Vivian Smith characterises Slessor's early poems as “the poems of a late-comer” (Smith, “Australian Modernism” 129). Hugh McCrae, writing in 1940, after the publication of Five Bells: XX Poems (1939), describes him as “Not too late, but in his primal strength … he has no compeer today” (59). This sense of Slessor as always late, but not too late, simultaneously timely and “out of time”, describes Slessor's habitual orientation as a poet, and suggests one reason why he was so drawn to elegy, the exemplary poetic genre of belatedness, compulsive return and self-placing, under the aspect of lack. It is not simply that Slessor's last and best-known poems — “Five Bells” and “Beach Burial” — are elegies, but that varieties of elegy dominate his compact oeuvre. The inscription of literal or figurative death, and the flexibility or even interchangeability of the relation between elegist and elegised (mourner and mourned), motivate Slessor's poetic career and his continuing engagement with the textual strategies and cultural capital of elegy.

It is the position of poet as elegist, and the intertextually rich and stratified topography of elegy, which Slessor occupies as the ground of self-witnessing, conforming to Coleridge's insistence that elegy “treat no subject for itself; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself” (Woodring 444–45). The elegised is submitted to elision and reification, absorbed into a metonymic series which finds its terminus in the person of the still living but to-be-dead elegist, the apocalyptic last man. Indeed, Slessor so often appears as auto-elegist, or elegist elegised, that accounts of his career often simultaneously replicate and repress this generically overdetermined and recursive structure.

Andrew Taylor allegorises Slessor's poetic career and its untimely end through a reading of his best-known elegies, especially “Elegy in a Botanic Gardens”, without remarking on this generic concentration. He interprets “Elegy in a Botanic Gardens”, the “elegy of a dead romance”, as an allegory of the end of Slessor's affair with Romanticism and Vision, and as marking a crisis which issues in the death of Slessor's poetry. Taylor's opportunistic reading conflates romance with Romanticism, and makes Slessor a colonially inflected instance of what he calls “the modernist impasse” (69): “Notions of culture and tradition available to Eliot and Pound in Europe simply were not available to him in the Australia of his time … His response was to quit poetry altogether, and ‘Beach Burial’ is his vale to it” (69). Some twenty years earlier Judith Wright had offered an inverse but similar formulation of this argument: “In Slessor's work the emotional impasse of European civilisation appears as affecting Australian writing directly” (150). On her account Slessor stops writing poetry because he rejects Romanticism without being able to endorse experimental Modernism (what he called “the incendiaries under the domination of cummings and Gertrude Stein”, in “Modern English Poetry” [1931], [Haskell, Kenneth Slessor 155]). It may be that Slessor wearied of his poetic rehearsals of genealogical crisis, and of his attempts to marry “orthodoxy and experiment” (Haskell, Kenneth Slessor 159), preferring to exchange what Smith refers to as these “poised suspensions” (“Ambivalence” 257) for the partisan but catholic and minute deliberations of editing, judging, anthologising, committee work and epicureanism.

Many critics have identified “Five Bells” as both Slessor's most compelling thematisation and formalisation of “impasse”, and as enacting its resolution: “Five Bells” is pressed into interpretive service as Slessor's heroic last word. Max Harris writes. “It seemed that everything that went to make up the poet in Slessor conspired to make him put down his pen for ever” (42). James McAuley finds “utter dark” (“An Imprint” 10) at the end of “Five Bells”, but calls it “a summation, a last encounter” (9). Vincent Buckley reads it as Slessor's “summing-up of all he had tried to say in poetry, and of all the ways he has discovered of saying it effectively. It is this which makes us wonder whether he will ever write again” (76). Stewart calls “Five Bells” “a kind of anthology, a compilation, a summation of everything he wishes to say in poetry, and everything he can do” (85), describing “Beach Burial” as “a kind of overflow from “Five Bells” ’ (83). “Five
“Bloodless feet” becomes the recuperative marker of aesthetic closure in Slessor’s career: his only personal elegy, ironically and appropriately enough, does double service as auto-elegy, his last word, pace the “overflow” of “Beach Burial”, which is in turn read as a kind of anonymising coda or epitaph. Chronologically displaced, “Five Bells” is repositioned and reread as the generically appropriate marker of the premature end of Slessor’s career, and also as the aesthetically satisfying rhetorical proof of his poetic achievement. But the discursive meaning and affect generated by, and attributed to, Slessor’s elegy exceed the boundaries of even the most expansive consideration of Slessor as poet, while also being disconnected from an analysis of genre.

In what is in many ways the most suggestive reading to date of this much discussed poem, Kevin Hart chooses “Five Bells” “out of the entire library of Australian literature” (189) because of its cultural capital in the canon of Australian poetry (“one of the strongest poems written in this country” [190]), and because he sees it as thematising “the relation between nomination and signification” (190), “the weight of the dead and … the ambiguities of their possible return” (189–90). The question of genre is never explicitly raised — “Five Bells” as elegy, and the concomitant question of the cultural capital of elegy. Setting out to pose the discursive relations of “theory” and “literature”, Hart finds “différance already at work within the poem” (190). In reading Slessor’s “act of mourning” (196) allegorically and self-reflexively — ‘Five Bells’ remains [Slessor’s] own crypt, his own berth of dissolution” (196) — Hart offers a more elegant and formally attentive version of the canonical account outlined above; but instead of producing an historical allegory of the (failed) crossing from Romanticism to Modernism in Australia, he uses “Five Bells” to demonstrate the inescapable implication of subjectivity, writing and reading in “an economy of signification” (186) that is rendered elegiac or deathly in its dispersal, displacement, deferral and multiplicity. The generic displacement which Hart performs is both a symptomatic deferral, and an instantiation of the textual economy he discusses; it is also crucial to the “scene of instruction” over which he wishes to preside, and to the disclosure of what is “already at work” in his exemplary chosen text, “Five Bells”.

