On the Personal Element in Kenneth Slessor’s Poetry
Author(s): Adrian Mitchell
Source: Antipodes, Vol. 5, No. 2 (December 1991), pp. 84–90
Published by: Wayne State University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41958300
Accessed: 17-10-2019 03:53 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Wayne State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Antipodes
On the Personal Element in Kenneth Slessor’s Poetry

ADRIAN MITCHELL

The Guy Howarth papers held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, do not seem to have been much visited. Whether they contain treasures still to be ascertained; but they do include a number of letters from Kenneth Slessor to Guy Howarth, together with a substantial batch of Howarth’s notes—written in a minute hand, smaller even than Slessor’s and rarely with a sharp pencil. They are approximate records of interview, aides mémoires perhaps, relating to the years just after the war when Howarth became acquainted with Slessor, at that stage clearly Australia’s leading poet. Howarth’s notes appear to be in chronological order. (It would be a great pity if future researchers were accidentally to shuffle the small squares of paper.)

The Slessor letters begin in August 1944, in apparent response to a request by Howarth for some poems for inclusion in an anthology. In the preceding years Slessor had similarly been asked for poems. The entry in his war diary for 21 March 1941, just before he accompanied the Australian troops to Greece, records that Slessor had received a letter from Angus & Robertson, “asking for poems to be used in their forthcoming anthology of Australian poetry in 1940—but of course I haven’t written anything since ‘Five Bells’” (212). One observes that “of course,” suggesting as it does that Slessor is attempting to impress an unacknowledged reader; which in turn raises a question about the candor of his reflections in his diaries.

Slessor responded to Howarth by offering him “Beach Burial”: “I came across some rather fragmentary verse which might do, although I am very conscious of its defects” (Slessor to Howarth, 24 August 1944). He was similarly depreciatory about another poem, “Polarities,” which he offered Howarth for Southernly in 1948. In each instance he is curiously diffident, perhaps a little awed, unnecessarily, by Howarth’s academic status, or maybe his academic address.

On the other hand, that diffidence could have been habitual with him, for as Herbert Jaffa showed in his study, Kenneth Slessor (1971), Slessor was quite guarded about some aspects of his poetry whereas he was remarkably candid about other details. In a series of articles written for the Sydney Daily Telegraph in 1967, Slessor summed up “Five Bells,” his most complex poem, as “fundamentally . . . an expression of the relativeness of time,” and considered in this light, “the personal allusions are unimportant” (Monday, 31 July 1967). That, Jaffa argued, was both right and wrong, though he stops well short of suggesting that Slessor might have been disingenuous.

Slessor’s attitude to the substantial facts of his poems is curious. He did not have to wear his heart upon his sleeve, of course; and the poetry itself should be our surest guide. But even with his major poems there are odd and perhaps defensive entanglements. The elegiac impetus of “Five Bells,” for example, a poem about a friend of his named Joe Lynch, is thrown into question by Slessor’s mistake in giving, in the same Daily Telegraph article, the date of Joe Lynch’s death as being in the early 1930s—that is, only a matter of a few years before the poem was written. In another letter to Howarth, Slessor informed him that, according to his old manuscript book, “Five Bells” was completed in January 1937. And in the essay “Reply to Elliott” he said that he wrote the poem between August 1935 and January 1937. The “dead man,” he wrote in the Daily Telegraph piece, “whose life is re-lived ‘between the double and the single bell’ was named Joe Lynch. He was a friend of my youth.”

In fact Joe Lynch had drowned in the previous decade, in May 1927. It is an unusual mistake for Slessor, notoriously a man fussy about detail, to make, and especially odd if Joe Lynch is the subject of the elegy. What is more, Slessor persisted with that mistake, reprinting it as late as 1970, the year before he died, in his prose collection Bread and Wine (198). As we now know, from the work of Peter Kirkpatrick and Dennis Haskell (see for example Australian Literary Studies, May 1988), Slessor was not in Sydney but in Melbourne at the time of Joe Lynch’s death. Memory, the tide that does not flow indeed . . . All the evidence seems to suggest that Jaffa is right, that the poem is only apparently an elegy. Some other emotion than grief at the loss of a friend—a friend, moreover, of only a few years’ acquaintance—informs this poem.

