

SLESSOR'S *DARLINGHURST NIGHTS*: TROPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

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THROUGHOUT his poetic and journalistic careers, Kenneth Slessor probably wrote more light verse than he did so-called serious poetry, though only one collection of it appeared in his lifetime. Forty-one of the *Smith's Weekly* verses on modern life and manners, written as an occasional series between 1928 and 1933, were gleaned in the volume *Darlinghurst Nights* in 1933, published by Slessor's former *Vision* partner, Frank Johnson. *Darlinghurst Nights*, with its original titillating illustrations by Virgil Reilly, was reprinted in 1981 by Angus and Robertson. It proved successful enough as a nostalgic coffee table book to be followed by a selection of another thirty-four of the *Smith's Weekly* poems in 1983, edited by Julian Croft, entitled *Backless Betty from Bondi*. These collections by no means exhaust the range of Slessor's light verse in *Smith's Weekly*, which also extended to more immediately topical pieces on items from the news, as well as verse captions for celebrity caricatures.

In his 1977 memoir, *A Man of Sydney*, Douglas Stewart raised the possibility of a comic re-evaluation of Slessor by paying tribute to his humorous and topical poems and presenting the man himself in the context of his literary and journalistic networks as a fundamentally sociable person. To appropriate a phrase from John Docker, it was, if you like, a substantial lifting of the black crepe around the prevailing 'gloom thesis' on the poet.

Docker uses the term in his polemical *In a Critical Condition* (1984) to describe revisionist New Critical accounts of the radical nationalist Australian 'legend' associated with the 1890s. As a 'metaphysical ascendancy' the New Critics (and fellow travellers like the early Manning Clark) challenged the social optimism of writers like Vance Palmer and Russel Ward. Their version of the literary culture of the nineties thus became a 'gloom thesis'.

The gloom thesis on Slessor and his work appears to have begun in 1947, with an essay by Tom Inglis Moore in *Southerly* which coincided with the canonisation of Slessor in the second year English course at Sydney University¹. Comparing his work to the Romanic gestures of Brennan and Shelley, Moore concluded, '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' (205). The essential gloominess of Slessor was re-emphasised in major essays by such varied critics as Vincent Buckley (1952), Charles Higham (1959-60) and Judith Wright (1965). Max Harris modified the gloom in his 1963 monograph for the Australian Writers and Their Work series by suggesting that irony 'softens the late despair of Slessor, transmuting his nihilism into a quasi-nihilism, an acknowledgement of Camusian absurdities' (39), but pessimism remains the perceived keynote. Though there was an occasional dissenting voice – notably W.M. Maidment's in 1964 – the pessimistic stereotype was solidly in place by 1968, when Slessor's *Poems* were a standard high school text and A.K. Thomson edited a volume of critical essays on his work. When Slessor died in 1971, much of the literary establishment buried him under the weight of a modernist *weltschmerz* which, in

the context of Australian poetry, he had almost singly come to represent.

That darkness was clearly visible in American critic Herbert C. Jaffa's monograph for the Twayne's World Authors series of the same year. Yet essays by Terry Sturm (building on Maidment's ideas) and Vivian Smith in the Slessor memorial issue of *Southerly* doubted the poet's pessimism. Each raised different questions about the positive role of aesthetic experience in his work, Smith suggesting that '[n]ihilism is never Slessor's final word' (260). In 1974 John Docker also saw a path out of despair for Slessor through artistic transcendence, relating his aestheticism, as Maidment and Sturm had done, to Norman Lindsay's philosophy. Which brings us obliquely back up to 1977 and Douglas Stewart.

In his 1991 biography of Slessor – the last major monograph to deal with the poet – Geoffrey Dutton took Stewart's *A Man of Sydney* to task for breaking the gloomish orthodoxy, for suggesting that Slessor could be 'simultaneously impish and majestic' (Stewart 1). 'Stewart stops at the mask of the bon viveur and the skills of the fastidious craftsman, ignoring the blackness and the anger', Dutton writes:

It is as if the awe he had of Slessor would not allow him to talk about the older man except in a jocular, jovial tone, or else as a very matter-of-fact, and practical literary critic. Chaos, whether metaphysical, philosophical or of the fourth whisky, alarmed him; it was essential to Slessor. (336-37)

It was essential because he would then write orderly poems so as to overcome it, shoring the fragments upon his ruins. Dutton is willing to admit that the light verse helped Slessor out of a narrow aestheticism, and that some of it 'ought to endure as long as [his] "serious" work' (121), but this doesn't interfere with his basic proposition that, as a modernist, Slessor must have been miserable.