In theory, différance is immanent in any text whatsoever; why then, does Hart choose “Five Bells”, and why does he pass over the question of genre? Deconstructive practice is elegiac in mode, locating the very possibility of reading and writing in an impossible desire for presence, completion, and coherence, and a structure of infinite regress. In Goldberg’s formulation, “[t]he generation of the text is the generation of death” (48), or in Hartman’s: “every voice with presence is already an inscription; already speaking from the realm of the dead, as if aware of the ancestral world, or having anticipated its own passing” (121). To choose an elegy, a formal lament, as exemplary text of and for deconstruction is to rig the sample in a way that is obviously tempting, perhaps irresistible, certainly useful; but it does displace and allegorise genre (amongst other possible contexts of reading) and, in doing so, rhetorically disables the investigation of elegy qua elegy: its formal repertoire, classic narratives and habitual processes (displacement, condensation, recuperation, eroticisation). In insisting on the significance of genre as a category of analysis, I want to motivate my account of Slessor’s generic preference through an attention to the problematic of canonical, masculine elegy — the inscription of homosocial desire under the aspect of lack and oedipal crisis.

The corollary of Slessor’s exploration of “the poet himself” (Coleridge’s phrase) through elegy and its hermeneutic of loss is his classical engagement with elegy as a legitimate poetic domain of affect between men. Slessor mostly avoids directly personal elegy (“Five Bells” is the exception). Instead, he favours more abstract elegiac encounters between men, mediated by various kinds of fictionalisation, historicisation, theatricality and textuality. Slessor conjures an array of heroicised “dead captains” (“Mangroves”), amongst them Lao-Tzu, Heine, Rubens, Cook, Marco Polo, Laurence Sterne and Hamlet’s father, even rendering the living Hugh McCrae as a ghostly textual “uncle”. He also aligns himself with the nostalgic recorders and collectors of stories and souvenirs of masculine mesmerism, the pseudo-historical Captain Dobbin and the historical Alexander Home.

Slessor dramatises his own elegiac witness as the product of an aesthetic encounter which makes both living and dead, past and present authors, equally ghastly or belated. Slessor’s poems are haunted by historical narratives and representations of sovereign or deposed masculinity, and by the pathos of his own future posthumousness. This instantiation of elegy as tribute and alliance is perhaps clearest in Slessor’s homage “To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae” with its curious pedagogical scene of “Uncles who burst on childhood, from the East./Blown from air, like bearded ghosts arriving./… Spending your trophies at our bloodless feet”. McCrae is figured as returning uncle to the poet as child, seducing him with “boomerangs
of rhyme”, and “blossoms wrenched from sweet and deadly branches”. In a curious textual manoeuvre, mediated by the recursive trope of the discursive boomerang, the figure of McCrae spans the distance between seaman and enigmatic “native” poet, his “whiteness trenched by what mysterious tide”. Implicitly, McCrae is figured as the blacked-up, boomerang-bearing Man Friday who offers “his chest of miracles” to Slessor's infantilised “pale Crusoe”. He is the wanderer back from “Kimberleys of thought”, “beaches of the mind”, “unimagined rivers” and the “aching silence of the Never-Nevers”; but the “miracles” he brings are “desperate plunder”: “you stole them out of death/Out of death's pyramids, to prove us breathing”. The apocalyptic finale of the poem opposes commercial trade — “To squeeze the greasy udders of our purses” — to the miraculous but illegitimate sustenance of “Uncle” McCrae's textual body and the (homo) eroticised economy of textual exchange (“spending”) between dead master-poets and their living disciples:

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We live by these, your masks and images,
We breathe in this, your quick and borrowed body;
But you take passage on the ruffian seas,
And you are vanished in the dark already.
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As an elegy of succession, “To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae” ends by disposing of the familial ghost of the author, so that the speaker of the poem can assume his place: “you take passage”, “you are vanished in the dark already”. The logic of the poem, however, guarantees that such a clearing is only provisional, for the body of Slessor's poem is already “trenched” by McCrae's “sweet and deadly branches”, his “boomerangs of rhyme” and “chest of miracles”. The final lines declare the breach between “your quick and borrowed body”, i.e. the textual corpus addressed by the title “To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae”, and its “vanished” source, the author himself. In a trope of inversion, the temporality of the living becomes “the moment's tomb”, “the sides of emptiness”, while McCrae is released “on the ruffian seas”. The lateral and retrospective excursion of writing and reading between older and younger man (“Watch, turn aside, and touch…”) is thematised as a homoerotic and perhaps paedophile narrative of first contact (“whiteness trenched by what mysterious tide”) which metonymically erases the difference between the positions of merchant trader and “native”, coloniser and colonised, through the interpolation of “we, pale Crusoes”, unassimilable to either polarity, in love with both. This fantasmatic colonial scene, with its enabling incoherence, is offered by Slessor as the turning point in his development as a poet, a sexualised narrative of initiation into textual commerce, which has its familial parallel in the relation of uncle and nephew. Although the final lines mourn the loss of McCrae in person, the trade is clear: it is precisely the substitution of McCrae for “McCrae” that permits Slessor in turn to become “Slessor”, fulfilling the logic of the “boomerangs of rhyme”.

