

## SITES OF DESIRE

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### THE PLACE OF DESIRE

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In the first decades of this century Australian poetry was marked by a strong tendency towards exotic reverie. The tendency was strongest in the poets associated with Norman Lindsay and the aptly-named *Vision* magazine, particularly Hugh McCrae and Kenneth Slessor, but it reached further afield. Shaw Neilson did not, so far as I know, have any contact with the *Vision* group, though he appeared in their 1923 anthology *Poetry in Australia*. His appearance there is appropriate—Neilson's poetry is more deeply rooted in Australian nature than the poetry of McCrae or Slessor or the art of Lindsay, but with its fiddlers and dancing maids and fairs and village festivals, and its general air of enchantment, his folk-fantasy has the same dream-like quality, if not quite the same cast, as the fantasies of the others, with their centaurs and satyrs, their damsels and unicorns, their potentates and sea-captains.

Different reasons have been advanced for this tendency towards exotic reverie and the dream vision in the poetry of the time. It was, in part, a reaction against the dominance of the bush ballad and the literary nationalism of the preceding period. To others, who find in the poets' dreamings traces of the Decadence, or the influence of the *Symbolistes*, it is a typically belated Australian reaction to developments which had occurred in Europe a generation before. As Peter Kirkpatrick argued in *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*, the commitment to 'vision' should also be seen as a reaction to the First World War, an escape from, a dream of renewal in the face of, horror and devastation.

However, these accounts leave out two factors which have had an enormous and determining influence on our literature, and whose presence here, in the poetry of dream and reverie, it is hard to overlook. The first is religion, in this case the stricter forms of Protestantism; the second, migration. The three poets I've mentioned—McCrae, Neilson and Slessor—all had Scottish backgrounds, and Presbyterianism of a particularly severe kind was a dominant influence on at least two of them, Neilson and Slessor. In Lindsay's case the demon was Methodism—his grandfather was a Wesleyan minister who achieved considerable success in Christianising the natives of Fiji before settling in Australia. In his autobiography *My Mask* Lindsay described his mother 'harried by her Wesleyan nightmare of a concupiscent earth', hunting the streets at night for her wayward son. It does not require a great leap of the imagination to see how, in Lindsay's art, the mother's Wesleyan nightmare has become the son's dream of desire. In his novel *Redheap* Lindsay describes the sexual fantasies of an adolescent male of his own social and religious background in terms which perfectly match the world he reproduces in his own art, 'a vast, exotic garden of femininity, of girls with epicene bodies, of women whose tender flesh one melted into, of loose-jointed strumpets, peasant girls

with goose-fleshed legs, shy virgins and salacious minxes with impish breasts—all naked in the sunlight, all motionless in the burgeoning of desire'. The attenuated burgeoning of desire, so that it is raised to a pitch without ever preceding to fulfilment, so that it remains essentially a matter of fantasy, is typical of a repressed outlook. Lindsay's art, being visual, and being obsessed with the naked female form, is perhaps more obviously in flight from repression than that of the poets, but in each fantasy and reverie projects itself powerfully out of a sense of constriction or moral opprobrium. It isn't simply that you feel the repression to be implicitly there in the very intensity and remoteness of the fantasy. Around his sunlit emblems of sublimated and purified desire, Lindsay puts dark, satyric, ogre-like figures who signify desire in its unredeemed physical aspect, as a predatory force which mocks and humiliates and degrades. Desire, in this hellish aspect, could have come straight out of the Wesleyan nightmare—these devilish versions of desire have bent horns and toad mouths; or they have leering countenances and exaggerated Jewish features. As we shall see, the dark deathly aspect of desire stalks the poets' fantasies as well. Indeed in Neilson, even more explicitly than in Lindsay, death works as the agent of God, a wrathful Presbyterian God.

