

Down (but not Out) in the City

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In 1921 when T. S. Eliot published 'The Waste Land', London had in Eliot's imagination turned spiritually and aesthetically into the prospect Macaulay had prophesied in 1840, except that the ruins of London Bridge and St Paul's were metaphysical rather than physical. On the other side of the world, where Macaulay's traveller had started from, the prospect was quite the reverse. Sydney was celebrating the new and the modern with an enthusiasm which was to last until the 1970s, and creating a life style in the city and the suburbs which was to provide a tension in poetry and the novel until much the same time.

It had not been always been so. Only a decade or so before Slessor wrote 'Pan in Lane Cove' in 1920, Christopher Brennan and Henry Lawson had seen a very different city. Lawson's 'Faces in the Street', or even Paterson's office-bound imaginer of Clancy, saw filth and squalor, heard noise and confusion, and felt the presence of evil. Brennan's Asaheurus-like persona of *Poems 1913*, experienced a more refined horror in the epilogue to his wanderings through the city of the Sydney. Even the tram up Broadway was an infernal version of Elijah's chariot, taking its passive victim up the hill not towards the bosom of Abraham, but to the flinty mercies of the Senate of Sydney University. In Brennan's poetry spiritual alienation and despair haunt not only the city streets of Sydney, but extend as far as the northern beaches, past the off-limits of Fairy Bower to the sandy impermanences of his house at Newport.

What was the change that occurred in Sydney in the 1920s, which marked its poetry off from what was being produced in the Imperial metropolis, and how did it come about?

First 'The Waste Land'. Most commentators point to Eliot's close knowledge of French poetry of the mid to late nineteenth century, the same poets who were so influential on C. J. Brennan in his own journeys towards a new poetic in the 1890s. In particular they cite Baudelaire and his vision of the flowers of evil in *l'immonde cité* of second-Empire Paris, and the sense of failure and dependency which were the precursors of the shallow hedonism of the *belle-époque* of the 1890s. Yet there is a more immediate source, in English, for this transmutation of the city into a spiritual rather than a physical slum, a reprocessing of the pastoral slough of despond into the inanition of the suburbs of a great city. That source is James (B.V.) Thomson's 'The City of Dreadful Night' (1874), an immediately popular poem which captured the late Victorian spiritual malaise, and vividly portrayed the individual consequences of that century's 'loss of faith', which, cliché though it might be, was an accurate shorthand for the spiritual agony of poets such as Thomson. Thomson's city is described in frightening detail, and it is not the usual dark satanic industrial

city of nineteenth-century iconography, but a brooding harbour city, with suburbs stretched around its shores and islands, while behind it stand the ramparts of a mountain range. In the suburbs various examples of what a generation ago would have been called sufferers from existential dread can be found crawling towards their homes; the bridges which span the rivers and inlets of the harbour provide convenient platforms for suicides; and over the whole city is the dark shadow of its titular deity, the goddess Melancholia. Hell is a city much like Sydney.

Thomson's city, though, was fittingly on the Black Sea. Shelley's apophthegm 'Hell is a city much like London' in 'Peter Bell the Third' (1819) makes satiric reply to Wordsworth's celebration of the quietly beating heart of the same city seen from "Westminster Bridge" (1802) and shows vividly how one tradition sees the city as a realm of the physical, while the other sees it as some kind of transmutation of the celestial city of aspiration to the infernal city of despair. Significantly, for Shelley, as for Sartre, Hell is a city of people. Thomson was to take this to its allegorical limits, but on the other side of the channel, hermetic symbolism was to veil the city in significances which Thomson could only dully narrate. Nevertheless, it was Thomson's vision of spiritual *ennui* which spoke more directly to English imaginations than Baudelaire's, that is until the turn of the century, when Eliot picked up the threads of high Victorian despair and incorporated them into the transparent collages of Symbolism's *Grande Oeuvre*. 'The Waste Land' is the estuarine littoral of the Imperial Metropolis with its flotsam and dunnage of cosmopolitan voices and its museum of seemingly incoherent bits and pieces from around the world. There is no topography for it, as there had been in Thomson's poem; it is a state of mind, individual and group, private and public, and as such it is a profoundly classical piece. For me 'The Waste Land' does not deal with modernity but with the issues of the nineteenth century, and can be seen as a final statement of the *fin de siècle* in Europe. The modern city, a North American phenomenon, arrived in Australia at the same time, and its development influenced the ways in which its poets viewed themselves and their place in time and space.

