

# NOEL MACAINSH: Aestheticism and Reality in the Poetry of Kenneth Slessor

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It may seem a little surprising to consider Kenneth Slessor, who was born in the year 1901, in a context of aestheticism and *fin-de-siècle* writing. Such a procedure may seem more appropriate to earlier Australian authors such as Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae or Victor Daley. Nevertheless, the influence of the Aesthetic Movement, of certain nineteenth-century French authors, directly or via English authors and artists, on the work of Kenneth Slessor and other Australian writers, has been widely noted by critics here, if not examined in detail. The Aesthetic Movement represented a devotion to beauty as a good in itself in a materialistic world which otherwise seemed chaotic and depressing; it thus rejected theories which held that the value of literature is somehow related to morality or to some sort of usefulness, and instead advocated, in defiance of much tradition and of the bourgeoisie, the independence of art from any moral or didactic end.

A. C. W. Mitchell, in reviewing the critical literature on Kenneth Slessor, comments on the pervasive influence of the literature of the nineties, on its influence in the work of Slessor, and adds that

*the Aesthetic Movement provides the basis for a number of assumptions about art and society made by the 'Vision' school, and directs its fundamental poetic attitudes. The two groups share essentially the same aesthetic principles, although these are rarely thought out with much clarity by the contributors to the second movement, and remain for the most part unquestioned assumptions.(1)*

The present study is intended as a commentary on these "aesthetic principles" in Slessor's work, from the viewpoint that the aestheticism to be found in earlier writers, say Brennan and McCrae, is a persistent and important factor in modern Australian poetry right to this day, and that an interesting variant of it is to be found in the work of Kenneth Slessor, associated with a recurring element in Slessor's work, of distaste, aversion, even of nausea in the face of contemporary reality.

At first, the experience of the narrator in Slessor's poetry may appear to be contrary to that of the aesthete, since it is accompanied often by aversion rather than pleasure; the purity of this latter feeling is contradicted in Slessor's poetry by what has been termed variously as "irony", "anguish", "protest", "torture", "horror", "nihilism", or, as Vincent Buckley writes, there is "a vague yet disturbing air of frenzy about almost all Slessor's poems".(2) But, as we shall see, this concerns less the content of the experience than its evaluation.

The texts selected here for analysis are generally not those of Slessor's meditations on a past life nor instances of his interest in remote and exotic themes, but are selected rather from that smaller part of Slessor's work that appears to address itself more directly to the world about him. The poem "North Country", for instance, depicts one of the poet's experiences of aversion, in which reality appears to him as ill-formed, disordered, meaningless:

*North Country, filled with gesturing wood,  
With trees that fence, like archer's volleys,  
The flanks of hidden valleys  
Where nothing's left to hide*

*But verticals and perpendiculars,  
Like rain gone wooden, fixed in falling,  
Or fingers blindly feeling*

*For what nobody cares;*

*Or trunks of pewter, bangled by greedy death,  
Stuck with black staghorns, quietly sucking,  
And trees whose boughs go seeking,  
And trees like broken teeth*

*With smoky antlers broken in the sky;  
Or trunks that lie grotesquely rigid,  
Like bodies blank and wretched  
After a fool's battue,*

*As if they've secret ways of dying here  
And secret places for their anguish  
When boughs at last relinquish  
Their clench of blowing air -*

*But this gaunt country, filled with mills and saws,  
With butter-works and railway-stations  
And public institutions,  
And scornful rumps of cows,*

*North Country, filled with gesturing wood -  
Timber's the end it gives to branches,  
Cut off in cubic inches,  
Dripping red with blood. (3)*