Migration is an equally compelling influence, if we think of desire in its broader sense, as yearning or longing. Lindsay, McCrae, Neilson and Slessor all had immigrant grandparents—and each had a parent who was born outside Australia. It is hardly surprising if, in their art, they choose to inhabit other lands, for their imaginations had roots in other lands to begin with. In a sense they are going home, though it is necessarily a home of their own making. In the poetry of Neilson and Slessor in particular, there is a strong atavistic quality, ancestral echoes which sound from distant places and distant times. A.R. Chisholm has written perceptively about the Gaelic qualities of Neilson's vision which he finds in every aspect of his poetry, in his song measures, his linguistic constructions, his habit of personification, his imagery, his whole orientation towards the natural world. On the other hand, Slessor's German-Jewish antecedents have been almost entirely overlooked. (Slessor's father was Jewish, from a line of celebrated German-Jewish musicians.) Lindsay dreams of naked women, and Neilson of a rustic community living in close contact with the soil, but Slessor dreams of alchemists and magi come out of the East, kabbalistic figures cloaked in black furs, with beards and gypsy eyes and strange words upon their tongues. These are sublimated figures too, a million miles away from the caricatures of Jews popular in Slessor's journalistic circles—exalted beings, with the power of magic and divination, masters of the universe. In the poem 'Earth-Visitors', which he dedicated to Lindsay, Slessor goes out of his way to dignify these oriental apparitions, perhaps in unconscious deference to Lindsay's anti-semitism—he calls them princes, barons, and kings before deciding they must be Archdukes. His sea-captains, too, have the occult power of the kabbalist, especially Captain Cook, with his 'strange, half-dreadful sortilege with books' and his power to read 'fair alphabet in stars'. Slessor's reference to 'the phylacteries of Cook' at the end of the second of the 'Five Visions'—'It was the spell/ Of Cook did this, the phylacteries of Cook'—is the most explicit acknowledgement of the Jewish antecedents at work in his mythologising of Australia's founding hero. (The phylacteries are the leather thongs which religious Jewish men bind around their arms and upon their beads at their morning prayers. A little box containing text from the scriptures is attached to each thong—because of this the phylacteries were thought to possess magical qualities. The phylacteries feature in Patrick White's description of Himmelfarb at his prayers on the morning of his crucifixion in *The Riders in the Chariot*: White has him bathed in a magical glow of sanctity.) A more subtle, though equally characteristic note is sounded earlier when Slessor observes how, when faced with the choice of sailing north towards the safety of home, Cook had chosen the riskier course of going west into the unknown. 'So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout/ So men write poems in Australia', as if Cook's founding act of heroism allowed other heroic acts, like writing poetry in Australia, to take place in turn.

This, indeed, is the conventional interpretation. But as Adrian Caesar comments in his recent monograph on Slessor, there is a certain bathos in the lines, as if Slessor were somehow disappointed to be writing poems in Australia. Of course he is disappointed (he says

so in virtually every poem). 'So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout/So men write poems in Australia' [ironic emphasis on the 'so']. You know what Slessor is really thinking—if only Cook had sailed north, he'd be writing poems in Paris or New York. And you would have to say that that reading, with its ironic Jewish inflections, is rather more consistent with Slessor's habitually cynical stance than the conventional heroic interpretation.

I don't think it has been sufficiently recognised that Slessor's irony, and his much vaunted cynicism, is in fact a conscious rhetorical strategy, a deliberate art of negation and cancellation which allows him, as a poet who is both inside and outside of the European romantic tradition, to engage successfully in the impossible task of writing poems in Australia. A.G. Stephens was right in a way, if not particularly gracious, when he commented in his diary, 'Slessor looks like a Jew; an undercurrent of disapproving Jeremiah in his work' (Qtd in Cantrell 83). Just as those ghostly ancestral figures dominate his landscapes of desire, so the Jeremiah stance serves him in the managing of those landscapes, for in them he simultaneously invokes and condemns the possibility of romance, arouses desire and turns it to stone, in a gesture which defines his own sense of isolation and distance. The process is a very deliberate one, as Slessor in his characteristic fashion turns light into liquid, liquid into metal, or instead of looking at the stars as poets ought, sees instead 'the bottomless, black cups of space/ Between their clusters, and the planets climbing/ Dizzily in sick airs'. And yet, it is precisely this process which allowed Slessor to define, in a way that few poets have been able to match, the allure of Sydney Harbour:

Coldly in the window,  
Like a fog rubbed up and down the glass  
The harbour, bony with mist  
And ropes of water, glittered; and the blind tide  
That crawls it knows not where, nor for what gain,  
Pushed its drowned shoulders against the wheel,  
Against the wheel of the mill.

