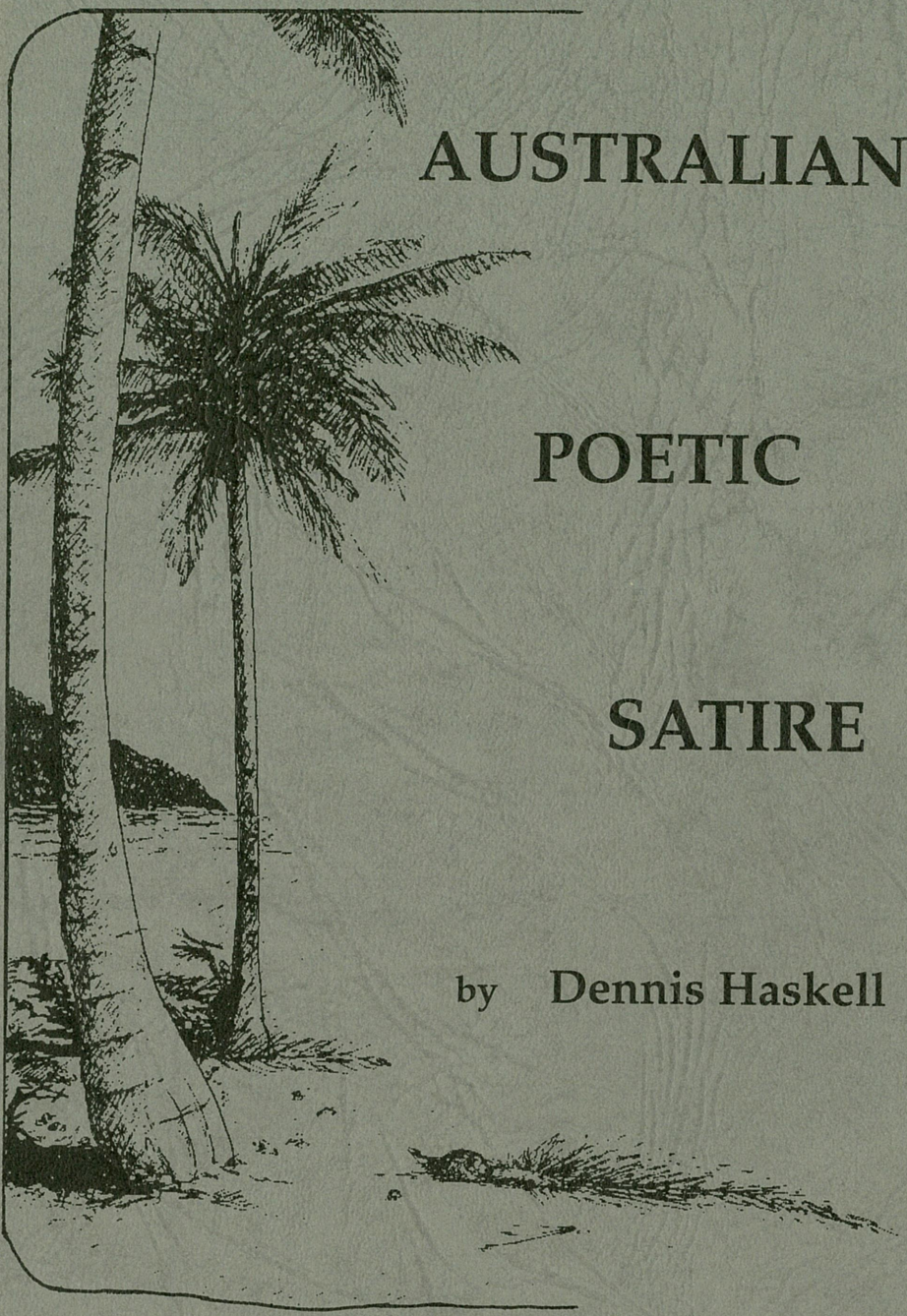

AUSTRALIAN POETIC SATIRE

by Dennis Haskell

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES

The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1994

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

Dennis Haskell is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia and Director of the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature. He has been Co-editor of *Westerly* since 1985. He has published literary essays in a wide range of areas, including American Literature, Australian Literature, Asian Literature, Modernism and Romanticism, and three collections of poetry: *Listening at Night* (1984), *A Touch of Ginger* (1992) and *Abracadabra* (1993). His other books include: *Wordhord* (1989), *Kenneth Slessor* (1991), *John Keats* (1991), and *Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes: Essays on Literature and Culture in the Asia-Pacific Region* (1992). He has also edited *Kenneth Slessor: Collected Poems* (1994) and *Tilting at Matilda: Literature, Aborigines, Women and the Church in Contemporary Australia* (1994).

Professor A.J. Hassall
Executive Director

Chapter 1

HOW MUCH CAN THE WATTLE STING?

If one were recounting to a scholar working in another language the most notable modes in recent literature, theory and criticism written in English I doubt if satire would come to mind. Metafiction, magic realism, lyric, the elegy, language and performance poetry, and performance-based rather than text-based theatre would all get attention, well ahead of satire, and it may well be that black comedy has subsumed at least some of the functions which satire once performed. John Snyder in his interesting book *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay and the Theory of Genre*[1] declares, "it is obvious that satire and the essay have been almost terminally trivialised" (9). I am interested in why this should be so and in satire's place in Australian culture. In television Australians have shown a great propensity for satire, as Clive James and programmes such as *The Late Show* and *Full Frontal* demonstrate. In Australian literature satire has never been prominent except perhaps in early colonial times. The white settlement of Australia began in 1788, just ten years before the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and after the publication of the work of Thomson, Cowper and Burns, but it would be fifty years before traces of Romanticism found their way into Australian poetry, in the work of Charles Harpur. English eighteenth century modes and manner prevailed, and the

eighteenth century of course is the great age of satire in literature in English, and perhaps in any literature. Satire was not as prominent in the small, struggling, relatively unsophisticated society of white Australia as in England but, as Vincent O'Sullivan reports in his "Introduction" to *The Unsparing Scourge: Australian Satirical Texts 1845–1860*,[2] in 1818 Dr William Bland was imprisoned for his satire, as later was Dr Revel Johnston. The early newspapers published many political satires, a tradition which continued, for example, on the Western Australian goldfields, and into the early twentieth century. Yet there is very little mention of satire in Australian literary historical studies: Geoffrey Dutton's *The Literature of Australia*, which is organised on historical lines, includes little discussion of satire; *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* has only scattered mentions of the word; and *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*[3] includes no entry under "satire" at all. The subject of verse satire, however, has been given topicality by the 1993 publication of Philip Neilsen's anthology *The Sting in the Watttle*.[4]

Another reason for my interest is the theoretical issues that satire brings into play. The first, and most obvious, is the issue of genre. To my mind, Neilsen's anthology includes a number of poems — such as Herb Wharton's "A Kid Called Moses", Susan Hampton's "It" and Gig Ryan's "If I Had a Gun" — which are protests, but not satires. Everyone who writes on satire begins by worrying what it is, as satirists and their butts have done over the centuries. For instance, would you call John Clarke's "Self Defence," notionally by "Sylvia Blath,"[5] a satire?

> You do no soft, you do no soft,
> No more the old soft shoe,
> In which I once delighted when you
> Danced upon my cradle, as I
> Annexed the Sedatenland.
> I clapped my partly German hand,

On my partly Polish one,
Just like in real life,
And when you came home, achtung!
You wiped your boots on my face.

In the shadows you ordered away the lives
Of all us black Jewish Poles,
Your daughter you condemned
To the oven, subtle in leather,
Der Ofen! Schnell!

Pig brute fatso bastard,
Shit bugger bum fuck poos,
Daddy daddy I'm through, Hello?
Germaine I can hardly hear you,
This is a very bad line.