The experience of aversion here is nothing other than a particular mode of perceiving reality. In this mode, things are released from the reference they have in the world of expediency. The first part of "North Country" describes the poet's attempt to exorcise his experience by aesthetically transposing the origin and aim of the object that withdraws from the ordering comprehension of his consciousness. The latter part of the poem confirms the failure of this attempt. Firstly, the "gesturing wood" is likened to "archers' volleys" or "rain gone wooden" or "fingers blindly feeling" or "trunks of pewter, bangled by greedy death" or "broken teeth" or "smoky antlers broken" or "bodies blank and wretched" and so on; that is an interpretive list is advanced, a series of possible keys to the phenomenon. Furthermore, this list of similes, in accordance with the principles described by modern linguistic analysis,(4) engenders by association in the reader the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt, that is all these terms may be construed as being selected from the general class of signs standing under this title. The particular guides to the reader, suggesting that he should so form this paradigm, are the "archers", "staghorns", "antlers" and the "battue", this last word being derived from the French *battre* (to beat), meaning a kind of sport in which game is driven by a body of beaters from under cover into a limited area where the animals may be easily shot.(5) One could also point to other features of the poem leading to, and emphasizing this same impression; for instance, the partrhyme of "smoky antlers broken in the sky" with "After a fool's battue", or that of "trees that fence, like archers' volleys,/The flanks of hidden valleys...!" but pursuit of such indications here would lead too far afield. Suffice it to say that two completely disparate realms of ideas, that of an Australian timber-milling and dairying district, and that of a feudal deer-hunt, are brought together, such that they mutually deflect each other from their normal significance, that is from their statistically most frequent meaning. The effect of simile, which, like metaphor, is one of the most important means of critical and creative use of language, rests on the tension between the normal significance of its individual terms and the deflection of significance each time, as well as on the latent system of relationships of the successive similes in the text, which, by repetition and variation, contribute to the structure of the text.

The similes employed by the poet in "North Country", under the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt, reflects the poet's comprehension of the world in its mutually determining appearance of subjective and objective elements, such that a part of the world is not presented altogether objectively but with an induced

subjective interpretation. One might also remark here that a preference for simile as against metaphor appears to be a mark more of realism, classicism, of the Enlightenment, rather than of romanticism, of the baroque or of expressionism. Such a preference fits with the poet's recurrent selection of elements from the paradigm, testing them in turn as it were for "reality". This procedure takes up the greater part of "North Country", five stanzas out of seven; only with the sixth stanza, beginning with "But this gaunt country, filled with mills and saws...", do we find that the attempted aesthetic transposition is abandoned and that the dominance of the principle of expediency is acknowledged. Even so, the poet thereupon spontaneously transposes the object of this meditation, not by means of simile, as previously, but by the more intense device of metaphor: the branches "cut off in cubic inches" are seen as "Dripping red with blood". Thus the initial aversion for the "North Country", whose perceived implacable timber-getting expediency cannot be aesthetically transposed and re-interpreted under the paradigm of the medieval deer-hunt is acknowledged for what the poet takes to be its dominant reality, and is all the more violently rejected then under the image of blood. Of the rich complexity of the actual timber-industry, its social purpose and human ramifications, there is no acknowledgement. Instead, the poem is a finely wrought structure articulating a central tension between a perceived unpalatable, physical reality and an invoked world of past European feudal life. In the moment of aesthetic perception of this reality, the poet's capacity to grasp real interconnections has receded before the spontaneous, imaginative transposition of this reality. This is by no means an atypical poem; it is illustrative of a similar approach to be found elsewhere in Slessor.

For instance, in the earlier poem, "Elegy in a Botanic Gardens", the narrator states that he came to the gardens in autumn, "Where spring had used me better", and, analogous to the acknowledgement of reality in "North Country", he comes to accept the expediency, the unromantic intent of the situation, with again a note of aversion at the conclusion of the poem. The springtime, in which the poet was better used, corresponded to a time when he did not assent to names, to botanical classification:

... *Never before*  
*Had I assented to the hateful name*  
*Meryta Macrophylla, on a tin tag.*  
*That was no time for botany. But now the schools,*  
*The horticulturists, come forth*  
*Triumphantly with Latin. So be it now,*  
*Meryta Macrophylla, and the old house,*  
*Ringed with black stone, no Georgian Headlong Hall*  
*With glass-eye windows winking candles forth,*  
*Stuffed with French horns, globes, air-pumps, telescopes*  
*And Cupid in a wig, playing the flute,*  
*But truly, and without escape,*  
**THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM,**  
*Repeated dryly in Roman capitals,*  
**THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM. (6)**