In an interview with John Thompson in 1966, Slessor named Tennyson as his “master”, and “Tithonus” as Tennyson's “master-piece”:

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You know, the one that starts:
The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground.

With that glorious line, “Man comes and tills the earth and lies beneath”,
which sums up the whole of human life in one line. Tennyson is the master
to whom any poet can go for lessons in technique, and if that kind of writing
is scorned today, well, I'd prefer to live in the past.
(“Poetry in Australia” 192)
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Quite apart from stylistic instruction, Tennyson — and not only the Tennyson of “In Memoriam”, but also of the dramatised auto-elegy “Tithonus” and other poems written in the aftermath of Hallam's death — offers the most compelling and canonical precedent for Slessor's own textual negotiation of the homosocial and the homosexual, through the genealogically inflected domain of elegy as memorial. In “To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae” Slessor casts himself as a kind of Tithonus, “Here at the quiet limit of the world” (“Tithonus” 1.7), an anachronistic and elegiac survivor, gazing from infancy to the end of time:
(Look in this harsher glass, and I will show you
The daylight after the darkness, and the morning
After the midnight, and after the night the day
After the year after, terribly returning).

In projecting himself backwards, Slessor is mourning the apparent extinction not simply of the past, but specifically the past as vanished masculinity. It is in this context that Slessor's interest in metempsychosis — the transmigration of the soul at or after death into a new body (OED) — can be understood, and particularly his desire to represent poetry as potential vehicle or transport, both in terms of rhetorical energia (vivid description which "brings to life"), and as the regenerative, interactive ground of exchange between poems, poets and readers. This Orphic project — one that can only fail — is Slessor's governing motivation as a poet, and also the guarantee of his commitment to elegy. The final section of "Five Visions of Captain Cook" is a paradigmatic case. The blind dissociated Alexander Home is transported from "the vague ancestral darkness" of his marital home in Scotland to the "blazing", colour-saturated scene of Cook's death, "Half-round the earth", via the energia of repeated anecdote and memory. Slessor's text establishes a rhetorical circuit ("boomerang") for poetic metempsychosis — "Cook died. The body of Alexander Home/Flowed round the world and back again" — in which Home is the visionary transport between Cook and Slessor, and their "strange, half-dreadful sortilege with books" (I). Like Home, Cook and Slessor are implicitly figured as men who "gaze […] elsewhere" (V), but the inferior Home, here occupying the place of eye-witness, is figured as irredeemably in the dark, a position enshrined by the allegorical opening strophe of part V: "After the candles had gone out, and those/Who listened had gone out". Cook, and by implication Slessor, on the other hand, have already been figured as heroically electing "a passage into the dark" (I): "So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout,So men write poems in Australia" (I). Home is the hierarchical, historical and textual hinge of the attempted poetic crossing of Cook and Slessor, man enough to play a part in this business between (great) men, while the representation of Home's "noble wife", Elizabeth, "Who lived in a present full of kitchen-fumes/And had no past", serves as alibi: not only the possibility, but the desire for such exchange is figured as an heroic proof of masculinity, even if it is destined to fail.

In "Metempsychosis" Slessor projects himself into the generic character of John Benbow and the romance of urban shiftlessness: "Suddenly paid-off and forgotten in Woolloomooloo". Benbow is offered as the icon of spontaneous, independent, improvised masculinity, free from work and routinised heterosexual domesticity (of the kind which encumbers Alexander Home): "walking down William Street/With a tin trunk and a five-pound note, looking for a place to eat". His tattooed body, with its "places that make the delicate female inquirer screech", is the ground of the inscription of desire, but Slessor's desire is nothing less than "Suddenly to become John Benbow …", the phrase with which Slessor opens and closes the circle of his intricately and asymmetrically rhymed poem with its long, rangy ("walking") line. A triple rhyme ("do", "view", "Woolloomooloo") leads to the suspended last line, "Suddenly to become John Benbow …" the only unrhymed line in the poem, but also an exact repetition of the poem's opening phrase. The final aposiopesis marks a space of contingency and overlap, but also of equivocation and impossibility. It is both an attempt "suddenly" to instantiate Slessor as Benbow, to effect metempsychosis, and a strategy to keep the wishful circuit of metempsychosis open, to indicate a suspended structure of eternal return.