One reason for this concern with definition is that satire is not a genre which can be delineated by a strong sense of form, like the sonnet or the epic. Clearly satire roams across the formal genres of novel, short fiction, drama and poetry, although it is in poetry that it began. Always useful in such circumstances is M.H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms.*[6] Abrams defines satire as:

> the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. (166)

This makes satire a genre defined by attitudes induced in the reader ("amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation"), with decidedly unfashionable implications of a certainty of meaning and, I would argue, of authorial intention. Vincent O'Sullivan claims, "Satire is a form that willingly concedes a certain instability, a tracking between depicted and verbal

extremes and assumptions of shared decency. The indeterminacy that current criticism likes to pursue plays across political satire as an actual aspect of the genre" (12). However, to my mind satire's "indeterminacy" is utterly different to the radical indeterminacy involved in *différance* or gaps between signifiers and signifieds. The assumptions of shared decency can only come into play in relation to a certainty of meaning in expression. At least in political satire, for "language" to be "another subversive."[7] the reader can have no doubts as to who or what the targets are.

Matthew Hodgart in *Satire*[8] points approvingly to Northrop Frye's definition in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, which has been influential:

> Frye has put in a few words the best distinction between satire and the other conditions of literature: satire demands (at least a token) fantasy, a content recognised as grotesque, moral judgements (at least implicit), and a "militant attitude to experience" ... its final distinguishing mark is the "double focus of morality and fantasy." (31)

This makes explicit the moral judgement which is implicit in Abrams's definition, and adds a stress on fantasy, which is part of the way in which Abrams's "attitudes of amusement" are brought about.

It is worth noting that both these definitions are sharply different from those which prevailed in earlier periods in English. Peter Elkin, in *The Augustan Defence of Satire*,[9] cites the seventeenth century lexicographer, Joshua Poole, who in *The English Parnassus: or, a Helpe to English Poesie* (1657) recorded:

> *Satyre.* Girding, biting, snarling, scourging, jerking, lashing, smarting, sharp, tart, rough, invective, censorious, currish, snappish, captious, barking, brawling, carping, fanged ...

and so on through forty-one words ending in "approbious, contumelious, defaming, calumnious" (18). Not much

amusement or fantasy there. Elkin notes that "For Englishmen [and I suppose 'men' is correct] of Tudor and Jacobean times, satire was harsh and punitive, full of stern reproof" (27). Amongst other things, this shows the precariousness of a-temporal definitions. Genres are intimately tied up with history. The concept of any genre is built up from a tradition of individual works, written over time, which are then used as exemplars. Succeeding works in the genre will be adapted to changing political, cultural and technological circumstances, thereby changing the concept of the genre itself.

To see genres as allied to history is to see them as not perfectly stable. With satire there are special reasons for seeing it as inherently unstable. For one thing, there is a degree of conflict between its interest in moral judgement and its interest in fantasy and the comic. Thus one can find John Snyder saying that satire is "the genre commonly acknowledged to be either altogether nonfictional — especially by its really intended targets — or closer to factual realism, in its topicality, than any other" (97), which misses the element of fantasy altogether. Snyder's inaccuracy derives from satire's need for a ready recognisability of its verbal representations and its wordly targets. Fantasy tends to take us away from representations of a world which must be realistic enough for us to recognise as our own, otherwise the moral judgements are pointless. Furthermore, humour tends to encourage relaxed pleasure and relief, rather than moral indignation and a determination for corrective action. Vincent O'Sullivan declares that "satire conceives morality as action" (12). In direct contrast, John Snyder claims, "Satire ... has no action, just signifiers — words. These words have their bite, yet their edges lack the sharpness of mimetic-political action" (94). Snyder goes on to say that "Satire *means* to criticise, to aim reason at targets; but in the very act of critique, satire wanders its own verbalising way" (95). Two features of satire prompt Snyder's comment. One

is that satire is a highly rhetorical genre, and its sense of moral outrage or its comedy or fantasy can encourage a verbal fandango, which points to the word's derivation from the Latin *satura*, or farrago (of foods). There is more than a touch of the carnival involved, although it is carnival as corrective, not as an allowed period of misrule. This is also one reason for satire's rating, in the Renaissance hierarchy of genres, as one of the lower forms.

Snyder's second reason is that the possibility of imitative action shifts the work into another genre:

> The consequence of satire's delicate poise between too much faith and none at all — between too successful politics and complete political collapse, and between overly conventionalised public standards and utter civic cynicism — is that the satiric genre is unstable. If political renewal has been the hope, satire characteristically veers off into tragedy, as in Juvenal and Ralph Ellison. If religious transcendence is looked for, satire slides into fantasy and romance, as in Cervantes and probably much of the apparently antireligious surreal Latin American fiction of today. If gradual historical amelioration is the panacea, satire subsides into other genres such as the realist novel ... (100)

This seems to me a convincing argument, in that satire involves a certain delight in pointing to wrongs without indicating means of correction. This delight has created another element of tension in satire. The satirist throws mud against the wind and some of it blows back on to him- or her-self. In writing zestfully about undesirable acts, the satirist may seem to partake of such acts; in writing aggressively about undesirable personalities, the satirist may seem to be cruel or even malicious. Michael Seidel notes, "The first represented satirist in Western literature, Thersites of the *Iliad*, is also the most deformed warrior in the Greek camp. In an age of heroic demeanor, Thersites is an ugly being with a hunched back and a tuft of hair

growing from a misshapen skull"[10] — which makes him sound like Alexander Pope with his wig off. The standard satirist's defence is that adopted by Swift, who claimed that he

> ... abhorred that senseless tribe
> Who call it humour when they gibe:
> ...
> True genuine dullness moved his pity,
> Unless it offered to be witty.[11]

The possible appearance of cruelty is particularly strong since satire implicitly assumes a position of moral superiority. Australia's most famous poetic satirist, A.D. Hope, has described it as "an aristocratic art."[12] In pointing out vice or folly, but not elaborating actions — which would tip it into tragedy or romance or realism — satire at least implicitly asserts moral judgements, but without seeking to explain or justify them any more than it seeks to understand the causes of the immorality or folly it attacks — which would involve an empathising that, again, would tip the work into another genre, through a change in both content and tone.

In a post-structuralist literary environment in which the conditionality or uncertainty of meaning has been a dominant outlook, the claim of moral certainty seems a recklessly grand gesture. Also, in the employment of fantasy or imaginative verbal fireworks the speaking voice of the satirist may seem a subjective one, but there must be an assumed objectivity in the moral claims which underwrite the satire or, less often, which are explicitly announced. The claims must have a clear and instantly recognisable validity beyond the speaker's personal wishes; the satirist cannot afford to exhibit a mere pose of moral ascendancy. This would not be true of works which satirised claims of certainties. Thus Philip Neilsen argues that satire can cope with the challenge of "a post-modern age" because it "is less

concerned with positing normative and correct standards than with exposing the hypocrisy of those who espouse them" (xxvii); but in fact most contemporary satires *do* posit normative standards and there are very few poems in his collection which accord with this apology.

Because the satirist offers very little argument for his or her position, it is generally agreed that satire is largely a matter of preaching to the converted, although it is true that a reader may be converted or encouraged to a willing suspension of disapproval in the course of the poem by the skilful use of rhetoric. Alastair Fowler declares that:

> Satire may seem chaotic or nihilistic, but in reality it is more often traditional, if not conservative. Its positive values are so implicit, are offered with such elaborate obliquity of surprise and such sudden dénouement, that in order to communicate themselves they must be venerably familiar. (Postmodern underground satire proves the rule: it is addressed to true believers who already share the satirist's views.)[13]

Surprise and sudden dénouement are in large part occasioned by the element of humour; the comic demands this suddenness in timing. It is intrinsic to the satirist's use of comic ridicule that the acts ridiculed represent aberrations from the normative — otherwise either they could only be lamented rather than mocked, or else the mockery would seem cynical rather than satiric, in which case the sense of fun would disappear. By "normative" I mean not necessarily what is usually done but what the imagination shows is capable of being done.