The difficulty I have with this view is not so much that it reads the man too intensely through his work – though there are real theoretical problems there relating to authorship and autobiography – but that it reads Slessor through a selective version of that work, one that canonises the later 'serious' (read high modernist) poetry at the expense of both the 'serious', if romantic, early poetry and the copious light verse the poet wrote across both periods. Dutton takes for granted the largely New Critical orthodoxy on Slessor's 'best' poems, and judges the poet as a person accordingly. That is, that he was a failure: that he never fulfilled the promise of that handful of great meditative lyrics mostly written in his early middle age. Poetically he should have died hereafter.

The problem lies in reading modernism as the wholly troubled soul of modernity. Coeval with high modernism, New Criticism in all its variant forms was the (sometimes unwilling) prophet of this tortured new spirit, and in Australia its key twentieth century poets have remained largely unrevised. But the experience of modernity is much vaster and more polyphonic than its alienated expression within high art. The view from the realm of popular culture is rather different. The light verse that Slessor wrote on urban themes for *Smith's Weekly* offers a re-evaluation of the frustrated, gloomy modernist whose nihilism inevitably caused him to bite out his own poet's tongue. It represents another, more social side to his modernism – an alternative modernism – in which the dualities enacted in the serious poetry are cheerfully recoded, from a source of metaphysical angst, to playful markers of quotidian consolation. Writing poetry for a popular audience made Slessor freshly aware of the imaginative possibilities of modern Sydney, forcing him to abandon the Victorian archaisms of his earlier romantic work.

The 'Darlinghurst Nights' series nominally began on 11 August 1928 with 'The Green Rolls Royce', but the poet had already begun to collaborate with Virgil Reilly

earlier in the year, and in a similar style. Their first effort was 'As We Pine in a Line', which appeared on 11 February 1928. By March 1929 the poems had become so familiar a feature that fellow poet Colin Wills could send them up with 'Darling Point Nights' (2/3/29, 23). The series' title lapsed after October 1928, eventually to be replaced by 'New Darlinghurst Nights' for two pieces during October 1930, but the poems continued throughout. They were maintained until November 1933, though there was something of a lull in 1931. Slessor may have seen certain poems belonging more naturally together than others, but as Kings Cross remains a touchstone for city life rather than the exclusive focus it seems not unreasonable to include all the illustrated *Smith's Weekly* verses that express social (as distinct from political) observations under a generic 'Darlinghurst Nights' label.

For their fuller historical meaning the Darlinghurst Nights poems need to be read with the original illustrations, nearly all of which were done by Reilly, who was famous for his 'Virgil girls'. To provide Reilly with his favourite subject matter Slessor's poems usually focus on women, and in ways that repeat the conventional symbolic association between nature and the feminine. 'Cucumber Kitty' (28/12/29, 3; *Darlinghurst Nights* 26) brings the cooling benefactions of floral imagery and fragrance in her wake as she calmly glides through a sweltering summer day:

When Cucumber Kitty comes mocking the city,
The boulevards burst into bud,
The dusty old alleys breathe Roger and Gallet's
And daffodils blaze in the mud.

The young city typists are themselves flowers in 'Underground Roses' (28/9/29, 3; *DN* 28):

You can talk of botanical gardens,
Where roses are commonly found,
But the kind that I mean are less frequently seen —
They're the roses that grow underground.
In the caverns of thundering marble,
They bloom at 8.30 a.m.,
Or they hang by a door to the 5.44
As a tiger-rose hangs to the stem.

In 'It, If and Also' (11/1/30, 3; *DN* 16) you know that 'Adorable Clara' passes by

When skyscrapers burst into lilac,
And Burgundy foams by the tank,
And nightingales carol their joy by the barrel,
Or nest in the Commonwealth Bank.

The ironic hyperbole of that surreal first line, 'When skyscrapers burst into lilac', performs a characteristic gesture – a generically pastoral one. Slessor can celebrate the natural only by maintaining a tension between nature and culture in which culture remains the dominant term. To that extent, he acknowledges that the 'natural' can only truly manifest its essence within the frame of its opposite. This is the trope of urban pastoral.