The poem discloses to us that it is not solely a matter of botanical names, but, by inference, of names in general. The "old house", which the poet had transposed previously as a "Georgian Headlong Hall/With glass-eye windows winking candles forth", and so on, suggestive of the world of Thomas Love Peacock's novel *Headlong Hall*, is assented to, "truly, and without escape", as the National Herbarium. The epithets "dryly" and "Roman", together with the repetition of the name in bold letters, imply literality, the death of romance and imagination under dryness and civic order. In the spring-season, the season "Where we had kissed,.../Where we had kissed so awkwardly" in the grove now dead, the poet was not obliged to grasp names and things as belonging to each other. Nor did he have the capacity then to properly orient himself in the world of society; for it is names that make it possible to order things in a world humanly created and administered. What the poet records as a "springtime" release of things from their names is nothing other than what earlier writers such as Proust and Valéry had striven for as a condition of artistic vision. As Paul Valéry has written, "Regarder, c'est-à-dire oublier les noms des choses que l'ont voit",<sup>(7)</sup> that is seeing means to forget the names of the things one is looking at. And Proust has said in his *A la recherche du temps perdu* that the names with which we designate things always correspond to a concept of these things that has nothing to do with our real impressions of them. The names of things allow of their placing in a

purposeful, rational order. The designated objects are no longer perceived in their appearance *per se* but always in relation to possible use. This means that normal, daily perception is distorted by recollection, by knowledge of the object and by projects for the future, by plans of possible use. In contrast to this, the kind of artistic perception indicated by Valéry and Proust, and evidenced too by Slessor, restricts itself to the time and space of the present.

The same applies likewise for the experience of aversion expressed in Slessor's poetry; it also is restricted to the immediacy of what is spatially and temporally present; it is without concept; things no longer allow of their being subsumed under names. The opposing image is that of the expediently ordered world. In consequence, a transposition of reality takes place: just as the narrator in Christopher Brennan's first poem of "Towards the Source" contemplates a scene under pine trees from the aspect of "some forgotten afternoon, cast out from life, where Time might scarcely be", (8) so the narrator in Slessor's poem sees the trees of the North Country from the viewpoint of an imagined environment, in this case a cruel feudal hunt. As with Brennan, the transformation of reality in Slessor is independent of the will of the experiencing subject. Certainly, the aesthete Slessor thinks of techniques that shall make possible such moments, such "magic", but in accordance with their nature these techniques are also for him largely incalculable. (9)

In another essential factor also, Slessor's protagonist agrees with the aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle*: in the consciousness of being different from the others. In "Winter Dawn", for instance, originally the opening poem of *Earth Visitors*, published in 1926, the poet looks out through a "smoking pane" at the "dead suburbs", and invokes his fellow citizens:

*O buried dolls, O men sleeping invisible there,  
I stare above your mounds of stone, lean down,  
Marooned and lonely in this bitter air,  
And in one moment deny your frozen town,  
Renounce your bodies - earth falls in clouds away,  
Stones lose their meaning, substance is lost in clay  
Roofs fade, and that small smoking forgotten heap,  
The city, dissolves to a shell of bricks and paper,  
Empty, without purpose, a thing not comprehended  
A broken tomb, where ghosts unknown sleep. (10)*

Like Brennan's narrator, Slessor's, too, is not at ease with his fellow man; firstly because they live in an ordered world of work; they are "buried dolls", or, as Slessor expresses it elsewhere, in "City Nightfall",

*... those who chafe here, limed on the iron twigs,  
No greater seem than sparrows, all their cries  
Their clockwork and their merchandise,  
Frolic of painted dolls. I pass unheeding, (11)*

and, secondly, because they feel at home in this world, whereas the poet longs, in "Realities",

*No more amongst earth's phantoms to be cast,  
No more in the shadowy race of the world exist,  
But, born into reality, remember Life  
As men see ghosts at midnight... (12)*