Slessor’s chance remark—though Hal Porter’s riveting account, in The Extra (1975), of his acquaintance with Slessor rests on an unswerving, and unnerving, conviction that Slessor left nothing to chance, that everything he did and said was deliberate—prompts speculation yet again about what was happening at the close of Slessor’s poetic career. He had commenced publishing his poems in 1919. (In the Howarth papers, however, is a juvenile piece, “Bush Brownies,” dated 1915 and accompanied by illustrations in the Gumnut Babies manner.) By 1926 he had enough poems to bring out his first volume, Earth-Visitors, poems mainly of his years as one of the young editors of Vision, and showing the very potent influence of Norman Lindsay. This, he was to assert in an essay collected in Bread and Wine, was most importantly manifest in the insistence on the concrete image, the “abhorrence of abstraction” (124). That essay is possibly the one he told Howarth, in 1952, that
That the excitement seems to be empty headed and what is the nature of the relationship between it and encouraged by critics as acute as James McAuley, who element in Slessor's poetry nevertheless persists, editions of his collected poems attest.

Reflections on those final years are no doubt what Slessor, and others, would regard as impertinent; also, perhaps, irrelevant. The urge to inspect the personal element in Slessor's poetry nevertheless persists, encouraged by critics as acute as James McAuley, who recognized that "the improvement of Slessor's poetry involved a strengthening of its relation to experience (?)". Given Slessor's insistent privacy, and his seeming emotional detachment from so much of his poetry, what is the nature of the relationship between it and his experience, especially his personal experience? What correlation is there between the circumstances of his life and thinking, and the shape and shifting of his creative imagination? And the persistent question: Is there any kind of connection between Slessor's poetic imagination and the fact that he stopped writing poetry altogether?

Slessor's own explanation—"If only I could get away for a year or two"—may be good enough. But it seems too simple for a man as private and complex as Hal Porter, for one, has portrayed him. Besides, Slessor had already spoken his mind about those who would inquire too closely into the private self, feasting their eyes through private panes (not only is that image persistent in Slessor, so is the anguished pun):

Small good you'll get from asking questions;
Walk on your nostrils, like a dog.
("Advice to Psychologists")

Quite right too.

From the outset Slessor had affected the poetic stance of the detached and somewhat pained observer looking out—or in—upon the frantic ecstasies of Life. That the excitement seems to be empty headed and fatuous makes the yearning to join in the revelry all the more poignant, though it is unlikely that Slessor intended the irony, at least at this stage of his career. The insistent vision of the advocated lifestyle, all tumbling delight and excess, is essentially hollow, or derivative: imitation Rubens, imitation Sterne, imitation Norman Lindsay, imitation anything:

Good roaring pistol-boys, brave lads of gold,
Good roistering easy maids, blown cock-a-hoop
On floods of tavern-steam, I greet you!
("Thieves' Kitchen")

It is artificial, theatrical, especially in the sense of stage-costumery. And one has to admit that the preferred stance of the unobserved observer is somewhat theatrical too. Nothing is less Australian than Slessor's fake eighteenth-century nymphets (none of them is likely to break out into a coo-ee chorus . . . ), yet it is not without significance that Slessor shares the habit of detachment, as distinct from the habit of irony, that is discernible in so many Australian writers, and in so many figures in Australian writing—so distinctive as to have become a kind of "signature."

While the figure of the anguished ghost at the window, the withdrawn observer hinting faintly at the sterility of his own circumstances as he looks out of his window, a phantom, as it were, at the Beggar's Opera—while this kind of figure in Slessor's poems expresses an almost ritualized rather than existential sense of displacement, occasionally Slessor takes up an alternative pose, when the poem swaggers in with some kind of showman or conjurer. But here, too, it is the emptiness of the gesture, or verbal gesturing, that is most noticeable. The playful theatrical flourish at the end of "Fixed Ideas" ("Undo, loosen your bubbles") seems to belong in this mode, coming at the end of a self-consciously structured poem in which images of fixity and rigidity are answered by a delicate few lines of contrasting images of fluidity. It is an exercise with a hey presto disappearing act at the end.

Slessor later let it be known that this particular line was the standard greeting of a drinking companion, a pleasantry, a charming invocation to beer. It was a private reference, which he subsequently felt constrained to explain, as though somehow to justify the poem in terms of more than a formal experiment. Poetry, after all, has to be about something. But in admitting us to the personal domain, he merely provoked a further disbelief, for then arises the question of the bearing of the previous lines and images on the ultimate escape to the bar. Alternatively, why put that particular line in the poem? Nothing is announced other than the announcer, much as the signified signifies the signifier. . . .