Traditional pastoral celebrates nature over culture, the country over the city. Urban pastoral works the other way by deconstructing the opposition. It upholds city pleasures, frequently against bucolic boredom, but it does so via consoling natural images. Its

origins lie in the urban satires of writers like Swift and Gay in the early eighteenth century, whose ironic pastorals of London life show that a classical bias against the town still operated. Wordsworth turned the tables in his Westminster Bridge sonnet, where the comparison with nature—

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill

— made for celebration rather than mockery. By the late nineteenth-century James Thomson's monstrous *City of Dreadful Night* (1870–73) may have provided a literary model for feelings of urban alienation, but the scale and technological achievements of the industrial city could evidently cut two ways. Thus urban pastoral was a familiar trope of the London poets of the 1890s. It still retained its satirical edge — as in John Davidson's *Fleet Street Eclogues* — but was sometimes used to naturalise, and thereby ameliorate, the conspicuous artificiality of modern life. It is this potentially positive urban pastoral that Slessor would develop.

Pastoral motifs reappear in much of Slessor's city poetry. In the serious verse of the twenties they tend to be set against the alien modernity of the urban landscape — as in 'Winter Dawn' where the poet finally cries out to the rising sun, 'Waken me with old earth, keep me awake!' (*Poems* 18). Yet in the *Smith's Weekly* verses Slessor poetically realigned himself with those aspects of modernity — such as highrise living, and certain forms of technology and consumerism — that offered new sensory or imaginative pleasures, and where fresh metaphysical possibilities might be located. The imagery of pastoral was one way of mediating this change.

Take, for example, 'Gardens in the Sky' (25/10/30, 3; *DN* 17):

There's a golden hocus-pocus
Where the buried people eat,
For the air is full of crocus
Blowing down to William Street —
Oh, behold the Roman candles
Of the window-boxes burst,
As the fairies tap their sandals
On the Alps of Darlington!

Everywhere, everywhere, flowers are fleeting in the air,
Lovers greeting, poets meeting, flowers are fleeting everywhere.

Where the stars are lit by Neon,
Where the fried potato fumes,
And the ghost of Mr. Villon
Still inhabits single rooms,
And the girls lean out from heaven
Over lightwells, thumping mops,
While the gent in 57
Cooks his pound of mutton chops —

Even there, even there, flowers are floating in the air;
Eyes are gloating, boarders dotting, flowers are floating even there.

The aerial gardens are a transforming presence, a 'golden hocus-pocus' that invests the flat-dwellers' lives with romance. Lovers and bohemian poets help populate this mood, one in which the otherwise plebeian fried potatoes, mops and mutton chops also feature, subsumed in the celebration of living at the Cross.

It's significant that in these light verses the conspicuously unnatural urban settings manage to stimulate pastoral echoes, whereas the more natural space of the well-known 'Elegy in a Botanic Garden' – a serious poem written at the same time – helps to defeat them. There the autumnal death of love has become associated with nature's own corruption in a place already mapped and inscribed by the ordered, dead language of science. The human *disorder* of the city, and especially raffish Darlinghurst, is ironically what makes it 'naturally' vital – as in the later 'William Street', where the neon signs reflected on the roadway '*go deeper than a stream*' (my italics).

The flappers who dominate the *Smith's Weekly* poems may sometimes be melancholy (see, for example, 'Lonely', 22/12/28, 8; DN 41) but they're not alienated from their urban world. They still have their dreams, and the material consolations of city living are everywhere at hand. 'Miss Pillion' (17/8/29, 9; DN 36) compares the present favourably with the past:

Where Uncle James with his bygone flames
 On a bob-tailed nag would canter,
 His niece goes out on an Indian Scout
 In a lavender tam-o'-shanter.
 There's a bang and a scatter and a headlong clatter
 And a roar in the middle of the track—
 'Oh, scowl if you must, but pardon our dust!'
 Says the Girl
 On the Bike
 At the Back.

Slessor's girls on motorbikes, in cars and planes, or at the theatre are enjoying themselves – in fact they are *metaphoric* of the modern world. Jazz Age Darlinghurst is its metonym. Modernism is so often narrowly construed as a critique of modernity that it is easy to overlook the pleasure which popular culture took in the new technologies of the 1920s and thirties, and which was reflected in an alternative modernism of the 'techno-pastoral', a phrase coined by Marshall Berman.

Berman traces the conflict in aesthetic responses to modernity – celebration versus critique – back to the work of Baudelaire: 'Baudelaire's pastoral visions of modernity would be elaborated in our century under the name of "modernolatri"; his counter-pastorals would turn into what the twentieth century would call "cultural despair"' (134). This is an over-simplification, but it does point to a basic contradiction within the experience of modernity that has relevance to Slessor. It has been a critical convention to see Slessor's serious poetry as a form of what might be called 'cultural despair', and to read the man himself in those terms. The light verse, on the other hand, presents a more 'pastoral' vision, though one somewhat short of 'modernolatri'.