Max Harris wrote of Slessor: "He pursues an unrealisable past in his personal modus vivendi. In the same way, his poetry seeks ideal past worlds to inhabit (19) … reliving other men's lives …" (27). Ronald McCuaig writes, "with Slessor we are always dealing with an incipient seventeenth-century man-of-the-world" (56). Interestingly, Hugh McCrae, himself so implicated in Slessor's poetic genealogies, compliments Slessor via the scheme of chiasmus (mirror inversion), in a subtle rhetorical displacement of metempsychosis: 'The best of this best book is 'Sleep', which might be bound up with poems by Donne, and not sink. It has affinity with Donne's work; but, if the poets' birth dates could be exchanged, the affinity would remain—suspicionless" (61). Slessor simultaneously returned and weakened the compliment in "Australian Poetry and Hugh McCrae" (1956), substituting Donne for his almost exact contemporary Jonson: "Of all the Elizabethans to whom he is so clearly kin, Ben Jonson. I think, would most have enjoyed Hugh McCrae's company — for it would be as grievous a mistake to nurture the popular misconception of Jonson as a pompous and ponderous schoolman as it would to adopt the critical misconception of McCrae as a kind of leprechaun" (Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 183). In Slessor's doubly ambiguous phrase, Jonson
“would most have enjoyed” McCrae’s “company”, aligning the (again, ambiguously phrased) “popular misconception” of Jonson with the “critical misconception” of McCrae. The convoluted pairing of Jonson and McCrae which Slessor effects, redeems both for manly conviviality, via the authorising mechanism of Slessor’s (Donne's) recommendation, saving them from the errors of the “popular” on the one hand and the “critical” on the other. In doing so, Slessor converts McCrae’s chiasmus into metempsychosis: Slessor as Donne. Quite apart from Slessor's rhetorically motivated but historically suspect choice of the “Elizabethan” period as the setting for this fantasie, Slessor goes on to capitalise on another fortuitous “misconception”. He draws attention to a newspaper typo which substitutes “Huge” for “Hugh McCrae”, calling it “one of those aberrations bordering on the sublime” (183). The effect of this “huge” misconception of McCrae on the ersatz “Elizabethan” masculine quadrangle already in place is the conversion of Slessor and “Huge McCrae” (a.k.a Donne, and Jonson's friend) into poetic contemporaries, giants and equals. What renders the project of metempsychosis both elegiac and “lovely” in Slessor's poetry is its association with the trace of a masculinity that, if it cannot be restored to full presence, is never simply eviscerated:

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.
(“William Street”)

The pawn shop window (kin to Yeats’s “foul rag and bone shop of the heart”) offers a solicitation to an implicitly homoeroticised and working class economy of exchange and recuperation (pledge and redemption). In this “pulsing” red-light district refigured as “pasturage”, the “dips and molls” are simply window-dressing for transactions between “hung men”. The “you” agonistically addressed and excluded as outside “William Street” is associated with suburban middle-class sanitisation and feminisation, while the visceral decadence of its antithesis (“running fire”, “Smells rich and rasping”) is linked to primal, authentic masculinity, “deeper than a stream”. Recursively, the interior of the pawn shop offers an emblem of William Street: “none inside to suffer or condemn”. The bi-location of the poem's speaking subject is articulated spatially — cruising William Street, looking into the pawn shop window — and rhetorically. The challenge of the refrain, with its emphatic and schematic contradiction, is apotropaic: it defensively wards off the speaker's own potential exclusion from the loveliness of William Street, while elegiacally inscribing its possibility.

In the auto-elegy, “To Myself”, Slessor dramatises his own uneasy self-witnessing as an illicit peepshow: “It is impossible (damn it!) to avoid/Looking at you through keyholes”. There he sees himself playing “Hamlet's father in the wings” — off-stage (otherworldly) remnant of the murdered king, the hero of his own play, supplanted onstage by the poetic authority of the soliloquies of Hamlet, and the new King, Hamlet's uncle. Slessor casts himself as the murdered king and father, twice displaced, condemned to witness a tragedy of the perversion of masculine genealogy:

Have you not played Hamlet's father in the wings
Long enough, listening to poets groan,
Seeking a false catharsis
In flesh not yours, through doors ajar
In the houses of dead kings,
In the gods' tombs, in the coffins of cracked stone?

A curiously involuted pun is formulated here. As an actor he counterfeits “flesh not yours”. As the living embodiment of a dead man, he is a figure of meta-theatricality, a theatrical impersonation of a reanimated corpse whose voice is generated through prosopopoeia. As the (murdered) father, he is the narrator of the tragedy which unfolds, the articulation of the return of the repressed. As the ghost of a ghost the actor who plays Hamlet's father emblematises the father's supersession in a structure which promises repeated murder
and interminable haunting. He is off-stage even when he is on stage, a recursive figure of genealogy as impersonation, as prosopopoeia.

The next stanza abandons the theatrical mise-en-scène to metaphorise an unproductive generation topographically:

Have you not poured yourself, thin fluid mind,
Down the dried-up canals, the powdering creeks,
Whose waters none remember
Either to praise them or condemn,
Whose fabulous cataracts none can find
Save one who has forgotten what he seeks?

The inseminating masculine mind is represented allegorically as pouring backwards into the forgotten and neglected channels of history in a figure of perverse reproduction between men. Temporally and spatially backwards, Hamlet's father, viewed “through keyholes”, figures the tenuous reanimation of the dehydrated, thirsty body of masculine history by a ghost “who has forgotten what he seeks”. In this scenario the cost of being rescued from extinction is to be forgotten again (colonised, appropriated, repressed, poisoned), the dried-up canals filled with new fluid in a process that is doubly elegiac. But the Gothic twist in this is that the one who has “poured [him]self” is himself already dead, already lodged in “the houses of dead kings”: he is too late.

By casting himself as Hamlet's father (rather than Hamlet) Slessor positions himself as a figure of paternal prosopopoeia and reanimation, already posthumous, thoroughly belated, able to see in both directions. The final stanza meditates on the corrupt epicurean legacy of uncles, “[t]he memory of a cravat, a taste in cheese, / And a way of saying ‘I am honoured’ ”: effeminate tokens of the epicure which “[s]mell sweetly to the seraphim”. In a reversal of chronology, it is the seraphic dead who witness the living (like the spectator-gods of “The Old Play”) who, always in the wings, form the best audience. The questions of stanzas two and three seem to counsel an end to performance as repetition — or at least to the performance of Hamlet's father, which is to say the renunciation of prosopopoeia, of haunting. In the logic of the poem, prosopopoeia is superseded by reification, the memory of “things”. The poem's effort of self-persuasion and interrogation is, however, ironised by the fact that such an address is only made possible via prosopopoeia. The “dead” voice of the author addressed “To Myself” and spiced with stagy vocatives — “damn it!”,”Believe me, fool” — is a fabrication and a prolepsis of its own posterity in the reanimation of the performative text.