This lack of explanation or justification may explain why satire, to quote Snyder, "has historically been a genre favoured by conservatives: Juvenal, Horace, Dryden, the Augustan Tories, contemporary American right-centre journalistic satirists" (130). There is another point of tension in satire here, as the satirist points to acts which he or she (implicitly) claims are deviations from the norm; were these

acts frequent — and they need to have a certain frequency in order to justify satirising them — they would seem to constitute the norm. However, the conservative position is that his or her poem works to restore nature; remove the aberration and the truth of nature will out. Conservatism, inside and outside satire, is very strong on appeals to nature. The more liberal-minded view is the nurturing one — that redemption is possible, that behaviour can be altered through education or changes in social conditions — but this view tends to be harder to imply.

In either case the appeal is intrinsically to some sense of reasonable order, even when a strong element of fantasy is present. This appeal is through what I have been calling "rhetoric" — language gestures or tropes. The most important is irony, that extraordinarily intricate technique whereby one meaning is conveyed by expressing another, often its opposite. This can lead to an intended satire not being recognised as satire, like Daniel Defoe's *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* when it was first published. The other significant literary techniques include those involved with humour; analogies, often involving the animal or inanimate world; and sudden switches in tone, or level of speech, particularly bathos, which Pope famously described as "the art of sinking in poetry." This shifting of levels plays on a sense of normative, appropriate matchings of tone and content, and in contemporary literature may represent the last trace of the Renaissance concept of decorum.

There are elements in Australian culture and the Australian character that would seem particularly to encourage the writing of satire. Vincent O'Sullivan in *The Unsparing Scourge* quotes Manning Clark's phrase, "the Botany Bay disease." Clark says,

> A taste for mockery and a pleasure in fantasising about taking the mighty down from their seat were among the unlovely

> fruits of colonialism — the subterranean satisfaction of putting into words what they lacked the resources or the conscience to put into deeds.[14]

One might expect satire to be a weapon in any post-colonial literature, since it is a ready one and can — though this need not be the case — be seen in Clark's terms. At least some satire attests to powerlessness even as it attacks. In asserting a symbolic superiority over its targets it may indicate that the superiority is *merely* symbolic.

One might find in "the Botany Bay disease," and in Australia's general democratic ethos, the origin of the tall poppy syndrome. This famous Australian wish to scythe the tall poppies would seem to bring the satiric muse calling — if only there were such a creature. Yet I have not found a great many poems of this kind. In the whole 263 pages of Neilsen's anthology I think only Banjo Paterson's "The Ballad of G.R. Dibbs" or, at a stretch, that and Neilsen's own "Les A. Murray and John Tranter Fight It Out at the Sydney Cricket Ground" could count as poems of this kind.

Something like the obverse can be seen in the first individual satire I want to discuss, one of the first poems written by a white person in Australia, Barron Field's "The Kangaroo":

> Kangaroo, Kangaroo!
> Thou Spirit of Australia,
> That redeems from utter failure,
> From perfect desolation,
> And warrants the creation
> Of this fifth part of the Earth,
> Which should seem an after-birth,
> Not conceiv'd in the Beginning
> (For GOD bless'd His work at first,
> And saw that it was good),
> But emerg'd at the first sinning,
> When the ground was therefore curst; —
> And hence this barren wood!

...
She had made the squirrel fragile;
She had made the bounding hart;
But a third so strong and agile
Was beyond ev'n Nature's art.
So she join'd the former two
    In thee, Kangaroo!
To describe thee, it is hard:
Converse of the camélopard,
Which beginneth camel-wise,
But endeth of the panther size,
Thy fore half, it would appear,
Had belong'd to some "small deer",
Such as liveth in a tree;
By thy hinder, thou shoulds't be
A large animal of chace,
Bounding o'er the forest's space; —
Join'd by some divine mistake,
None but Nature's hand can make —
Nature, in her wisdom's play,
On Creation's holiday.[15]

Field, whose poetry was described by one contemporary as a *"barren field* indeed!",[16] satirises Australia through portraying its symbol, the kangaroo ("Thou Spirit of Australia"), as a piece of satire on Nature's part. Yet but for the kangaroo, which is actually a creature of *concordia discors*, Australia would seem not to be part of God's creation but something which emerged, along with shame, guilt and death, after the Fall. The kangaroo, and Australia, are signs of nature at play, carnivalesque creations.

Our perspectives on Field's poem are probably quite different to those of his contemporaries in Britain and Australia, and this is perhaps true of my second example. This is less a poem than a song, and to many it might seem simply comic rather than satiric. It's the traditional piece, "Five Mile from Gundagai":

I'm used to punchin' bullock teams across the hills and plains,
I've teamed out back for forty years through blazing droughts
and rains,
I've lived a heap of troubles down without a bloomin' lie
But I can't forget what happened me 5 mile from Gundagai.

'Twas gettin' dark the team got bogged the axle snapped in two,
I lost me matches and me pipe, what was I to do,
The rain came on 'twas bitter cold and hungry too was I,
And the dorg sat in the tucker box 5 mile from Gundagai.

Some blokes I know have stacks of luck no matter how they fall,
But there was I Lord love a duck no blessed luck at all,
I couldn't make a pot of tea nor get me trousers dry,
And the dorg sat in the tucker box 5 mile from Gundagai.

Well I can forgive the blinkin' team, I can forgive the rain,
I can forgive the dark and cold and go through it again,
I can forgive me rotten luck but hang me till I die,
I can't forgive that bloomin' dorg 5 mile from Gundagai.[17]

For many people this might be just funny, a kind of low life version of the Australian tall story, but I wonder if it might be read differently in different contexts. Were it included in Neilsen's anthology, which it's not, would it unquestionably be read (or sung) as a satire? I *do* read it as satire, as a satiric account of the Australian bush tradition. The character in this indirect satire is the recognisable bush figure of the bullocky. He's no new chum — he's been "out back for forty years" — and, while his swearing is very mild for a bullocky, his world is entirely masculine — he doesn't think of sheilas who have "stacks of luck." That Australian bushman is known for his qualities as a battler — for a stoic refusal to give into hardship, for his uncomplaining resilience and ability to make do. In the male world of the outback his dog is his best mate. But this bushman is the very type of the whinger. Admittedly, what happens to him is pretty disastrous but there is satiric comedy in the way he

focuses all his troubles on the poor dog. This is an element of bathos, also apparent in his rather "domestic" scale of values, according to which he is more worried about not being able to light his pipe or make a pot of tea than the bogged bullocks or the broken axle, and the well-known soldier's injunction to "keep your powder dry" is reduced to "nor get me trousers dry."

The humour involved is Australian-sardonic, a quality of humour which would seem to be *made* for satire. One aspect of the tall poppy syndrome is a love of "taking the mickey" or "taking the piss" out of those with any pretensions. What is striking when you look across the range of Australian poetic satire is not that Australians do this, but how much they like to do it to themselves. This rather healthy "disease" has spread far beyond "Botany Bay," and one can find it readily with the treatment of an Australian literary and cultural icon in "The Man from Kaomagma":

> There was movement on the station, for the wog had passed around.
> Salmonella, I regret, had got away.
> Makes you run like wild bush horses — Sorbent made a thousand pounds,
> And everybody's crack began to fray.
>
> All the tried and noted bush quacks from the stations near and far
> Had mustered at the homestead overnight,
> But their cures proved ineffective, from cement to Stockholm tar,
> And it wasn't plugged by trusty Araldite.
>
> ...
> But one was there, a stripling, with his backside tightly shut,
> Against wogs that cut a mountain man to size.
> He wouldn't go outside, boys, to that lonely little hut
> No diarrhoea from him could be prized.