The aestheticising perception of reality separates Slessor's narrator, as with Brennan, not from the working-class as such but essentially from the middleclass, bourgeois citizen. As with Norman Lindsay's *épaté le bourgeois*, expressed in his novels and pictures, this anti-bourgeois attitude could hardly be taken as political engagement, as *littérature engagée*; it remains individual criticism; its arch-enemy lives in the "monasteries of mensuration", (13) is the technocrat, the scientist, is the rationalist who can remark of a mermaid: "Those pisciform mammals - pure Spectres, I fear -." (14)

The development of Kenneth Slessor's poetry shows a progression from a relatively untroubled aestheticism, through a period of increasingly direct intrusion of the real world into the aesthetic mode of perception, to an ultimate *dénouement* and capitulation before this reality. It is an extended, essentially

unreflective attempt to hold the world at bay by means of an exorcism, a poetical "magic" practiced in accord with an aestheticism that was already waning elsewhere in the world but still to run its course in Australia.

The fate of this process in Slessor is of considerable interest. What for the earlier aesthete is a moment of grace, signifying liberation from the everyday world, and to be pleasurably enjoyed, as with Albrecht Durer in "Nuremberg",

*O happy nine, spouting your dew all way  
In green-scaled rows of metal, whilst the town  
Moves peacefully below in quiet joy...  
O happy gargoyles to be gazing down  
On Albrecht Durer and his plates of iron! (15)*

becomes, for the later Slessor, an extremely negative experience, a compulsion from which he cannot extract himself despite the utmost exertion. Judith Wright has spoken of Slessor as of a man "buried alive".(16) This throws some light on the differing attitude of the poet towards the expedient world of everyday. The earlier aesthete shields himself as much as possible from it; he would like to savour the moment of grace so long as is possible. The later Slessor, in contrast, seeks precisely in the everyday appellation of objects for help against a spontaneous aversion. Insofar as he names the details, the poet attempts to master his unpleasant experience. This is by no means a resort to realism or naturalism, since both of these terms imply some element of social interpretation in the selection and presentation of particulars, rather it is, as Vincent Buckley writes, "something which is more properly called 'physicalism' than 'realism'-a preoccupation with grasping, in one desperate swoop, all the variety, the hard physicality of sense-experience...".(17) It should be mentioned that this is also an important aspect of the general impressionist culture dominating Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in which naturalist observation of detail is intensified to the point where sensory experience gains importance at the expense of any interpretative framework.(18) In Slessor's "William Street", for instance, the poem consists entirely of a noting of the sensory particulars of the street, its sights, sounds, smells, and the human types, "dips and molls", that range its pavements, or, as Slessor himself states, the poem "is a sort of flashlight photograph of the swarming city channel that runs up the hill to Kings Cross..."; (19) despite a somewhat Villonesque touch, there is no direct aesthetic transposition as such, no simile or metaphor expressive of the will to project this reality onto an interpretative schema, be it from the Middle Ages, Tartary, or the philosophy of Henri Bergson,(20) such as may be found elsewhere in Slessor, but there occurs instead the plain assertion, "You find this ugly, I find it lovely", repeated each time as the last line of the poem's four stanzas:

*The red globes of light, the liquor-green,  
The pulsing arrows and the running fire  
Spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;  
You find this ugly, I find it lovely.*

*Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,  
In pawnshop-windows, bumping knee by knee,  
But none inside to suffer or condemn;  
You find this ugly, I find it lovely.*

*Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish  
And puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,  
Or grease that blesses onions with a hiss;  
You find it ugly, I find it lovely.*

*The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze  
(Death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)  
Ranging the pavements of their pasturage;  
You find it ugly, I find it lovely. (21)*

The attempt here, considered in isolation, may appear to be successful; but considered in the context of Slessor's poetry as a whole, it can be seen as but one variant of a striving never to be fully successful. The distance from everyday life, which the earlier aesthete experiences as liberation, since he can turn back into it each time, is experienced by the later poet as a compulsory alienation, to which he is subject. The pane that is recurrently present between the central figure and the world of the others, in Slessor's poems, proves to be impenetrable. In "Five Bells", it is present between the dead and the living:

*Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face  
In agonies of speech on speechless panes?  
Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name! (22)*

and elsewhere, from as early as "Nuremberg" onwards, the glass, whether as "bottle-panes", a "smoking pane", "glass-eye windows" or in whatever form, only mediately allows perception of the world, not entry and participation.