At the turn of the century, poets saw Sydney, the city, in the European terms of the nineteenth century: a place of despair and evil. Lawson and Paterson have given us well known images of that paradigm. Less known but just as representative of that older vision is a poem of O'Dowd (ca 1900 – published in book form 1904), simply called 'The City', which opens with the same imagery and allegorical topography of Thomson's city:

The city crowds our motley broods,
And plants its citadel
Upon the delta where the floods
Of evil plunge to Hell.

Through fogs retributive, that stream
From ooze of stagnant wrongs,
The towers satanically gleam
Defiance at our throngs. (53)

Hyde Park and the local citizenry are equally transformed by O'Dowd's apocalyptic, and occasionally apoplectic, language:

The Babylonian Venus sways
 In every city park;
 Her idiot niece, Abortion, plays
 Beside her in the dark.

Here, Office fawns fidelity
 When stroked by gilded hands
 In bramble of chicanery
 Belated Justice stands. (54)

The only cure for this fallen city of Mammon is that Hope will procreate rebellions on 'hoyden disobedience,' led by the cleansing anarchy of Bohemianism:

Self-sacrifice averts His frown,
 When, angry, God at last
 Our Gadarenean droves adown
 Disaster's cliff would cast:

And those Bohemians of the mist,
 Arrayed 'gainst Law, 'twould seem,
 Are cleansing for the Harmonist
 The City of His Dream. (56)

O'Dowd was right. Thomson's luminary goddess Melancholia was sent packing by the spirit of modern Bohemia, and its presiding deity Pan. Peter Kirkpatrick (1992) has shown us the subterranean surprises of Sydney's Bohemia in the 1920s and 1930s, and its roots in the traditions of the late nineteenth century. But he also shows how many of the poets followed the Lindsays' lead to cast a new Dionysian and Arcadian gloss over the dry and dirty pavements of the nineteenth-century city.

Yet there was another powerful force at work, one which did not come from the remote past of classical Mediterranean cultures, but from the new technologies of the mature industrial age: fast and efficient transport ('Wynyard to Vineyard' as one wit [Harley Matthews] put it) which led to the creation of dormitory suburbs, supported by better communications through photographic, radio, sound recording, and telephonic advances, and with the advent of steel and concrete buildings, the creation of inner city apartments and office skyscrapers. The modern was transforming Sydney by the end of the 1920s, but went into a long recess through the depression and the war, to emerge as a whirlwind among the dry bones of the city from the late 1950s until the present. The transformation of the city of dreadful night occurred as gas light vanished and the gloom was dissipated by Edison and Claude Neon.

The sesqui-centennial year of 1938 was the climacteric of the electric hope of modern Bohemia against the gloom of nineteenth-century *ennui* and the dismal science of the depression. And what were the songs created for the 'Harmonist' and the city of His dream? Kenneth Slessor, Colin Wills, and Ronald McCuaig gave out the signs and sounds of the new modern city.

This was not a waste land. The poets actually felt comfortable and at ease in the city. They chose the wit of light verse rather than the ponderous stream of consciousness of free verse, hedonism rather than despair, the body rather than the spirit, extravagance rather than thrift. Sydney's local rhymes versus London's Cosmo-modernism was rather like the Cavaliers' Grasshopper's song in the face of the Puritans' winter of seriousness. Even the whole debate of the city and the country, the new against the old, and Eliot's struggle to make sense of the ruins of the cultural inheritance of Europe is brought to its proper significance in Colin Wills' rewriting of Hart Crane's epic in a few lines of light verse in 'Pymont Bridge':