For he hailed from Kaomagma down by Sulphanilamide
Where the wogs are twice as big and twice as tough,
Where their guts are lined with leather, (they're impregnable inside)
And a man that holds his own is good enough.

...
But this hardy little mountain man could hardly raise the trots
While Kaomagma settled his insides;
In intestinal panacea, and you may believe or not
But without it he'd have surely filled his strides.

He saddled up his pony and he slowly rode away
Till his figure was a speck against the sky.
And we watched in thoughtful silence; no one had a word to say
When he violently exploded by and by.

...
And down beside the Overflow where the dust is blowing grey
They tell the tale, those men who won't be beat,
And the man from Kaomagma is a household word today,
How he exploded, not admitting he was beat.[18]

Beginning with the play on the word "movement," shifting its general meaning in Paterson's poem to that of bowel movements, that prolific author of satires, "Anon" exhibits the scatological element that can reasonably often be found in satire. Like John Clarke's "Sylvia Blath" it is that special form of satire, parody, the form adopted when literature itself is to be satirised. A.D. Hope has declared that: "Satire is poetry written with a definite social purpose. It is unashamedly and openly didactic. It is plain propaganda."[19] These are perhaps statements for rhetorical effect, for they seem to me wildly inaccurate. They apply only to Juvenalian direct satire, with its first person address to the reader, victim, or adversarius character — a John Poynes or

Dr Arbuthnot — within the work, not to parody or other forms of indirect satire. Unless poems such as "Sylvia Blath" and "The Man from Kaomagma" are taken to be not satires at all. "Kaomagma" *is* included in Neilsen's anthology, and to my mind it is a playful satire not so much on Paterson's poem, whose ballad form and language of course it echoes, but on the poem's reception and status. As with Clarke's "Sylvia," it's not the poet or the poem which is being satirised so much as its audience's reception of the poem and its author.

One of the striking features of Australian poetic satire is the sophistication with which it draws on previous literature, not just directly as in parody, but when a literary manner is applied out of key with a poem's contents. *The Sting in the Wattle* includes a number of fine examples by women poets, including Anna Wickham's cunning feminist poem "Invocation to the Intelligence of a Gentleman":

> Nymph in a Cloud!
> Shy loiterer on a height!
> By faith art thou avowed
> Thou art not known to sight;
> Pity the clod in me,
> Frail denizen of air;
> I, lacking sight of thee,
> Must doubt if thou art there![20]

Wickham's Shelleyan manner "humbly" ascribes clod-ness to herself and blithe spirit qualities to the empyreanical gentleman's intelligence. Interestingly, that notional intelligence is given the usually feminine characterisation as a nymph as well as a modesty and shyness once thought of as feminine virtues. Wickham's pose of delicate, wide-eyed innocence adopts a "feminine" role except in the firmness of the poem's telling last line, a good instance of that satiric "surprise and ... sudden dénouement" mentioned by

Fowler. The word "frail" applied to the idea of a gentleman's intelligence is altered in meaning as the last line brings poet and reader down to earth. Its dumping of a wilfully poetic manner works because it appeals to a down to earth pragmatism which is deeply ingrained in the Australian character, male or female, and which is one aspect of that dislike of pretentiousness.

Some of the same qualities are found in the more contemporary "On Seeing the First Flasher" by Vicki Raymond:

> Grey-coated, solitary stranger, hail!
> Thou harbinger of summer's lusty days,
> tracing through country parks thy mazy trail,
> or lingering by some brook to catch the gaze
> of passing schoolgirl, who, with scornful eye,
> remarks upon thy manhood's lack of length,
> then vanishing, before her angry cry
> shall summon to her aid the studded strength
> of forty skin heads, or, with deadly aim,
> her dainty foot shall plunge into thy crotch —
> when shalt thou find a partner to thy game,
> a maid whose pleasure is to stand and watch?
> As soon, alas, as poets shall enthrall
> commuter crowds, or fill the Albert Hall.[21]

The poem works through historical disjunction in that it plays off Wordsworthian and Keatsian echoes of poetic language against its subject matter and contemporary language ("skinheads" and "crotch") then returns to poetic language in "maid." A surprising empathy with the flasher, is claimed — he is in a way a symbol of the ignored poet. Of course, this is mock-empathy, as the old Cumberland beggar of a flasher is debunked not through anger but through his vulnerability; he is more victim than the schoolgirl, who might kick him in the crotch and call in the skinheads. It is not clear just who are the targets of the satire — this is not

propaganda — but they are multiple. It is tempting to say the targets are those who pretend to be shocked by flashers or who ignore modern poets, but that sounds so solemn as to be ridiculous, and worthy of satire itself.

It is the good-naturedness of Raymond's poem that makes such an idea ridiculously solemn. The back cover of *The Sting in the Wattle* claims "From sharp and savage ridicule to comic mockery ..."; but in the anthology and in Australian poetic satire more widely there seems to me to be surprisingly little Juvenalian or Swiftian *saeva indignatio* in any period, but particularly in the twentieth century. This may have something to do with our constrictive defamation laws, but I suspect that it has more to do with Australian easy-goingness, general comfort and lack of high expectations from public figures. There has been a utopian strain in Australian thought whereby Australia has been seen as a new world which might avoid the mistakes of the old. One might have expected satire to crow whenever there was a falling away from utopian ideals; this has helped Australia produce a succession of great cartoonists and pen and ink artists, but on the whole that utopianism has not been seen to reside with political or public officials but with the society generally and with certain areas of the country itself (especially the coastline). Even Aboriginal satire — and Neilsen's anthology includes some fine examples, particularly from Jack Davis, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and W. Les Russell — on the whole works through irony and subtlety rather than through savage anger.

There is also surprisingly little depiction of rigidity and inflexibility, which is one of the traditional targets of satire. Les Russell's "God Gave Us Trees to Cut Down," which parodies Joh Bjelke-Petersen, is an exception in this regard, as are some poems of A.D. Hope. It is probably true that Australian pragmatism — a consequence of the inheritance of English empiricism and the harsh conditions of the early colonies — on the whole works against the creation of satire,

and encourages genres such as the realism which the left has frequently favoured. In Australian writing generally realism rather than satire has so often been the genre of protest. Australians tend not to be ideologues; they do not have the firm programmes of system-builders. They tend to be sceptical of such people — this I think is an unnoticed element in John Hewson's defeat at the last federal election. System-builders are good targets of satire.

On the whole what we have in Australian poetry is moral, social, political, literary and gender satire, and some satire of manners. There are surprisingly few poems concerning satire's historically most famous target, hypocrisy. In a country as slightly concerned with religion as Australia it seems no accident that we have almost no religious satire, but it is interesting that in the Australian tradition satire is *not* the province of conservatives. Australian defiance of authority and Australian larrikinism are forces which encourage the creation of satire, but in satire's combination of criticism with comedy and fantasy, even these have leaned towards the comic and the fantastical. The most striking features of the twentieth century poems in Neilsen's anthology are the number of feminist satires, the number of literary satires, and the number of satires concerned with mediocrity. This, rather than cutting down the tall poppies, emerges as the major subject, with poems by A.D. Hope, Dorothy Auchterlonie, Judith Wright, Bruce Dawe, Edith Speers and others adopting Australian mediocrity as a target. Paul Keating's government would be proud of them.

