bound up with poems by Donne, and not sink. It has affinity with Donne's work; but, if the poets' birth dates could be exchanged, the affinity would remain—suspicionless.

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 huger 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 the driving forth,
Life with remorseless forceps beckoning—
Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.