Loud laughs the lordly limousine,
 Large looms the belching bus,
 The baby squalls for more benzine,
 And flivvers fume and fuss.
 And then Horatius halts the line
 Above the rolling tide;
 Bold Lartius gives the countersign,
 And lo – the span swings wide.
 Porsena cries a cooe, e,
 The Tuscans chew their cud,
 And s.s. Koranui
 Comes in with Sydney's spuds. (28)

While one bridge shows the impermanence of cultural structures in the face of basic human appetites, that other structure made by Dorman and Long, promises an open road whose 'signal is always 'Go!' as a communion between North and South, neatly reversed in antipodean manner from Mrs Gaskell's division of labour and capital, into northern and southern clans of Montague and Capulets:

Smith from St. Leonards and Ryan from Ryde
 Are drunk together at last;
 Willoughby Wilks brings home a bride
 Who's proud of a Potts Point past;
 Trains flash past in the skies,
 Trams roll over the deep;
 The shores are linked with eternal ties,
 And their feuds are fast asleep.
 Here where the queue extended

Once for a mile or so,
 Rises a roadway wide and splendid
 Whose signal is always 'Go!
 Grandfathers hoary
 Mumble the story
 Of the fallen pride and the faded glory
 Of the Sydney Ferry Co. (Wills, 9)

The new electric city did not banish the poverty which appalled Lawson and Paterson, but for the poets of the 1930s there were compensations in the physical delight the city now offered. Kenneth Slessor's Mabel lives in the top-floor-back, the not so desirable penthouse before lifts, 'feeding on the view', but she lives with the Gods in a paradise of illuminated delights from the neon signs which decorate the outside of her building ('Up in Mabel's Room'). She has insights into a deeper realms of things denied to YOU, to whom the poem is addressed, who can afford fifty shilling rents:

And you with fifty-shilling pride
 Might scorn the top-floor-back,
 But, flaming on the walls outside,
 Behold a golden track!

Oh, bed and board you may well hire
 To save the weary hoof,
 But not the men of dancing fire
 Up on Mabel's roof.

There Mr Neon's nebulae
 Are constantly on view,
 The starlight falls entirely free,
 The moon is always blue,

The clouds are full of shining wings,
 The flowers of carbon bloom -

But you - YOU'LL never see these things
 Up in Mabel's room. (47)

Slessor, more than Wills, captured as well the sleaze which went with the new city, but it was a 'raffish' (to use a word often associated with Slessor) sleaze. Ronald McCuaig in his poem sequence of the 1930s, *Vaudeville* (1938), gave more psychological depth to his inhabitants of the city. The poems do not use the city as a Modernist interior exploration, but rather treat it as a background for an analysis of the social and sexual roles of its citizens. McCuaig's style owes much to his

study of the Cavaliers, but it incorporates an Enlightenment critique of social ills in the description of individual behaviour. The human desolation of 'Music in the Air', possibly ironically named after a romantic musical comedy of the period, which describes the seduction of a young virgin typist by a clerk (compare with the similar scene in 'The Waste Land'), is contrasted with images of the modern city life with its trams, neons, radios, modern spaces (flats) and modern mores (sexual accessibility), and its human cost. However much the external context changes, human behaviour seems to remain the same, and disillusionment and disappointment are what come of the modern promises:

Like the boom of trams
 Outside, and the squeal
 Of nerves on the curves
 Of shrieking steel:
 There was music in the air
 And the moon shone bright
 In curving nerves
 On Friday night:

Like shrieking steel
 In his shaking embrace
 Through a slit in the blind
 Light streamed on her face:
 There was music in the air
 And the moon shone bright
 Through slit in the blind
 On Friday night:

On her anguished face
 And tight-shut eyes:
 Jack won't forget it
 Until he dies:
 There was music in the air
 And the moon shone bright
 When Jack had his girl
 On Friday night. (78-9)

In a rewriting of Ovid's *Ars Amoris* using the libertine *carpe diem* theme, McCuaig shows us the hollowness in the men at least who inhabit the modern city. Hedonism has its limits, particularly if wit and manners are left behind in the naked pursuit of sensual pleasure. In 'The Art of Love' only the well-off can be libertines; men who want to 'pirate' a girl need resources (five shilling seats at the cinema) for their seduction, otherwise the whole transaction is reduced to a brutish parody of the libertine argument:

Pictures. They all
 Want pictures: 'Pictures
 Are all very well,'
 I says; 'but there's
 Nothing like natural
 Pictures.'