Initially, on the subjective side of the glass, the gods and goddesses of art and culture, the Muses, appear to justify this isolation, the creation of an inner space, a "high, sun-steeped room", in which Art may be served; however, in the course of Slessor's poetry this room comes to be increasingly vacated by the gods and goddesses, and left empty. Early, in "Pan at Lane Cove", the poet could invoke Chiron:

*...Chiron, pipe your centaurs out...  
This garden by the dark Lane Cove  
Shall spark before thy music dies  
With silver sandals, all thy gods  
Be conjured from Ionian skies.  
Those poplars in a fluting-trice  
They'll charm into an olive-grove  
And dance a while in Paradise  
Like men of fire above Lane Cove. (23)*

But, later, in "The Old Play", the poet appeals to the gods:

*...Be true to us,  
Play us not false;  
Be cruel, O Gods,  
Not fabulous.  
You were our statues  
Cut from space,  
Gorgon's eyes  
And dragon's face;  
Fail us not,  
You that we made,  
When the stars go out  
And the suns fade,  
You were our hope  
Death to bless  
Leave us not crying  
In emptiness. (24)*

The aestheticism, which for the earlier poet, was both a protest against and a flight from social reality, is later experienced as having turned against the poet; the earlier defence against "those tunnels of nothingness" (25) loses its credibility and effectiveness.

The question arises of how one is to explain historically the continuity of what has been designated here as an aestheticising perception. In the case of Christopher Brennan, reference has already been made elsewhere to a sense of exile, of isolation of the poet in Sydney at the time.(26) It would be possible to point out other cases of self-perceived isolation, say of Hugh McCrae, William Baylebridge or Victor Daley. An additional factor contributing in both Brennan and Slessor to the sense of isolation from

contemporary reality may well have been that both writers also remained in the "universe of words" during their professional activities; Brennan, firstly as library cataloguer, then as University lecturer; Slessor, as journalist; that is both remained in the field of interpretation, of talk of reality, but not properly in reality as known to their fellow citizens. The "hell" of journalism as referred to with Slessor, and the "cupboard-musty weeks"(27) of Brennan's library days, may well have derived their negative qualities, not only from their limitation of time and energy available for poetry but from their sequestering of these two employees from wider, more immediate, palpable experience. Furthermore, the very status of poet, as Brennan has indicated, had declined and, in public eyes, was ambiguous and marginal.(28)

The freedom that the poet found in art appears to stand in contradiction to his experience of aversion from reality, until seen in relation to the further experience of the alienation necessarily entailed by aesthetic perception of the world. For, in this particular approach, the factor of happiness is split off from the act of perception and reduced to the act of representation. Albrecht Durer is happy, in "Nuremberg", working on his intaglios; the poet in "Winter Dawn" finds that contemplation of the "least crystal weed... stirs more my heart/... than mortal towers/Dried to a common blindness...";(29) in "Realities", happiness lies within the "radiance" of classical art and not amongst the "shadowy race of the world";(30) in "Music", the sphere of art and merriment lies "On some old beach, where Time is put to rout,/and the world a buried star, not talked about", and so on. The embracement of alienation is to lift whoever achieves it out of the general fate in a wonderful way. So, in "To The Poetry of Hugh McCrae", the poet is addressed as one who comes "from the baleful Kimberleys of thought,/ From the mad continent of dreams", bearing the means of life to those who are dying in the midst of life -

*... with blossoms wrenched from sweet and deadly branches,  
And we, pale Crusoes in the moment's tomb,  
Watch, turn aside, and touch again those riches,*

*Nor ask what beaches of the mind you trod,  
What skies endured, and unimagined rivers,  
Or whiteness trenched by what mysterious tide,  
And aching silence of the Never-Nevers...(31)*