Prosopopoeia is the voice of epitaph, a rhetorical reminder of the body buried beneath or within monumental inscription or inscription as monument — a body “in the wings”. Slessor manipulates the crossings of writing and reading for an elegiac rendition of textual genealogy and indebtedness, in which the positions of elegist and elegised are rendered curiously symmetrical, through the panoramic trope of “bygone life” (“Marco Polo”), life converted to text moment by moment, in an endless series of asymmetrical displacements. The poet-reader of “Marco Polo”, living backwards in the footsteps of Marco Polo, celebrates the apparent rewards of reading and the recuperative representational capacity of writing:

Reading how Marco Polo came
By bridle-path to Kanbalu,
Forgotten fibres wake to flame,
And smoke old memories anew ...
For in a bygone life of mine
I watched the carven rampart shine,
Where Kublai's five-clawed dragons glowed
Like painted wyverns, line on line.

Even as he does so, however, negative knowledge and ennui floods back:
He's gone; and with him, flowers and birds,
And old Venetians too, have died;
Yet burnt in Marco Polo's words,
Those unforgotten splendours hide …
And, tired of life's new-fashioned plan,
I long to be barbarian.
I'm sick of modern men, I wish
You were still living, Kublai-Khan!

The elegist (whose own technique strives to represent him purely as a reader of “Marco Polo's words”, and not as the author of “Marco Polo”) mourns the passing of a golden age of primal masculinity. “Barbarian” suggests nostalgically “splendid” exoticism without effeminacy, the antithesis of the lamented etiolation of “modern men”, of which Slessor's own melancholy tribute is yet another symptom: “I long to be barbarian”. In a characteristic way, however, Slessor's figuration of Marco Polo is entirely appropriative and self-reflexive. He provides the textual occasion (“Marco Polo”) for Slessor to mourn the impotence of reading and writing, the inadequacy of textuality as a medium of (masculine) encounter, and the failure of energia as resurrection. The elegiac testimony of “Marco Polo” is that neither reading nor writing is capable of effecting a genuine metempsychosis: the dividing screens of bodies, language and history operate as reified tokens of an impassable distance which elegy can only hope to measure.

The figure of the melancholy, isolated reader-poet recurs in Slessor's elegies, and is itself a master-trope of masculine elegy, derived from textual and pictorial representations of the meditative requiescens. The locus classicus of such a representation in the canon of English elegy is the languid and to-be-dead “youth to fortune and to fame unknown” in Gray's “Elegy in a Country Church-yard”:

There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by. (101–104)

Gray's “youth” synthesises the poem's concerns with the endorsement and memorialisation of the elegiac man of feeling, and the homosocial pathos of thwarted and anonymised masculinity. Slessor's sonnet, “Mangroves”, with its intertwining rhymes, offers a highly appropriate Australian rendition of this marked/unmarked elegiac territory and its problematic of masculine genealogy:

These black bush-waters, heavy with crusted boughs
Like plumes above dead captains, wake the mind …

These opening lines collect a number of Slessor's poetic obsessions and, equally, rehearse a generic primal scene. “Boughs” is a word which Slessor chooses with striking frequency, always in the context of the erotics of masculine succession. Here they are “crusted” and tangled, forming a “heavy” canopy over “black bush-waters”, “Like plumes above dead captains”. The mangroves are similised as a murky grave, fancifully complete with hierarchical signifiers of dignity (“plumes”); a generically overdetermined space which “wake[s] the mind”, allowing what has been submerged to rise to the surface. By means of the funerary simile, the becalmed poet is revived to an accounting of what has been lost to consciousness:

Uncounted kissing, unremembered vows,
Nights long forgotten, moons too dark to find,
Or stars too cold … all quick things that have fled
Whilst these old bubbles uprise in older stone,
Return like pale dead faces of children dead,
Staring unfelt through doors for ever unknown.
The conjuring of dead captains (fathers) calls forth a second comparison, the curiously emphatic and tautological, “like pale dead faces of children dead”: the sacrificial offspring, on the poem's logic, of “Uncounted kissing, unremembered vows”. Such a ghoulish representation of a blighted family tree, figuring the failure (death) of illegitimate heterosexual reproduction, can only be read in terms of the fantasy the poem's rhetoric establishes of a salient lateral connection between brothers. Against the historical dynamic of the family tree, the poem favours a rhetoric of “timeless” branching and connection between “eternal brothers”, which is figurally homoerotic and textually productive:

O silent ones that drink these timeless pools,
Eternal brothers, bending so deeply over,
Your branches tremble above my tears again …
And even my songs are stolen from some old lover
Who cried beneath your leaves like other fools,
While still they whisper “in vain … in vain … in vain …”

The structure of simile is displaced by metaphor as ‘the poet figures himself within a sexualised scenario of trembling, linked branches, “bending so deeply over”.