The poetry of the twenties and early thirties is, then, characterized by a somewhat arch manner, a playful artificiality in both subject matter and imagery, undercut by a taste for melodramatic despair—the very combination to catch the eye of Hal Porter, just emerging from his own iridescent chrysalis. It may be unfair to dismiss this attitude as posturing, nor does anything in Slessor's poetry altogether other than the announcer, much as the artificiality signifies the signifier. . . .

The earlier poetry is, quite simply, not discomfiting enough to persuade us to read it with that degree of seriousness. It even finds a measure of nostalgia and
sentimental complacency, as in the much anthologized "Country Towns":

Find me a bench, and let me snore,
Till, charged with ale and unconcern,
I'll think it's noon at half-past four!

The mellow reassurance of that, the provincial Englishness of this final vision (the dogs lying about are recognizably Australia, but the dozing mulberry faces are from the English counties) and the reference to rural time all hint very strongly at Rupert Brooke's "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester," with its comparable meter and tone:

Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?

There is no great angst in this kind of poetry.

But a few of Slessor's poems, and sometimes no more than a few lines here and there, do convince us that we are reading poetry of a quite different order, poetry not contrived but (as Patrick White used to put it) compelled. It is a poetry that responds almost helplessly to the pressure of some emerging apprehension, a dread of what might be revealed. And it is this anticipatory horror that strengthens his verse; it may also be what Slessor attempted to suppress. His guardedness, that is, may have been against admitting a particular kind of darkness, rather than an inveterate privacy.

However one argues the case, poems such as "The Night-Ride," Poem IX from "The Old Play" ("A bird sang in the jaws of night"), the final stanza of "Stars":

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

or the poems of the countryside, "Crow Country," "Talbingo," "North Country," "South Country," all stand out for their poetic forcefulness. And not a little of that impact derives from Slessor's imaginative resistance to the dread intimation. It is characteristic of him to resist; for all his representation of the forlorn figure at the window, he has no particular desire to open it; or to break the pane—and this habit of preserving the defensive but opaque barrier is crucial to understanding the imaginative force of "Five Bells,"...

"Beach Burial" as Slessor wrote the poem in a notebook.

(Reproduced by permission of Collins/Angus & Robertson, Sydney)
where it will be recalled he appears to exhaust himself, as a presence in the poem, by beating uselessly against the dividing pane.

In "South Country," by way of variation, he apprehends the dreadful through comparison:

As if, rebellious, buried, pitiful,
Something below pushed up a knob of skull,
Feeling its way to air.

It is a strong summary image, and that intimation of death as an actual, active, and potent agency, which lends it such a nightmarish quality, has a bearing on the last poems. It is also apropos that Slessor explained to Howarth that this poem related to the country south of Kiama (on the coast, south of Sydney), and that when he wrote the lines, "The monstrous continent of air floats back/ Coloured with rotting sunlight," he had in mind that "the sky was coloured by rotting sunlight as the sea is coloured by rotten seaweed." Almost inevitably, in this envisaging of the momentous and awful Slessor found confirmation in (for him) the equally imaginatively terrifying sea; but we only know this from the correspondence. Key conceptual images—of death, burial, the sea and darkness, though indirectly, have accumulated here. And it is a poem that brings the reader to a shuddering halt, such as is encountered again in Slessor's last poem, "Beach Burial."

Slessor's correspondence with Howarth began at just the point where his career as an active poet had ceased. In 1946 he was writing to Howarth that he was in "such a state of emotional desolation." The reference is to the death of his wife Noela in the year preceding, and it is clear that his distress was real, and deep. His war diaries, for example, detail the care and concern with which he made arrangements for her during his years as Australia's Official War Correspondent. Jaffa has summarized the biographical details succinctly:

Slessor married in 1922, when he was twenty-one. It was a meaningful marriage, lasting until Noela's death in 1945, and it was "To Noela" that the poet dedicated his major volume, One Hundred Poems, in 1944. He was to publish only three short poems after her death, changing the dedication in his final volume Poems (1957), to his second wife, Pauline, and to his son, Paul, born of this marriage. This second marriage was dissolved in 1961. (36)

Yet Noela, as Hal Porter had remarked, rated only one passing reference in the poetry; she "left no stain on his poetry, one idle phrase only" (The Extra 98).