In much of the experimental poetry of the 1960s and 1970s satire maintains a strong presence. The work of John Tranter seems to me to have a backbone of parody, and the work of John Forbes a backbone of satire. Their poems, however, avert the clear points of view which A.D. Hope and others require of satire; Tranter particularly, often provides definiteness of statement with indefiniteness of

outlook. A short poem of Forbes's is an appropriate one with which to end, as its title indicates:

The Best of All Possible Poems

like a dozing shark
or a very quiet limb
waiting for the lecture
to make it a star the
best of all possible
poems relaxes asleep
in the tropical surf
beginning near the
right hand corner of
the room. meanwhile
just outside my window
inter-island trade
begins: their supply
of coconuts is endless[22]

Forbes's poem is, I think, a satire on the academic evaluation of poetry. Mockery seems implicit in the poem's title, and this mythical poem manages to sleep in the surf while waiting for a lecture to "make it a star" and, presumably, get it into all the anthologies. Like the poems of Australia's most famous parodist, Ern Malley, it is not in Neilsen's anthology. Other Forbes poems are, and Neilsen's book does show the richness of Australian poetic satire, at least in the twentieth century, from which about eighty per cent of its poems are drawn. It would seem that Australian poets' supply of satires, like Forbes's supply of coconuts, might be "endless" after all.

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16. Cited by Wilkes, "Introduction," np.
17. Alex Hood, Record Cover, *Songs from "The Wallaby Track."* Sydney: Axis Records.
18. Neilsen, 82.
19. *The Cave and the Spring*, 62.
20. Neilsen, 69.
21. Neilsen, 229.
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Chapter 2

A CURE OF SOULS AND SATIN BOOTS: KENNETH SLESSOR AS SATIRIST

Although everyone agrees that Kenneth Slessor is a poet of immense importance in the Australian tradition it may seem surprising to consider him as a satirist. From the beginning to the present Slessor has been interpreted in Romantic-cum-Imagist-cum-Symbolist terms. None of these are readily the terms of satire. Graham Burns points to Slessor's "essentially Romantic conception of art as spontaneously generating a 'divine spark,' rather than involving some activity of self-exploration or moral introspection."[1] Placing Slessor amongst the *Vision* school, A.D. Hope sees him as "plainly influenced by ... later symbolist poets."[2] Terry Sturm argues that Slessor accepted Norman Lindsay's "framework of ideas and beliefs," which were "directly inside a post-Romantic, especially post-Shelleyan tradition"[3] and involved "the rejection of social concerns" while adopting "the idea of poetic value as a distillation of universal essences from personal experience" (295) — which would seem distinctly Romantic and directly opposed to the aesthetics of the satiric eighteenth century. More recently, Vivian Smith has argued that Slessor achieved "a highly individual combination of the hard-edged concrete language of imagism with the rich internal musicality of symbolism."[4]

There are good reasons for seeing Slessor's poetry in these terms and I have done so myself. Slessor made many

comments which would suggest their applicability. His essays frequently evince his Romantic interest in the mysteries of human psychology, "the mapless country of the mind,"[5] and in poetry's expression of "the sadness and incomprehension which every human being must feel before the great mysteries of life and death on this planet" — a far cry from the satirist's stance of recognisable certainties and moral imperatives. Slessor was wont to stress "the quality of magic" in poetic language, and in an essay of that name declared that "'real poetry' is under no compulsion to relate itself to high religious, aesthetic, reformist, sociological or moral purposes."[6] Slessor's description of Coleridge's "Christabel" as his first inspiration and his designation of Tennyson as his "master"[7] also encourage the reading of Slessor in Romantic and individual terms rather than in satiric and social terms.

Except in a passage in the "Introduction" to my edition of Slessor's work for the University of Queensland Press (xvi), no-one has encouraged a perception of Slessor as a satirist. However, there are a number of reasons for thinking of him this way. Despite his relatively small output Slessor was a poet of variety, who could write satiric verse alongside poetry of metaphysical concerns. He certainly had links with the great age of satire, the eighteenth century, apparent in poems such as "Gulliver," "Glubbdubdrib," "The Country Ride" and "The Nabob." Douglas Stewart reported that "Slessor and I shared an enthusiasm for the diaries and biographies of the eighteenth century because of the rich flavour of life to be got out of them."[8] Satire and parody are strong elements in Modernism, and Slessor can readily be seen as one of Australia's first Modernists. A number of critics have pointed to the repeated image of figures behind glass in his poetry. The sense of separation that this involves, together with an Eliotian degree of impersonality in his poetry, would suggest a stance highly amenable to satire. However, the main reason that Slessor the satirist has largely gone unnoticed is the canon of Slessor poems which

have been easily available to read. The publication of Slessor's *Collected Poems*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton and myself, in September will reveal a much greater number of poems of satiric intent than has been known before. Well over fifty poems could be seen as satires. They include many pieces of what is known as his 'light verse', poetry written for *Smith's Weekly*, the Sydney *Sun* and other newspapers. Writing poems for newspapers on topical events or on political figures logically gave encouragement to Slessor's satiric bent, which had been displayed in some of the first journalism he wrote, when he reported on New South Wales Parliamentary proceedings for the *Sun* in Dickensian style.

Thus Slessor's work includes Billy Hughes' lament for loss of the dictatorial power he had in the Great War, when "I was a kind of a King, in fact, / And you were a blithering Slave":

> I huffed and I puffed, and I blew my cheeks,
> I shivered the bones of men —
> And there weren't any constitutional shrieks
> Or High Court flummery then,
> But I upped and scuppered a million squeaks
> With a little black fountain pen.
> ("When I Was King")

Slessor's poem was prompted by Hughes' statement, "I had more power in the war-days than an Australian politician has ever had. Sometimes I sigh for the halcyon period when I took out my fountain-pen, the ink flowed and a law was made"; Slessor employs the statement as an epigraph. The element of mockery is enhanced by Slessor's adopting the form of a poem by the late nineteenth century English poet, W.E. Henley, "Or Ever the Knightly Years Were Gone." This is the "Botany Bay" stance, whereby one of the mighty is taken down from his (and it is virtually always "his") seat, but it is hard to see it as a symptom of "disease." There is something inherently absurd in Hughes' feeling nostalgic for a period of war just because it gave him immense

personal power. This might seem the worst kind of power-mongering but Slessor's satire is fairly gentle, since, historically, Hughes was a fairly benign figure and, whatever his wishes in 1937, he posed no Napoleonic threat. Rather, he huffs and puffs, like Aeolus or the Big Bad Wolf, and his only weapon was ever a "little black fountain pen." There *is* an element of the fantastical in Hughes' lament, and Slessor's rhythm is very jaunty.

Something of the same gentleness is apparent in "Truthful Bob," in which another Australian politician speaks himself into silliness:

> I reside at Kew in Melbourne, and my name is Truthful Bob,
> Which I draws the line at arson, and I never learned to rob,
> There's a beam of blazing virtue like a lighthouse in my eye—
> I have never picked a pocket, and I cannot tell a lie.
>
> ...
>
> I have never been corrupted — and they call me Truthful Bob —
> Which they takes away their money, and they curse me for a snob.
> I'm so pitifully honest that it fills me full of gall
> When I wonder what the blazes I am doing here at all!