Mangroves are a liminal site, as the compound “bush-waters” indicates; representationally, they disturb the boundaries and spatial relationships of surface and depth, ground and water, over and under. It is a space of metaphorical overdetermination and continuation, of allegory, figuratively overburdened and overlaid: the boughs are “crusted”, and “bubbles uprise in older stone”. Equally, the figure of the poet-elegist is offered as emblematically recursive: here “again”, his presence indicates temporal residue, repetition and solipsism. In addition, he represents a pattern of recursion and reiteration which is offered as both particular (“These black bush-waters”, “these old bubbles”, “these timeless pools”, “my tears”, “my songs”, “your leaves”) and intertextual:

And even my songs are stolen from some old lover
Who cried beneath your leaves like other fools,
While still they whisper “in vain … in vain … in vain …”

The poet as latecomer is not only returning to the scene of “these … waters”, “my tears”; he is a type of “lover[s]/Who cried beneath your leaves like other fools”. Tears function as a metonymic hinge, linked both to the water which “wakes[s] the mind” (the pool of thought) and to the text embedded in the poem. The stolen songs and the leaves which whisper the refrain, “in vain … in vain … in vain”, are connected via the elegiac trope of the poem as tear, as well as a familiar pun on leaves. The lesson of this tautological space of recursion and intertwining is that there is no originary text and no originary poet: the production of thought, of affect, of text is always a reproduction, and it is this melancholy recognition which marks the arena of elegy as a space of compulsive return and renewed mourning (“in vain …”). Such a structure is not, however, simply disabling; it is also empowering and revivifying. The man-groves offer the poet a highly dramatised arena of powerful connection and filiation with the “silent ones”, his “eternal brothers”, and not simply an encounter with “other fools”.

Rather than an anxiety about the impossibility of originality (anxiety of influence), what more often motivates Slessor's poems is an impossible desire to disappear, to become someone else through metempsychosis. The fantasy of being doubled with “dead captains”, who are themselves figured as originary and irreplaceable, displaces a desire for originality and authenticity. This is the source of the nostalgia for “living backward” which is crucial to Slessor's classically oedipal commitment to elegy.

Slessor's romance of the sea and shipboard life is a romance of covertly eroticised collective masculinity cognate with the tangled boughs of “Mangroves”, and equally with his memorial for the washed-up bodies of soldiers in “Beach Burial”. What makes such representations elegiac is their awareness that such camaraderie is itself phantasmatic. It is those journalistic recorders, the eye-witnesses, who fascinate Slessor: because they so readily occupy the positions of both elegist and elegised, and because they offer a metempsychosis transport, they are figured as cognate with his own work. They offer a way of traversing historical distance,
and of connecting the lateral branches of his own twin careers as journalist (especially “correspondent”) and poet. It is into these affect-laden domains of metropolitan masculine exchange and collaboration, where work and leisure flow together, that Joe Lynch, the subject of “Five Bells” and Slessor's sometime illustrator and newspaper colleague, fits so appropriately. Even the setting of Lynch's death is oddly suitable for Slessor's purpose — a ferry carrying a group of men friends to a party, Lynch's pockets weighed down with bottles. Kirkpatrick's account of the conflicting reports of Lynch’s death by drowning, and their omissions, plausibly suggests Lynch's suicide (295–6). The more decorous story that was disseminated in the newspapers is a tragedy of conviviality. Whatever the motive or motivelessness of Lynch's drowning, the manner of his death offered a fortuitous connection of the two most marked domains of the pathos of masculinity in Slessor's poetry.

Men such as Captain Dobbin, Alexander Home, Joe Lynch and Slessor himself are figured as the incomplete remnants of a collective body. Like the speaker of “Burying Friends” they are figurally amputated, broken boughs:

This little bin of cancelled flesh
Strode the earth once,
Rubbed against men—
But that's all done.
A gentle elegy, a tear or two,
May charm the grave-diggers, no doubt,
But nothing can count to these incongruous ruins.
Their commercial value is not worth speaking about.

Only it seems not a burial
Of irrelevant sods,
But a lopped member
From this my body;
Almost, in fact, a tiny amputation,
A paring of biography, thrown in there.
And he has thieved his own life away
And something from mine. Farewell, thou pilferer!

In the Lindsay epigraph to “Burying Friends” mourning is metaphorised as ejaculation: “for a little of our vital essence goes into the grave of a friend”. Lindsay's rendition of this familiar, and familiarly homosocial elegiac trope, renders it explicitly homoerotic, rhetorically privileging insemination (anal intercourse) over masturbation. In Slessor's text, living friendship is figured as “rubb[ing] against men”, but the death of a friend is likened to “a lopped member”, “almost … a tiny amputation”. Through a pun on “member”, Slessor laments castration, the imaginary loss of the phallus he never had. He establishes an interpretive agonism between himself and Lindsay, epigraph and main text, writing mourning as castration rather than insemination. In this he also establishes an agonism between his own instantiation of elegy and its classic compensation of textual release and displaced textual productivity, opposing the copia of the dead to his own figural diminishment. Slessor figures himself as the remnant of an ever-more-complete, ever-more-occluded masculine entirety.