I says to them straight,
 'You must have a lover.
 You'll leave it too late.
 It's now or never,'
 I says. 'Why wait?
 We're not young for ever.'

'You know what I want,' I says.
 'Right or wrong,
 We haven't got always.
 We haven't long
 To live,' I says:
 We haven't long. (59-60)

McCuaig had an ear for the sounds of the street. His poems are often overheard dialogues or monologues, rhymed and structured, but picked up (as in 'Mokie's Madrigal') from the street – sounds from the city which seem to lessen the abominable conduct of people and the inescapable catastrophes of life, and sounds which distanced the real city and put it in the framework of the mirror, a mirror of art, as decorative as the Cavalier poets he admired and as remote as Tennyson's knight and his song to the Lady of Shalott lit by the afternoon sun:

Sunnamirrar, murdafiar!
 Pyar, pyar! Wannapyar?
 Tirra lirra, tirra lirra!
 Murdafiar, Sunnamirra! (110)

That confidence of 1938 in the positive virtues of the modern city was not evident in poets twenty years later looking back on the 1930s. Elizabeth Riddell in 'Suburban Song' described the antithesis of the city Bohemia, the dormitory suburb with its imprisoned Ladies of Shalott, though it was the Hills Hoist they tended rather than the loom. A storm threatens, change is in the air and in women's hearts, but these elemental processes will not touch them. Their fate is to close the door, retreat into private spaces, and hang the key of their own prison on an image of final closure, the nail in the coffin which encloses that the most private place, spiritual death:

Now all the dogs with folded paws
 Stare at the lowering sky.
 This is the hour when women hear
 Their lives go ticking by.

The baker's horse with rattling hooves
 Upon the windy hill
 Mocks the thunder in the heart
 Of women sitting still.

The poppies in the garden turn
 Their faces to the sand
 And tears upon the sewing fall
 And on the stranger's hand.

Flap flap the washing flies
 To meet the starting hail.
 Close the door on love and hang
 The key upon the nail. (54)

A similar apocalyptic vision is given to the young James McAuley and his family in their inner western suburb, as related by the older McAuley looking back from the 1960s. From a childhood of looking for signs in the suburban backyard, so other poems tell us, and finding none: 'I hear that every answer's No, /But can't believe it can be so.' ('Childhood Morning - Homebush', Kramer 9-10), a late afternoon thunderstorm in Summer gives an escape from the meta-physical prison of the city's backyard. The grocery order has been delivered, the delivery man looks at the approaching storm which has changed the colour and shape of all domestic space, and claims 'You'd think the ending of the world had come.' The young boy thinks of the 'leathern little man, with bicycle-clips' as an angelic messenger of the Lord as the apocalyptic storm explodes (Kramer 4). The private space in the suburb of the city of dreadful afternoon is transformed, and this is a promise that not every answer is No, that there is another meaning, another way of reading the text of the city, which is beyond both hedonism and despair, but it involves the same strategy which gave T. S. Eliot his antidote to the Waste Land, faith. Where Thomson and Brennan had lost theirs, McAuley was to find it again, and to fill the city of dreadful night with a summer afternoon storm. As we have seen that storm was not a covenant for Elizabeth Riddell, but a force which drove her further inwards into a prison beyond the more public space of the backyard. Apart from the obvious differences between female and male spaces in the city and suburbs, the ideological rigidities of the cold war gave sustenance to McAuley and paralysis to Riddell, and the city of Claude Neon remained a faint glimmer from beyond the black-out of World War Two and its aftermath. The

hollow men of the 1930s had become the stuffed shirts of the 1950s, earnestness replaced frivolity, cold satire light verse, and the city which once promised life and beauty, was again turned to stone.

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