Here, in 1940, the Prime Minister Bob Menzies reveals a blissful lack of self-awareness; another tall poppy cuts himself off at the knees. Again, Slessor has a poetic model (in a poem by the American, Bret Harte), and again Slessor has an epigraph which prompted the poem, this time a comment from the Prime Minister's mother that "He's such a good type of man. He doesn't know a crooked way." In Slessor's skeptical poem the mother's naivety is transferred to the Prime Minister himself, who sees his own virtue as "blazing like a lighthouse" from his own eye. There is no vanity more grandiloquent than that which perceives itself as virtue; Menzies claims not just to tell the truth but, George Washington-like, to be *unable* to speak anything else. Slessor, who once claimed that poetry could not be written

in "metrical slang and rhymed dialect,"[9] has fun with diction here, having a snob from Kew speak in every stanza's second line like Ginger Mick. In the end, with his pomposity, Australia's wartime Prime Minister sounds — probably Slessor's true reference point — as if he is a character in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

Slessor often claimed to be a-political, and he partly evidences the claim by also writing satires on Labor leaders, such as Jack Lang. One poem, with a punning title, "Virgil and Slessor Throw a Party on the Strength of the Lang Party's Return to Office," notionally celebrates the New South Wales Labor Party's 1930 election victory; but in talking about dining on prawn mayonnaise, drinking "copious draughts of champagne" and delightedly foxtrotting again, the poem suggests that, in the midst of the Depression, Lang was living in economic fairyland. Slessor returns to puns in "Jack-in-the-box," which portrays Jack Lang in the witness box at a Royal Commission. Satire is often concerned to show the great and famous their position of equivalence with common humanity, and this is explicitly done in "Jack-in-the-box" as Slessor abjures Lang to "Wipe the glory from your brow, / You're a human being now" and to "Mow the lawn and catch the train, / Be a common bloke again," while bringing him perhaps lower than others through the repeated mocking address, *"Jack-in-the-box."*

The following poem in *Collected Poems*, "Sugar Daddy," provides a more generalised political satire. Its method is interesting because the fantasy element of satire is made strong through the use of a kind of allegory. Only the last stanza, and a knowledge of the context which contemporary readers of *Smith's Weekly* might have had, indicates that the poem is actually a political satire:

Sugar-Daddy dotes
  Fondly on brunettes,
Buys 'em coney coats,

Fixes up their debts;
Sugar-Daddy gloats
Blissfully at blondes,
Gives 'em little notes,
Not to mention bonds.

DEAR Sugar-Daddy, SWEET Sugar-Daddy (hear the flappers coo),
What's a teeny million to a
MAN
LIKE
YOU?

Sugar-Daddy thrills
When a lady speaks,
Pays her little bills,
Pecks her little cheeks.
What the flappers bid,
Sugar-Daddies do —
"Want a million quid?
Bless you, child, take two!"

NICE Sugar-Daddy, DEAR Sugar-Daddy, all the flappers purr,
Gimme, gimme, gimme what you
GAVE
TO
HER!

Sugar-Daddy frets,
Sugar-Daddy's kind,
Sugar-Daddy's pets
Hypnotise his mind —
"Come, my dear, and sit
On the Old Man's knee;
Wheedle him a bit —
You'll have jam for tea!"
NICE Sir Robert, DEAR Sir Robert, hear the Premiers coo:
What's another million to a
MAN
LIKE
YOU?

Australian voters are used to the spectacle of state premiers pleading at Premiers' Conferences with the Commonwealth Government for more funds. In 1932, still in the Great Depression, the premiers asked the Prime Minister, Joe Lyons, for loans in order to finance jobs for the unemployed and for their own budget deficits. Lyons had the premiers confer with Sir Robert Gibson, Chairman of Directors of the Commonwealth Bank. Slessor's portrayal of the premiers as flappers wheedling money out of the Commonwealth Bank makes a mockery of any claim that economic rationality is involved in state-federal financial negotiations. The flapper-premiers sound spoilt and the sugar daddy Commonwealth Bank Manager a fool; but it's all done so sweetly!

Slessor's satirising of grand figures is not confined to his previously uncollected poems. "An Inscription for Dog River" is one of the three poems which Slessor added to his original selection of his best work, *One Hundred Poems*, to form the volume by which his reputation became widespread, variously titled *Poems* and *Selected Poems*, and continually in print since it first appeared in 1957. The poem is an elegiac satire which requires a willing suspension of disbelief in that it is spoken by a representative soldier who has served and died under Sir Thomas Blamey. Slessor's note to the poem explains its circumstances, whereby Blamey had an inscription cut in the cliffs above Dog River in Lebanon to commemorate Australian troops' capture of Damour. Over centuries seventeen others who had won nearby victories had carved their names in this place. Slessor visited the site, photographed the inscriptions and wrote about them in his role as Official War Correspondent. The carving is mentioned in both his *War Diaries* and *War Despatches*[10] yet oddly neither includes any criticism of Blamey or any hint of sarcasm or irony. The opening line of Slessor's poem might seem in tune with his prose, but it is, in fact, scathing: "Our general was the greatest and bravest of generals." Alone, this might seem a statement of

straightforward, direct meaning. The most savage irony comes in language which can at first be read with no awareness of ironic meaning. When the soldier ends the first stanza, "We, too, are part of his memorial, / Having been put in for the cost" (a word which rhymes with "lost") and ends the whole poem, "Having given him everything, in fact, / Except respect," it is as if the opening, one-sentence line has been tossed over on to the flip side or has been turned inside out. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* the word-playing Clown says to Viola: "To see this age! A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit: how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!" (III.i). In a different tone and to different purpose this is exactly what happens to Slessor's opening statement. This may suggest a deconstructionist sense of the arbitrariness of language's meaning but there is something very specific and definite about a meaning which can be exactly reversed. Irony actually requires that the original, surface meaning not be lost, for its power comes in the fact of reversal, of awareness of a kind of fraudulence, which *enacts* the fraudulence of Blamey's self-congratulatory claim in aligning himself with Ashur-Bani-Pal, creator of the first known library, Nebuchadnezzar, the Romans and Napoleon III. The poem's speaker, one of those whose "identities have been lost," is an "unknown soldier" whose notional speech provides Slessor with an alternative inscription. Words written on the page can be more powerful than those carved in stone.

Another important figure in Australian history to receive scathing treatment from Slessor is Samuel Marsden, the Anglican priest and magistrate who was a powerful figure in the colony of Australia after his arrival in 1794. He was famous for the brutal floggings he ordered as sentences, and Slessor has him condemn himself out of his own mouth in one of the most accomplished satires in Australian literature, "Vesper-Song of the Reverend Samuel Marsden":

My cure of souls, my cage of brutes,
Go lick and learn at these my boots!
When tainted highways tear a hole,
I bid my cobbler welt the sole.
O, ye that wear the boots of Hell,
Shall I not welt a soul as well?
  O, souls that leak with holes of sin,
  Shall I not let God's leather in,
  Or hit with sacramental knout
  Your twice-convicted vileness out?

Lord, I have sung with ceaseless lips
A tinker's litany of whips,
Have graved another Testament
On backs bowed down and bodies bent.
My stripes of jewelled blood repeat
A scarlet Grace for holy meat.
  Not mine, the Hand that writes the weal
  On this, my vellum of puffed veal,
  Not mine, the glory that endures,
  But Yours, dear God, entirely Yours.

Are there not Saints in holier skies
Who have been scourged to Paradise?
O, Lord, when I have come to that,
Grant there may be a Heavenly Cat
With twice as many tails as here —
  And make me, God, Your Overseer.
  But if the veins of Saints be dead,
  Grant me a whip in Hell instead,
  Where blood is not so hard to fetch.

But I, Lord, am Your humble wretch.