Lindsay's trope of mourning as backwards insemination, and Slessor's countervailing reply, mourning as castration, can usefully be read against Slessor's (far less common) instantiations of heterosexual exchange as masculine dissipation and the degeneration of the true line: the blighted family orchard in “Wild Grapes” (“outlaws of a strange bough”) or the metonymic series of “Heine in Paris”: “One girl revealed ten thousand times…all gone”, “What now was left of all the passion he'd spilled./The fire he'd struck? …All wrong, all wasted …”. Captain Dobbin's “ledger sticky with ink” is another emblem of displaced textual insemination. Via Captain Dobbin, Slessor is “voluptuously prying” into the nostalgic romance of “shipmates” — “fellows of storm and honey from the past” —precisely as a locus of eroticised collection.
Indeed, Slessor's epicurean poetry — his inky ledger — might be thought of as a collection of men, or bits of men, congnate with Dobbin’s “dwarfed memento”. The trope of the masculine collector is reflexive, like that of the elegist elegised; it allows an always unresolved play between the positions of castrating and castrated man which can only be poetically productive.13

Whether or not Lynch “thieved his own life away”, he is one of a long line of vanished men in Slessor's oeuvre, figured as stealing from him. As a representative of this series, Lynch is even more compelling, since his body was never recovered from Sydney Harbour. Not only narratively fitting, the whole story of Lynch's death is also an intertextual gift, and this I would suggest is the prime motivation of Slessor's only and belated personal elegy. When the autobiographical speaker of “Five Bells” asks, “Why do I think of you, dead man, why thieve/These profitless lodgings from the flukes of thought/Anchored in Time?”, it is impossible not to think of the precedent of “Lycidas”, the elegy Milton wrote for his obscure acquaintance and rival, Edward King, which became the most famous elegy, and one of the most famous poems, in the English language. Slessor wittingly appropriates (“thieves”) the story of Lynch in order to write the Australian “Lycidas”: an enterprise which has proved extraordinarily successful, given the profile of “Five Bells” as the Australian elegy. Uncannily enough, the profound debt of “Five Bells” to “Lycidas”, its many borrowings both structural and verbal, implicit and explicit, and the lost body that circulates between these elegies for drowned men, has mostly gone unremarked, in what can only be understood as cultural repression.

Before and after his death, Joe is a medium for another encounter; he is yet another of Slessor's middle men: “Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips/And hits and cries against the ports of space”. Lynch as elegised is reunited with Slessor in the apocalyptic Moore-bank section only in order to confirm his metonymic status, as the link between elegist and elegist, Slessor and Milton. The “blind mouths” of “Lycidas” return in the collocation of “sheer voice” and “slab-dark” in this section of the poem. The disembodied voice of Joe speaks of “Milton, melons and the Rights of Man”, but the speaker hears only “words that didn't join”. In the absence of syntactical connection, the speaker produces a metonymic series: “Milton became melons, melons girls./And fifty mouths, it seemed were out that night./And in each tree an Ear was bending down”. The capitalised “Ear” in each tree, bending to hear the clamour of fifty mouths, is a figure for genealogy, and the “sheer voice” is surely not only a prolepsis of Joe’s death, but also a literary historical trope of the huge presence of Milton.

Lynch is precisely a figure of regress, of “living backward”, the son of a “graveyard mason” whose genealogy confirms his availability for allegorisation. He is figured as always already vanishing, so that the apostrophes addressed to him across the boundary between the living and the dead, and the remnants left by him (“faint ink”, “frames/And shapes of flesh that had perplexed your youth”), only confirm and reiterate an established structure: “you forgot,/And all have now forgotten”. The poem itself works backwards from the scene of deferred mourning to confirm the displacement of epitaph by elegy, paternal monumental inscription (“funeral-cakes of sweet and sculptured stone”) by fraternal elegy: “You have no suburb, like those easier dead/In private berths of dissolution laid”.

At the end of “Five Bells” the elegist insists on his inability to hear anything but his own refrain, or to see beneath the surface of the water. As Hart remarks, “the poem is not the occasion of resurrection, of repossessing past life or, indeed, meaning, but a crypt in which the proper name ‘Joe Lynch’ is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed” (196). Hart thinks “[t]his is scarcely what Slessor desired” (196); for me it is not only what Slessor desired, but what elegy desires. As in “Metempsychosis”, the homosocial circuit of “Five Bells” is bound by a refrain — a refrain which is itself allegorically loaded. In the scheme of Slessor’s elegies, the dead do not come back for long: “vanished in the dark already” (“To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae”), they are repeatedly consigned to oblivion by the elegist's backward glance. In this Orphic scenario there can be no prosopopoeia. It is the elegist as survivor who returns revivified, his own voice figured as boomerang in a recuperative allegory of genealogical legitimation and revision which is always contingent on the re-enactment of loss.13

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Notes
1. Many commentators on Slessor's poetry have noted his fascination with death, most recently Dennis Haskell, who remarks: “it is surprising how few of these poems concerned with death seem to be elegies” (“‘The Nothing …” 124). Apart from Slessor's only straightforwardly personal elegy, “Five Bells”, and the generically titled “Elegy in a Botanic Gardens”, Haskell classifies “Beach Burial” and “arguably” “Burying Friends” as “generalised elegies” (meaning that the elegised is not named), and describes section V of “Five Visions of Captain Cook” as “an elegy for Cook, and, to some extent, for Alexander Home” (“‘The Nothing …” 124). Haskell's catalogue reduces the scope of elegy to its most conventionally recognised modern forms, interpersonal memorial and autumnal love complaint. Douglas Stewart comments: “what has most struck me reading Slessor's poetry in recent years and re-reading it for the present survey is how persistent and pervasive throughout all his writing is the theme of elegy” (83). Stewart's “theme of elegy”, no matter how rhetorically emptied its usage here, undoes the distinction between elegy-proper and a thematics of death which Haskell's account wants to institute by situating Slessor as a “melancholy poet” (87).