Presumably he had in mind the third poem of the sequence "Music," the love song that identifies Nonie—a love song, be it noted, wherein the lovers on the dark beach drown into each other.

Porter's account of Slessor's chilling relationship with Pauline, in the last years of the second marriage, is powerful stuff. But he is surely mistaken in identifying her as the woman in "Polarities" that Slessor sometimes does not like at all. Slessor's attitude to women was, he claimed, crystal clear to him and yet a mystery he did not care to investigate:

One of those final poems is the nearest he gets to writing about women rather than the wanton "girls" his friend Norman Lindsay drew, or John Gay and Laurence Sterne wrote of. It's a poem about Pauline. It finishes:

Sometimes I like her with camellias, sometimes with a parsley-stalk,
Sometimes I like her swimming in a mirror on the wall;
Sometimes I don't like her at all.

At Billyard Avenue, Elizabeth Bay, it's not easy not to be aware that the sometimes of the last line is fading.

Porter uses the identification to devastating effect; but it is misdirected. The poem was written while Noela was still alive, and relates to a tense state of affairs in the first marriage. Slessor's letter to Howarth has nothing to say about that, of course; we would be shocked if it were otherwise. A part of Slessor's doubt about offering the poem for publication has, in my guess, to do with the painfulness of the private circumstance. Indeed, he does not make it altogether clear, in these letters, that it was written before "Beach Burial"; it was offered to Howarth subsequent to the publication of "Beach Burial," and appeared in Southerly 2, 1948, the last of Slessor's poems to come into print. He was in several minds about it too, and left it to Howarth to decide whether it was suitable for publication. He explained the reference to pea-soup and Schumann: it derived, he wrote, from "To A Dead Lady" by Deiter [i.e. Detlev] von Liliencron, translated by Jethro Bithell, and he proposed to change that to "omelette and Schumann." Howarth printed it as it stood, however, but the detail suggests uncertainty, an unsettled view of the poem—or else, taking up the Hal Porter estimation of Slessor, it was a calculated but oblique signal, pointing to the acute irony of the poem's source.

The key to this poem lies in Clement Semmler's editorial interpolation in the war diaries. He notes that several of the diary entries from 21 March 1942 and following, are in Slessor's own brand of shorthand:

Attempts to decipher the shorthand have been partially successful, enough to make it clear that Noela was having an affair with John Hetherington.

Slessor was noting the times of her arrival home at night, and the final larger entry concerned the inevitable confrontation and recriminations. For quite a time after this Slessor does not mention Noela at all, and there are one or two references to his avoiding Hetherington. He and Noela obviously patched it up after a time and were on reasonable terms again. (360)
Zeno

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

Two people stoop out of a car and bang the doors shut; they used it to arrive at P from elsewhere.

A cherry-red sedan, its back tires relax on the dark macadam, the front wheels being on cobbles of bluestone which form our gutters here: nice they are, too, but the blocks have been forced up by tentacles of English elm now extinct in Britain on account of Dutch elm disease but still thick as thieves in the beige antipodes.

The two, youth and woman, go into a milkwhite terrace where a stranger will tell them something utterly different.

The bell coughs. They go hand in hand through that open door, their curious, pale future closing over like cloud.

This time will never come again, and nothing in its peculiar way is happening to us all.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe is the distinguished author of numerous books of poetry and criticism, most recently For Crying Out Loud (Oxford Poets, 1991) and Falling Into Language (Oxford University Press, 1991). He is Director of the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne.

Given Hal Porter's reading of Slessor, one thinks of that reconciliation with something of a shudder. Yet is without doubt that Slessor was, as he informed Howarth, emotionally desolate after her death. Complex emotions support this fine poem; likewise, in the context of the whole of his poetry, the images take up intriguing resonances—not least the penultimate image, with its ambiguous implications, of the woman "swimming in a mirror on the wall," for in that image Slessor adverts to his key images of the pane of glass, or transformation (the Ondine legend) and, by extension, of drowning.