Marsden's inscriptions are carved on "backs bowed down and bodies bent," a line which captures the position of both prayer and punishment. Billy Hughes may have puffed up his cheeks but Marsden far more savagely puffs up the flesh of others through whipping. The details of "jewelled blood"

and "puffed veal" show that the sado-masochistic Marsden clearly relishes his task, all the more so because he can humbly attribute his self-righteous actions to God. The whip is "sacramental," made of "God's leather"; sin will be lashed out of those who are sinful, and Marsden's statements are addressed not to the reader but to God. Slessor was always careful about titles and irony is immediately apparent in this poem's beginning an evening prayer, a "Vesper-Song," with the aggressive "My cure of souls, my cage of brutes, / Go lick and learn at these my boots!" Marsden's self-conscious superiority to those in his curacy suggests contempt rather than care for their souls, as he plays with the homonym "soles." Whipping becomes a "litany" and the blood raised on victims' flesh, "scarlet Grace." Marsden seems part hypocrite, part lunatic, and the poem is extraordinarily imaginative as he applies a reverential language to vicious actions. Slessor's gift for imagery is put to an unusual purpose as he, a lifelong agnostic, portrays self-righteous religious sadism. Fleshly mutilation is seen as heavenly writing, "another Testament"; but Slessor's satire seems directed at Marsden's religion rather than at his language per se. Marsden's religion justifies an ultimate in arrogance; like Hughes' and Menzies', his lack of self-awareness makes him ripe for satire. Slessor's use of stressed, mostly monosyllabic rhymes in couplets heightens the satire, particularly in the last line, "But I, Lord, am Your humble wretch," which stands alone and claims a different tone — of humility — but is clearly allied to the fetching of blood. It is more important to Marsden to grab a whip in Hell than to go serenely to Heaven.

Marsden has a perversity which is fed by his imagination but the other poem which provides the title for this paper is a playful fantasy. "The King of Cuckooz" is the first of five poems which make up the sequence "The Atlas," and it provided the title for Slessor's third book of poetry, *Cuckooz Contrey*. Atlases, like language, are representations of reality

with their own codes and motifs, particularly in the case of the old, elaborately decorated maps with which Slessor was fascinated. "The King of Cuckooz" derives from a map prepared by the English mariner Robert Norton in 1620. In *Cuckooz Contrey* Slessor published a note which read, "On his manuscript map, the unknown hilly country to the south of the Bay is coloured green, and marked 'Part of the King of Cuckooz Contrey'." The third poem of "The Atlas" laments the impossibility of charting "Those other countries of the mind, / So tousled, dark and undefined," an idea that lies behind a great deal of Slessor's poetry, but "The King of Cuckooz" celebrates the cartographic unknown. It represents the realm of possibility but also of ridiculous desire, and the poem both celebrates and satirises the tendencies of the imagination. In doing so it can be seen as capturing simultaneously the imagination-praising Romantic, and skeptical Modernist, elements in Slessor's thought. In the castle of the (ridiculously named) King of Cuckooz,

> (I tell you it is so)
> Five thousand naked Concubines
> With dulcimers do go.

The dulcimers recall the Abyssinian maid who sang to Coleridge of Mount Abora and thus inspired the composition of "Kubla Khan," but *five thousand* naked muses sound a bit much for any man to cope with!

The poem ends with the speaker who has visited Cuckooz Contrey turning attention, and particularly one woman's attention, away from that country to himself:

> Let this be news to you, my dear,
> How Man should be revered;
> Though I'm no King of Cuckooz Land,
> Behold as fierce a beard!
>
> I have as huge an appetite,
> As deep a kiss, my girl,

And *somewhere*, for the hand that seeks,
Perhaps a Sultan's pearl!

These lines recall early Slessor poems such as "Thieves' Kitchen" or "Earth-Visitors," the latter with its revered men/Gods, unearthly beards and bubbles of gilt — poems written under the influence of Norman Lindsay. Lindsay's sketches, in the magazine *Vision* and elsewhere, frequently portray men in swashbuckling or cavalier dress, often wearing boots, surrounded by naked or semi-naked women. It is a ridiculous, Errol Flynn-like fantasy world in which women, despite their large, white breasts, are patronised as "girls." There has been much debate about the extent to which Slessor's thought can be aligned with Lindsay's, with critics such as Terry Sturm and John Docker[11] claiming a very close link, while critics such as myself[12] have wanted to argue for Slessor's independence of mind. To an outsider the evidence might seem to be mixed. Norman Lindsay provided illustrations for *Cuckooz Contrey*, which might suggest an alignment of Slessor's and Lindsay's thought, but in a later essay on Lindsay, Slessor argued that "illustration and poetry do not go well together,"[13] and claimed that the illustration was just a marketing exercise. Slessor was a co-editor of *Vision* magazine, which expounded Lindsay's ideas, but Slessor was frequently at pains to insist that he had no part "in the *Vision* manifesto or statements of philosophy."[14] At the end of his essay on Norman Lindsay, Slessor pointedly declares, "It would be far from my purpose to contend that all the poets who have been influenced by Norman Lindsay have agreed with all of his ideas."[15] My reason for engaging in what might seem at this point a divergent issue is that I think "The King of Cuckooz" can be read as a satire on Lindsay's pubescently fantasy-ish world. The stanzas immediately following the presentation of the dulcimer playing concubines display "girls" in service to the Cuckooz King:

Each rosy nose anoints a tile,
Bang, bang! the fort salutes,
When He, the King of Cuckooz Land,
Comes forth in satin boots,

Each rosy darling flies before
When he desires his tent,
Or, like a tempest driving flowers,
Inspects a battlement.

And this I spied by moonlight
Behind a royal bamboo —
That Monarch in a curricle
Which ninety virgins drew;

That Monarch drinking nectar
(Lord God, my tale attest!)
Milked from a snow-white elephant
As white as *your* white breast!

This is satire at the opposite pole from *saeva indignatio*, an instance of the satirist delighting in what he satirises, but overdone protestation ("Lord God, my tale attest!"), the white breast, the rosy noses and the Cecil B. de Mille qualities of ninety virgins and 5,000 concubines establish the poem as satire, nonetheless. They mark the poem as perhaps an interesting transition point between Slessor's early verse and the bulk of his mature work. This double stance, whereby the notional opposites of celebration and satire work simultaneously, is a sign of Slessor's complexity and modernity. It can also be found in "Captain Dobbin," where it has given rise to critical arguments about how Dobbin is positioned for the reader. Sailing the street in his brick villa and meticulously keeping his pointless "ledger sticky with ink," Captain Dobbin is a comic figure for whom the sea is not only closer than "a dead, lovely woman" but perhaps a substitute for any such woman or, indeed, any real personal contact. However, locking himself in a time warp, Captain

Dobbin also keeps his sense of adventure; his spirit shows in his "eye of wild and wispy scudding blue," so much in tune with the sea that it shows in him physically. The lines he writes in his ledger are "lines of grace," and all his relics, his "memorial-stones," are "fond" in both senses of the word. Much the same could be said of Alexander Home in the fifth vision of Captain Cook. Home lives in the past, a blind old salt talking to empty chairs, exasperating his "noble ... but brisk" wife who "had no past." In this he is clearly a figure of satire. But Home's capacity to make the adventurous past come alive sets him apart from modern captains, "cold executives of company rules," and all dull social conformists of any period. Worshipping Cook with a ferocious single-mindedness, he partakes of Cook's spirit. His eyes are "dazzle-full" of a larger world; each day he flows "round the world and back again" through the combined power of memory and imagination.

This, in a milder form, is the situation of so many characters in Slessor's light verse, where satire is readily apparent. Slessor's light verse always focuses on individuals, not in any depth, but on individuals made to be representative characters. As such they participate in the sort of social world where satire customarily operates. The great theme of the light verse is the capacity of the imagination to invigorate and to delude. Thus, in "The Voice on the Wire" Mr Jones keeps ringing a switchboard telephonist whom he turns into a dream creature:

> I'd pay ninety guineas, not 2d a call,
> If only I had the felicity
> To carry you off, with your headphones and all,
> Away from accursed electricity,
> To carry you off like a sylph of the air,
> Away on a magic trajectory...

In this poem Slessor has great fun through alternating what have traditionally been called "masculine" and "feminine"

rhymes. The poem also alternates between Mr Jones and the telephonist's voices, but it is she who firmly ends the poem:

> You keep your fancies to the 'phone,
> It's years since I've been carried.
> I'm 39, eleven stone,
> And, Mr Jones, I'm married.