Technology isn't always shown as a pleasurable phenomenon, then. Slessor celebrated it only to the extent that it allowed new sensory delights and freedom of movement within space-time. In 'Good-bye Iceman!' (27/10/28, 3; DN 19) the world of the machine, represented by the new-fangled refrigerator, is contrasted with the vanishing iceman, who symbolises vital sexuality. 'Good-bye – Chorus Lady!' (23/8/30, 8; DN 46) laments the impact of movie musicals on live lyric theatre:

But nobody waits in Chrysanthemum Alley
 For the Western Electric corps-de-ballet,
 And nobody listens, and nobody knocks,
 With a bunch of flowers for a Magnavox!

(In 'Firefly' [29/12/28, 3; *Backless Betty* 6] Slessor nevertheless celebrates the shadowy charms of young cinema ushers: modernity has its compensations.)

In poems like 'Choker's Lane' (1/9/28, 9; *DN* 11) and 'Residential' (18/8/28, 3; *DN* 25) Slessor doesn't overlook the darker side of Darlington, either. 'Snowdrops' (29/6/29, 10; *DN* 37), dealing with drug addiction, inspires Virgil Reilly's most sexually explicit image: that of a chained and bare-breasted woman writhing in what's probably meant to be the horrors of a cocaine-induced nightmare, but which looks more like sado-masochistic pleasure (the drug-user's 'fields of snowdrops' offer a false pastoral).

The erotic and fantastic elements in Reilly's illustrations recall *Vision* and serve to underline some of the imaginative continuities in Slessor's work. Julian Croft has hinted that '[t]he inheritance of Norman Lindsay can still be seen' in the literary as well as the graphic components of the *Smith's Weekly* poems (*BB*, v). I've noted that Slessor maintains a dualism between those vitalising elements of modern city life that produce forms of erotic and aesthetic pleasure, and those that do not, resulting in a creative ambivalence that Berman would claim is endemic to the representation of modernity. Yet this dualism also has an immediate philosophical source in Norman Lindsay's morality of art, first formulated in the long essay *Creative Effort* of 1920.

Much has already been written about Slessor's relationship with Lindsay and his ideas, and in particular Lindsay's sharp Platonic distinction between spirit and matter – or what he called Life and Existence. In Slessor's early serious poetry, like 'Winter Dawn', the distinction manifests itself in a romantic opposition between art (or the artistic soul) and contemporary society. In the light verse, however, the imagery used to represent Life no longer derives from the realm of high art – the Lindsayesque fauns and furbelows that once stood in for the *élan vital* – but is now apt to be found in things like motorbikes, hotel foyers, delicatessens, the bright lights of Kings Cross, and, of course, flappers. Lindsay's robust Madam Life becomes one of Virgil Reilly's lissom secretaries or caretakers' daughters. The *Smith's Weekly* poems therefore develop a range of romantic metaphors within a modern environment which work towards both its interrogation and, ultimately, enhancement. To this extent Slessor can be said to have democratised the elitist philosophy of *Creative Effort*. By reinvesting its metaphysical impulses in an aesthetics of the everyday, the social pessimism which was also part of the Lindsay inheritance (a form of Berman's 'cultural despair') is largely overcome.

As a journalist, Slessor could hardly deny what he once called the 'uninteresting facts' of Existence (Haskell 16), yet even in his newspaper copy there was room for creative experiment. Dennis Haskell has drawn attention to the poetic qualities of Slessor's prose journalism in the *Sun* in the early twenties, for example, at the same time observing of its populism that 'Slessor presumes that he and the audience are as one' (24). This is during the same period in which he co-edited the culturally snobbish *Vision!* That Slessor was poached from the *Sun* at the tender age of twenty-three to help revive Melbourne *Punch* is testimony to his precocious skills as an innovative popular writer. In *Smith's Weekly*, whose phenomenal success was a product of its novel style and design, he found his ideal métier. What became the *Darlinghurst Nights* series can be understood, then, as an extension of both his poetic and journalistic experimentation. Of all the reasons given for Slessor's subsequent poetic silence, his departure from the relatively relaxed, creative atmosphere of *Smith's* has never been mooted. Yet the way in which his work shows the interdependence of elite and popular cultures strongly suggests that it may have been crucial.

NOTES

1. *One Hundred Poems* was a set text, alongside Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Yeats's *Selected Poems (The University of Sydney Calendar Supplement for the Year 1947/268)*. Slessor's canonisation was no doubt the work of his academic friend Guy Howarth.

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