Here, an expectance of salvation is bound up with artistic activity. The aim of this activity is the justification of one's own life. What remains constant in both earlier and later Slessor is the sense of alienation, of being a pale Crusoe in "the moment's tomb". But this no longer comes to be seen in so relatively unproblematical a way as in earlier years. Between the aestheticism of Christopher Brennan and that of Slessor lies one great war, if not two, and also the Depression, in which the irrational nature of economic life had overwhelmingly revealed itself. The avantgarde movements had reacted to this by radicalising aestheticism in the attempt to overcome the separation of art and life. Where the aesthete, remaining passive, had contented himself with an ideal transformation of reality, the avantgardist had sought to change the public's attitude to reality by provocation.(32) If life, for the aesthete, is above all justified by art, then the avantgardist, whether along the lines of Norman Lindsay's "chillingly Olympian doctrine",(33) or otherwise, seeks to revolutionise life through art. After this attempt had largely foundered, after it had been shown that the status that art has in our society, and which at the same time conditions its relative freedom and lack of consequence, was not to be eliminated by the voluntary acts of isolated individuals, then the middle-class artist was thrown back to a position related to aestheticism. Slessor might be said to have outgrown this avantgarde movement, this "curious little Renaissance" as A. D. Hope calls it;(34) but A. D. Hope also puts the point suggestively when he remarks that this movement, this "Australian Vie de Boheme", was "congenial enough for him [Slessor] to stay in it and transform it into some thing genuine, lasting and alive", (35) and that this same movement represented the "first movement of provincialism towards autonomy".(36) It is indeed this last concept, of "autonomy", or of what Slessor himself calls "pure poetry or pure literature", (37) that is the crux of the matter, that represents both the glory and misery of the modern poet in Australia.(38) With Brennan, this same demand for autonomy had been tempered with an evolutionist doctrine of the "national" value of art and the restoration of a Golden Age, but with Slessor, the times had changed such that any lingering social and metaphysical optimism on behalf of an autonomous poetry was attenuated to a pale, Lindsayian ghost. Thus the likening of the timber-milling and dairying district of "North Country" to a feudal deer-hunt, without regard to the wider context of either of these two terms, is rationalised in that view of art as

a concern "with the eternal simplicities and mysteries that have outlasted and will outlast every political "struggle" and every social transformation-scene".(39) But this same poem, as elsewhere in Slessor's work, exhibits a relinquishment of the attempt to transpose reality.

This relinquishment is indeed nothing further than the despairing recognition of the distinction between libidinous and actual reality, which enables one to deliver oneself up to the external, social value-system because survival is more important than the fulfilment of unreal desires.

In aesthetic literature, the author, also acting representatively for the reader can exhibit a certain omnipotence in the sovereign shaping of his text; the lost unity of the world can find its reflection in the unity of the work and death can be overcome apparently in a timeless, immortal work that survives a little bit longer than its author. This peculiar, quasi-religious "Artistenmetaphysik" is so pervasive an article of faith in modern Australian poetry that it is virtually taken for granted. The earlier modern Australian poetry, the middle-class aesthetic experience of this period, is elitist. Its social expression is the quasi-formal institution of the avantgarde, a loosely fitting Bohemianism, whether Lindsayan or otherwise, which represents an unexpected association of extreme individuals mediated partially by groups, legitimised by its extremity. It would be false to limit this concept simply to attempts at aesthetic renewal within this century alone. As the present writer has sought to show elsewhere,(40) the avantgarde organisation of experience reaches back at least to the aesthetic opposition around the year 1850 and has its prototype in the radical aesthetic intellectuality of the Jena romantics who so influenced both Christopher Brennan and the French Symbolist poets. The society of literary aesthetes, as of the avantgarde, is an outsider-society. Its happiness is fictive, always a happiness for the others, for the educated spectator. The psychic misery, with which the avantgarde pays for its poetic licence to aesthetic pleasure, keeps firm the commonality of social relinquishment of happiness and surmounts it only in denial, in the taking of life over into art. This brief explanation naturally only applies for the writers themselves and for the small group of those whose real situation is largely similar to that of these writers. For the majority of readers, however, the isolation depicted by Slessor in his last major poem, "Five Bells", is a cypher of their own, or, as A. K. Thomson states: "It is also a moving description of the human condition which agonizes to reach some meaning, some purpose in life." (41) The poem allows them, not in the production of art, but in their conscious grasp of it, to lift themselves above what they apprehend as the meaninglessness of their existence. What is reproduced in the poem is not merely a subjective experience, that of freedom and election in shaping and contemplating, nor that which is actually the case, but both factors are mixed together in the poem in a remarkable way: it is precisely the aestheticising perception, exemplifying a total freedom of the percipient in the face of reality, that is presented as a compulsory experience. The element of truth here lies predominantly in that the illusoriness of the freedom of the aesthete becomes comprehensible. Elsewhere in Slessor's work, but not in "Five Bells", however, it is precisely this element of truth that is taken back by the suggestion that the production of art is a way out of a world of distasteful expediency.