2. This is from Coleridge's entry for 23 October, 1833. Stewart specifically exonerates Slessor on this point: “He is not, like most really melancholy poets, interested only in himself … He talks, when you come to sum up his subject-matter, of most of the things that are really worth talking about: art, music, literature; Europe, the East, Australia; far times and our own times; women and wine and food; the company of kindred spirits; life, death, and infinity” (87). Stewart's gentlemanly “appreciation” (an orientation signalled by the title of his book, A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor) precisely recognises and complements the clubby, homosocial ambit and equilibrium of Slessor's poetry: “the world where he lives and talks is not only full of the most beautiful poetry but is also, as an additional grace and attraction, an exceptionally entertaining place” (87). Stewart's own suitably obliging elegy for “Captain Slessor” serves as the envoi to A Man of Sydney, and offers a proleptic condensation of the “theme” of the whole book:

I thought how with your spacious hospitality
In its high tide you'd made all life a feast;
And how your verse in its rich lustrous quality
Flowed round us still though you were far and lost …

Stewart follows the logic of critical opinion, and of Slessor's own reflexive engagement with elegy, when he positions himself as Slessor's elegist at Circular Quay, as if Slessor had drowned (he borrows “sunk” from Milton's “Lycidas”), and as if Slessor himself had been the subject of “Five Bells” all along.

3. In this chronology “An Inscription for Dog River” and “Polarities”, the other poems added to Poems (1957) along with “Beach Burial”, are usually not mentioned, or at least treated as critically negligible. McAuley describes “Polarities” as “an inferior divertimento” (Map 102).

4. For sustained analyses of elegy in these terms see Sacks and Schenck.

5. Slessor did not, for instance, write an elegy for his first wife, Noela, who died in 1945, only some private prose notes which Haskell publishes (Haskell, ed. Slessor 258). In “‘The Nothing …” Haskell notes: “After this event Slessor wrote almost no serious poetry and, rightly or wrongly, he claimed that Noela's death was the principal cause” (126). In this scenario Noela's death robs Slessor of poetry, rather than offering a productive occasion for it. Graham Burns notes the “theoretic” cast of Slessor's mourning (though he does not argue its connection to elegy): “His most creative emotion is a simultaneously introspective and empathetic response to the human condition vis-à-vis time, a response of compassion for himself and all men” (26).

6. All quotations from Slessor's poetry are from Selected Poems.

7. “Trenched” also appears amongst the manuscript drafts of “Five Bells”: “Deep and dissolving verticals of light/Rib the dark water/Trench the still air” (Haskell “A Study” 261 [facs.]).

8. A.K. Thomson's discussion of Slessor's careful and detailed use of, and access to, modern historical scholarship and informal Early Modern sources (particularly Pepys' diary, Cook's published journals and Home's manuscript journal) is interesting in this connection. Again, Slessor's contact with this material is familially and homosocially mediated through the retired Captain Bayldon, Noela Slessor's uncle. Slessor credited Bayldon in a note to “Five Visions of Captain Cook” and also acknowledged “Captain Dobbin” as a partial tribute to him (Thomson 15-33). Slessor's most bizarre exercise in revivifying Early Modern sources is his dramatisation of Sterne in “The Man of Sentiment”, a text that might be understood as another displaced tribute to McCrae as anachronistic stylist. In “Australian Poetry and Hugh McCrae”, Slessor writes: “While Norman [Lindsay], in a transport of Rabelais-worship, copied out the entire second book of Pantagruel by hand, McCrae did the same with the Sentimental Journey of Laurence Sterne. Of his reading at this time, the tidemarks are to be seen in his memoirs — Boswell, of course, Aubrey's Lives, Burton and Sir Thomas Browne, Smollett, Fielding, Jeremy Taylor, Southey's prose, Gay, Spenser, Burns, Defoe, de Quincey and Hazlitt and many more, but scarcely anything (it should be noted) later than Disraeli in the thirties of last century. He
confided to me once that he hadn't got as far yet as reading much by Tennyson …” (McCrae 173). It can hardly be coincidental that this account of the reading of Slessor's mentor breaks off, on a “confidential” note, at Tennyson, the poet whom Slessor was to claim as his chief stylistic model in an interview a decade later (eight years after McCrae's death in 1958).

9. Stewart makes explicit this enlightenment discourse of the homosocial middle ground when he lifts without attribution (what could be more appropriate) the phrase “kindred spirit” from Gray's “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” (again, entirely appropriate, even inevitable) to describe the “place” of Slessor's poetry. Slessor himself acknowledges the influence of Gray's “Elegy” only at second-distance, by singling out of Tennyson's “Tithonus” “that glorious line, 'Man comes and tills the earth and lies beneath', which sums up the whole of human life in one line” (Thompson 192) — itself a condensation and simplification of the classic ground of Gray's “Elegy”.

10. The trope of brotherly connection is further elaborated in Slessor's interest in poetic uncles.

11. “The Ghost” also ends this way.

12. Not coincidentally, there is an intertextual debt in this poem to the opening sonnet (“Loving in truth”) of Sidney's Astrophel and Stella, itself a meditation on the problematic of inscribing self-presence and writing masculine desire.

13. Slessor's late manuscript notebooks include substantial drafts of a poem called “Elegy for a Dead Woman”, but the poem was never finished.

14. Kevin Hart has argued that apostrophe in “Five Bells” is “working to establish presence” but “sets in motion the exact opposite effect” (192): this is, of course, what apostrophe is supposed to do, and why it is, as Sacks suggests, the dominant trope of elegy. Apostrophe rhetorically fixes the relation between present elegist and absent elegised, marking the space of elegiac address precisely as immune to reply.

15. On the significance of fort-da for elegy see Sacks 10-12.

Works Cited


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