Now this is the curious thing about atavism, while it seems to draw the poet away, to remote origins, it serves to bring him back again, empowered, to the place from which he started. Just as it allows Slessor to mythologise Cook and Sydney Harbour, so it allows Neilson to give some of the most numinous evocations of Australian nature that we have in our literature. In his lifelong struggle against a religious perspective which saw the natural world as the haunting place of sin and time and death, Neilson constantly draws on an older, primitive point of view which stresses unity and reciprocity where the religious perspective sees division and decay. As Chisholm and others have pointed out, it is in Nielson's primitivism that the strongest Gaelic influence is to be found: it is as if he were deliberately drawing on a layer of belief and custom older than the Presbyterianism which was later grafted on it, and in order to unsettle the imperatives of that later order. You feel the strength of this primitive reversion, in its folk and communal aspect, in poems like 'You, and Yellow Air', and 'Stony Town', where the dissolution of the human into the natural perspective is breathtaking in its suddenness -

If ever I go to Stony Town  
I'll go as to a fair  
With bells and men and a dance girl  
with a heat-wave in her hair.

I'll ask the birds that be on the road  
I dream though it may not be  
That the eldest song was a forest thought  
And the Singer was a tree.

And again in 'The Crane is My Neighbour', where Neilson explicitly rejects the distanced religious perspective which would turn the crane into a Christian allegory in favour of a viewpoint so deeply immersed in nature that it sees the bird as a node, a channel, a focus of energies, and not as a separate being at all -

The bird is my neighbour, a whimsical fellow and dim;  
There is in the lake a nobility falling on him.

The bird is a noble, he turns to the sky for a theme,  
And the ripples are thoughts coming out to the edge of a dream.

As with Slessor, where the atavism confers the privilege of homeliness on the place it is summoned to, so in Nielson—what 'The Crane is My Neighbour' expresses, above all else, is the sense of being at home in the landscape, so much at home, that the human and the natural worlds become indistinguishable—'The bird is my neighbour, he leaves not a claim for a sigh./He moves as the guest of the sunlight—he roams in the sky'.

I am running two themes in parallel here, repression on the one hand, displacement on the other. Both condemn their victims to a restlessness and yearning, to reverie and the dream of fulfilment. In both Neilson and Slessor atavistic reflexes provide at least some kind of orientation, a primitive substitute for the living tradition that is available to neither—in both, these reflexes anchor themselves in a sense of place.

Atavism has its dangers, of course, but so too does the act of renunciation, caused by repression or displacement, which would consign all influences—ancestral or otherwise—to the devil, in order to declare, at every opportunity, the untrammelled freedom of the desiring imagination. Lindsay does just this—his notion of creative effort, the philosophical cornerstone of his art, has the imagination ceaselessly striving, free of all constraint, including that of satisfaction, because that would put an end to striving. In his art, this striving is portrayed in its most physical terms—as sexual desire, constantly kept on the boil, perpetually renewing itself in contemplation of the naked female figure which is its object. Hence the pathology at the centre of Lindsay's art—the figure of desire has to be redrawn, repeated, recycled endlessly, lest desire wane, and effort come to a standstill. This repetition-compulsion is obvious if you take Lindsay's work as a whole, because the same figures keep appearing in it, but it's plain too in individual works, especially those large compositions where hundreds of naked women swirl across the paper: winsome or provocative, coquettish or carnal, they pose, gesture, or cavort, a hundred versions of the same allegorical sign, and all with the same single and unchangeable burden: desire.

Since repetition dulls desire, it must range across the universe in search of variation. The consequence is encyclopaedism, a phenomenon diametrically opposite to atavism. Both Lindsay and McCrae seem to leave no period untouched in their search for allegorical variations to satisfy the inexhaustible demands of desire—from primitive savages to nymphs and satyrs, from knights and their damsels to cavaliers and courtesans and concubines and country wenches and ladies and beaux and flappers, sometimes with the whole cast assembled in Lindsay's cavalcades and bacchanals, with animals, and half-animals and mythical creatures thrown in for good measure. 'The poet will plunder the earth for the material of images, but he will always translate it into the inner world of his desire'. Jack Lindsay declared in the first number of *Vision*, but he had it the wrong way round. It is because the inner world of desire is insatiable, held in a state of perpetual restlessness and striving, that the poet has to plunder the earth for material, simply to feed its hunger.

Ultimately the fantasy of desire exhausts itself by eating the life out of things. McCrae understood this better than Lindsay:

She looked on me with sadder eyes than Death,  
And, moving through the large autumnal trees,

Failed like a phantom on the bitter breath  
Of midnight; and the unilluminated seas  
Roared in the darkness out of centuries.