Like the *Fin-de-siècle* aesthete, the poet Slessor seeks the way out, not in social engagement, but in the realm of art. The fulfilment of meaning in art, which does not exist, corresponds to the poet's conviction of the total meaninglessness of the existing world. The flight into art is however not the only possible answer to the experience of aversion which Slessor has presented. In this flight and experience rather there is already negatively implied the necessity of engagement. The experience of the poet in "Five Bells" designates a limit to human self-alienation from which the demand must necessarily arise for some inter-subjective shaping of reality, however limited.

1. A. C. W. Mitchell: Kenneth Slessor and the Grotesque. *Australian Literary Studies*, 1, No. 4, December 1964. Reprinted in A. K. Thomson (ed.): *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor*. Brisbane, 1968, p. 132.

2. Vincent Buckley: The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor. *Meanjin*, 1, 1952. Reprinted in Thomson, p. 73.

3. Kenneth Slessor: *Poems*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1957, p. 93.

4. Some further comment on, and an example of application of these principles can be found in the present author's article "Charles Harpur's Midsummer Noon-A Structuralist Approach. *Australian Literary Studies*, 2, 1978.

5. cf. Slessor's own account in his *Bread and Wine*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970, p. 199.

6. *Poems*, p. 55.

7. Paul Valery: *Oeuvres*, II, p. 1240.
8. A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.): *The Verse of Christopher Brennan*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1960, p. 66.
9. cf. *Bread and Wine*, p. 168 f.
10. *Poems*. p. 14.
11. p. 30.
12. p. 33.
13. p. 50.
14. p. 52.
15. p. 3.
16. Judith Wright: *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. Oxford Press, 1966, p. 176.
17. Buckley, in Thomson, pp. 72-3.
18. On this point, cf. the present author's comments on Impressionism in the case of Henry Handel Richardson, in "The Shock of Recognition-Henry Handel Richardson and J. P. Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*". *Southerly*, 1, 1976, pp. 99 f.
19. Slessor, *Bread and Wine*, pp. 199-200, also Thomson, p. 156.
20. cf. Noel Macainsh: Pragmatism and Australian Poets. *Quadrant*, July 1977.
21. Slessor, *Poems*, p. 99.
22. p. 103.
23. p. 5.
24. p. 87.
25. p. 26.
26. Noel Macainsh: Christopher Brennan's Wanderer. *Quadrant*, February 1978, p. 54.
27. Verse, p. 72.
28. A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn: *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965, p. 224.
29. Slessor, *Poems*, pp. 14-15.
30. p. 33.
31. p. 101.
32. cf. Slessor's remarks in his "Norman Lindsay", first published *Southerly*, 2, 1955. Reprinted in Thomson, pp. 111-127.
33. p. 119.
34. A. D. Hope: Slessor Twenty Years After, in Thomson, p. 128.
35. p. 129.
36. p. 129.
37. Kenneth Slessor: Spectacles for the Fifties-A Rejoinder to "Vision of the Twenties", in Thomson, p. 87.

38. cf. the present author's "The Writer and the State". *Quadrant*, August 1976.

39. Slessor, in Thomson, p. 89.

40. "The Tradition of the New". *Quadrant*, 1, 1975, pp. 34-41.

41. A. K. Thomson: Kenneth Slessor: An Essay in Interpretation, in Thomson, op. cit., p. 51.

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