The image of drowning exerted a powerful hold on Slessor's imagination. It is not only persistent throughout the poems, it is very often registered with an emphasis that is slightly out of proportion, when he begins to contemplate some extended aspect of the imagined experience, rather than just accepting the figure of speech: not the sumptuous immersion of "Thieves' Kitchen" but the worrying blackness and the pallor of dead faces of "Mangroves," where the perception of memory as submerged in the murky waters of night first appears in his verse. The panic already noted in "Stars," the nihilism of "The Night-Ride" are analogous to the deep dismay that springs to mind when suddenly this imagery obtrudes itself.

More importantly, the imagery of drowning appears in the key poems, in "Captain Dobbin" ("the blind tide/ That crawls it knows not where . . . / And white, dead bodies that were anchored there"), and "Five Visions of Captain Cook" (in which, in spite of his note that the details of Cook's death followed the accepted version, he added his own touch that Cook, when stabbed, had stumbled into the sea and drowned—Bread and Wine, 196), "Out of Time," "Sleep," "Five Bells" of course, and ultimately "Beach Burial." This imaginative compulsion is to be observed, not explained; but some elaboration comes in Slessor's prose, for example in his reports as a War Correspondent. It is characteristic that the funereal and macabre imagery of his account of the convoy leaving Sydney Harbor should be offset by an almost
That, too, in its own way, articulates emotional desolation. Slessor envisages in a most disturbing way what slowly becomes clearer as a pattern is that for suddenly fuller manner, "the thought of struggling externally. But in brief episodes like this one, he internalizes the event, brings it into a curious correlation to his more intimate self. Another example follows soon after, on 25 May, when he records that the man was buried at sea:

Bleak, leaden morning, with heavy roll on sea . . .

That is a curious and morbid extension of the brief facts of the event. In the published report it becomes

Smoothly and silently, without a bubble, the canvas bag went in. He had come a long way for that, and I tried not to think of the clumsy shape sliding so noiselessly down, until it could sink no further, but lay there, a tiny piece of debris in the infinite and appalling loneliness of water. (see Bread and Wine 207)

That, too, in its own way, articulates emotional desolation. Slessor envisages in a most disturbing way the futility and loneliness of existence, as well as projecting a harrowing apprehension of being utterly abandoned, not only from his fellow beings, but from the world itself. The one thing that controls this image is the sense of fixity, the persistence of the corpse at the bottom of the sea.

"Beach Burial," the final poem, dated "El Alamein, 1942," was inspired by the fighting in the summer of that year, that is, some months after the events at the heart of "Polarities." Superbly evocative in terms of its sound patterns, and carefully crafted in terms of its expressed humanity, it has long been regarded as one of Slessor's finest poems, a fitting postscript to his poetic career (Jaffa 17). The sense of pity, extended without differentiation to men of all races, friend and foe alike, is effectively registered by Slessor's care not to establish a single, personal point of view. The impersonality is an affirmation of common humanity.

Yet, as always in the stronger poems, there is an undercurrent that touches more closely home. In this instance it derives at least in part from Slessor's last variation on a theme. The convoys of dead sailors, immersed in the dark waters of the night, "sway and wander" as in some slow dance of death; there, they are still in some sense regarded as active agents. In the morning they are passive, inert, visibly dead—"morning rolled them in the foam." It is not proposed that Slessor rushed shrieking, Shelley-like, out into the sandhills when confronted actually with the too intensely imagined. On the contrary, there is more the effect of something becoming settled, as with Brennan's "Wanderer." But this is the only occasion on which the drowned figures come into the full light of day, and one has to wonder what that may signify in this, the last of his poems.

Slessor's note on this poem attempts to explain the deep meaning of the poem's weak point, the closing sentimental cliché—"Enlisted on the other front," with all its echoes from the previous war—in terms of the military strategy of the second front, and the common front of humanity's existence: "The absolute fact of death united them" (Bread and Wine 201). That may not overcome the critical suspicion that the poem ends on a weakness, but Slessor's note disguises while it reveals the important fact about it. In this one poem only, he really confronted the fact of death; everywhere else is a dramatic projection, and therefore imaginative distancing, from it. And having seen it, in such vast and impersonal numbers, there really was nothing more left for Slessor to say. All else amounted to refinements of poetic technique, or asserting his self-sufficiency.

Works Cited

Guy Howarth Papers, uncatalogued manuscript collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.


Adrian Mitchell, University of Sydney, is a co-editor of The Oxford Anthology of Australian Literature (1985) and wrote the fiction section of The Oxford History of Australian Literature (1981). In the spring of 1991 he was a visiting professor at The University of Texas at Austin.