McCrae has a poem, 'The Phantom Mistress', in which the wife of a medieval 'liege lord' thrills night after night to her husband's words of love-making, only to discover that it is the mistress of his dreams he addresses, and not her, his living wife. When she murders him in his sleep, his death cry has the triumphant ring of an orgasmic cry of union with the one he truly loves. Death is the true province of fantasy, and not only because the inner world of desire buys its freedom at the expense of life. The morbidity resides in the very details which make the world of fantasy so alluring: frankly artificial, they hover eternally beyond the reach of desire, precisely because they belong to the realm of death. The opening stanzas of McCrae's poem 'The End of Desire' precisely captures this swooning surrender of desire to the morbid allure of elaborated detail:

A flooded fold of sarcenet  
Against her slender body sank,  
Death-black, and beaded all with jet  
Across the pleasures of her flank.

The incense of a holy bowl  
Flowed round her knees till it did seem  
That she was standing on the shoal  
Of some forbidden sunlit stream.

A little gong, far through the wall,  
Complained like one, deep sorrowing,  
And, from the arras, I saw fall  
The woven swallow, fluttering;

While o'er the room there swam the breath,  
Of roses on a trellised tree:  
Loose ladies in pretended death  
Of sweet abandon to the bee.

Like the liege lord, the dreamer in this poem is excited to the point of climax by his morbid fantasy, only to discover that it still eludes him, as it must—

I took her closely, but while yet  
I trembled, vassal to my lust,  
Lo!—Nothing but some sarcenet,  
Deep-buried in a pile of dust.

Lindsay and McCrae produce fantasies of desire, allegories of desire, and allegory, as Walter Benjamin argued in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, has death at its heart: 'The greater the significance [of the allegorical emblem] the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance'. Only to the extent that the natural element ceases to have a life of its own can it take on the significance that the allegorist would impart to it. Or to put it another way, once the element has had the life driven out of it, has been ripped from its context or its place in history, it readily surrenders to the allegorist's recuperation. Both Lindsay and McCrae are allegorists at heart, plundering the world for images of desire. Nielson fought against the allegorical perspective, which he owed to his religious upbringing and the doctrine of the

Fall--the melancholy view which consoled itself by reading nature in terms of parables of guilt and redemption was one which saw sin and death everywhere. Against this he worked a primitive sensual magic through synaesthesia which conflates the senses, short-circuits the interpretive process, and draws the observing consciousness into a natural realm that is vibrant with life:

Here is the ecstasy  
Of sun-fed wine and song:  
Drink! It is melody  
Under a currajong.

Just as Benjamin set against the alienation of allegory the notion of *aura*, the expressive power radiated by the living entity, embedded in a context or a tradition, so Nielson's synaesthesia too has a radiant quality, and indeed is most often presented as an aura, like the nobility which falls on the bird in 'The Crane is My Neighbour', or the light which calls the girl into communion with nature in 'The Orange Tree', which lives 'in' and 'on' the orange tree, which is 'almost sound', 'a light, a step, a call'. (Benjamin offers an interesting clue as to how light might be a call in his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire': 'To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return'.) Slessor, too, makes much of this quality of radiance, revealing a fascination with light which might well be traced back to the same kabbalistic sources that Benjamin undoubtedly drew on in his notion of aura. They both had German Jewish backgrounds after all. There are positive instances of this radiance in Slessor's poetry, in 'Earth-Visitors', or the fifth of the 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' when Captain Home, with his eyes 'dazzle-ful/ Of skies and water farther around the world', imagines the 'wild granaries of sand' and the 'flying blood of cardinal-birds', but mostly it appears negatively, as a kind of negative aura, which precisely measures the distance from immersion or communion, without going so far as to deny its possibility. Thus the extraordinary effects in 'Winter Dawn', where the light congeals, crystallises, freezes, liquefies, burns, in what could be taken as a negative version of Neilson's synaesthesia -

The sun comes up in a golden stain,  
Floats like a glassy sea-fruit. There is mist everywhere,  
White and humid, and the Harbour is like plated stone,  
Dull flakes of ice. One light drips out alone,  
One bead of winter-red, smouldering in the steam,  
Quietly over the roof-tops...

And on the other hand, there is that wonderful moment of absorption which signals the end of the nightmare of separation and frustrated interpretation in 'Five Bells', and the sense of returning peace, of coming home, as the poet looks out the window towards the harbour:

At waves with diamond quills and combs of light  
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand  
In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze...  
It is only a moment, but in that moment there is a glimpse of paradise.

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**Note**

An expanded version of the discussion of Kenneth Slessor in this paper will appear in the first issue of *Heat* (June 1996).