The poem satirises Mr Jones' "fancies" and, by extension, the propensity of men to idealise women. This is a propensity much evident in Slessor's light verse generally, where it was enhanced by Virgil Reilly's lissom drawings of beautiful women. In "The Girl on the Corner" men ogle, and rush to buy flowers for, a woman waiting for hours on a corner, but she spurns them all. The man she is waiting for, they imagine, must be someone like Clark Gable, but eventually an old lady "Limps up" and away she goes with her grandmother to have tea. In "Mademoiselle from Everywhere" the ex-digger, now living a "life of brick bungs. and De Sotos / And pansies" dreams of the girl he kissed at Putney, whom he called his "daffodil fairy" and wonders, "O, what is she doing to-day?" It is the poet's voice that informs us "She's married to Somebody's chutney / And living out Beckenham way" and "has a grown-up daughter / Who weighs about seventeen stone." Partly through rhyme Slessor in these poems makes a great use of the classic satiric device, bathos.

In some of the light verse this capacity to fantasise is directed not at others but at the poem's subject him- or herself. Slessor was well-known as a gourmand, and in "Eating by Yourself" he invites the solitary reader to dream:

> Let aristocratic heroes
> Boast the platters of the Guelph,
> You can dream of Trocaderos
> When you're dining by yourself,
> You can hover like a glutton

You can order what you choose,
Try the fricasee of mutton,
Toy with terrapin ragouts ...

Moreover, these dishes, and "All the claret of Lugano" will be brought by nymphs named Nancy or Lucy or Mabel or Myrtle or Dulcie or ... The ingeniously neat rhymes and the regular patterning of the verse encourage a sense that this is all right, but the poem's ending, with the same regularity, characteristically brings us back to the stark real world:

For a twinkle they will gleam —
Then the kettle starts to simmer
And they vanish like a dream;
...
Then you suddenly awaken —
There's a sausage on the shelf,
And the bacon looks like bacon,
And you're eating by yourself!

"The Girl in the Gods" goes to the opera with "eyes of wonder" and leans "from the sky" like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel." Her fascination with the music and high drama of opera, "Airs that ripple, notes that foam," turns the Sydney suburb of Roseville "into Rome," and in the end:

... it's hard to face Artarmon,
Bricks and mortar, tiles and stones,
When a girl who should be Carmen
Has to act like Betty Jones!

John Keats once wrote that "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth."[16] Slessor clearly does not believe this and the light verse may make it tempting to see him as a forerunner of the English Movement poets of the 1950s — Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and others — with their puncturing of the imagination's pretensions. But Slessor's satire in his light verse is in what seems to be an Australian

tradition of gentle satire. Although Artarmon's bricks and mortar must be faced — a sense of the contemporary real is undeniable — Slessor loves this capacity to dream, to fantasise, to imagine. In "Mademoiselle from Everywhere" the women the digger dreams about are gone with their "daffodil kisses" but it is still partly true that

> ... those were the days, those miraculous days,
> And what does it matter,
> You've still got your dream.

Slessor never patronises his characters because of their dreams, no matter how wishful those dreams are. Rather, he has a Romantic and Modernist interest in the capacity of the mind to "half create, / And ... perceive."[17] In a manuscript diary note at the time of writing "The Atlas" Slessor declared of mermaids, "Sailors undoubtedly saw them *because* they believed in them."[18] One of Slessor's finest pieces of light verse, "The Night Express," has a night train flash through the small town of Bogan's Hill, cursing a young woman there "With torments of desire." "O, to be on the night-express," she thinks; while a young woman on the night express stares momentarily at Bogan's Hill and thinks, "O, to be there some day, / Cows and peace — release, release ..." Looking at Bogan's Hill or at the night express is like looking at the sea and seeing mermaids: perception is partly a matter of the perceiver's desires. In "Serenade" the main speaker is a man who takes his Spanish guitar and serenades Sydney ladies in flats with Spanish names such as "Alcazar" or "San Antonio," imagining them to be Carmens in mantillas. (He should, of course, go to Artarmon and meet Betty Jones but this does not happen.) Rather than being a deluded idiot he is conscious of his "bravery / In singing a serenade here" and he comically implores the ladies to imagine:

> Can this be El Duque who proposes?
> Imagine it is, if you can —

But you should be firing down roses
  Or bashfully biting a fan,
And I should be christened Ignacio
Fernando Come-into-the-Patio
Porfirio Flor del Moustachio
  de las Cruzes y Jaime Esteban.

The reaction he gets is "Plink-a-plunk, plink-a-plunk, / What a nuisance! He's drunk." Perhaps he is, but it is hard not to believe that his entreaty to "be as daft as you dare" is endorsed by Slessor, who always enjoyed eccentrics. The poems celebrates the *play* of the imagination, and the pseudo-Spanish serenader is a kind of Quixotean hero.

Throughout the light verse Slessor enjoys ordinary people's foibles, even while satirising them, and this is the main source of the poems' charm. Slessor, however, never extended the same licence to officialdom, as his poems on Hughes, Menzies and Lang show. Petty officials especially got his goat, and poems such as "I sing the Epic of those valiant souls," "Sally in Our Alley," "To a Town Hall Pigeon" and "Lovett Bay" in the *Collected Poems* all reveal the not-suffering-fools-gladly side of Slessor's personality. In these poems Slessor's *saeva indignatio* takes the outwardly mild form of comedy, as can be illustrated with one example from "Sally in Our Alley," a sequence of well-known poems and songs, rewritten with "cotton stockings, Jemima boots, Turkey twill, flannelette, hair nets, and other vegetarian effects" by Slessor, in order to conform with the imagined requirements of the Commonwealth censor, Mr Cresswell O'Reilly.

I wonder who's kissing her now,
I wonder who's teaching her how,
I wonder who's gazing into her eyes,
Breathing sighs, telling lies.
I wonder who's buying the wine
For the lips that I used to call mine,
I wonder if ever she tells him of me,
I wonder who's kissing her now!

I wonder who's her Sunday-school superintendent now,
I'll bet he regrets it, poor cow.
I wonder who's gazing into her pince-nez
As she stands at bay all through the day.
I wonder who now cocoa stirs
For lips irreproachably hers.
I wonder if ever she gives him a tract,
I wonder who's taking off his hat to her now!

Slessor had a lifelong hatred of censorship but the "Sally in Our Alley" poems and songs make their point, that the censor is a humourless, patronising prude, solely through comedy, without direct comment or critique. This cutting down of the middling poppies Slessor cheerfully extended to aldermen, council officials, politicians and professors of economics. These poems were mostly published in *Smith's Weekly*, a paper whose eccentric, raffish staff, irregular journalistic habits and down to earth stance Slessor relished. He described his "life on *Smith's Weekly*, with all its torment, toil, irritations and frustrations" as "the happiest chapter of my existence."[19] This plain sensibility side of Slessor informed all his satire and it should be kept in mind when reading those critics who want to portray Slessor as a gaudy, overly-elaborating aesthete and an uncritical follower of Norman Lindsay. Between Lindsay and Slessor there was a vast difference in temperament. Lindsay's satire was always directed outwards, but Slessor was a modest man quite capable of satirising himself, as poems which I have not space to discuss, such as "Talbingo," "To Myself" (which describes Slessor as "my rather tedious hero" and "fool") and "To a Friend" demonstrate. Slessor had a self-awareness that Lindsay lacked almost entirely, and many of Lindsay's letters to Slessor from the 1940s on are laments that Slessor never came to see him any more.[20] They did share a love of the comic and the fantastical, but Slessor had none of Lindsay's Nietzschean arrogance. Rather his common person's stance was directed *at* any signs of such arrogance,

especially in the powerful. All these things come together in a poem from late in Slessor's career with which I would like to end, simply by reading it. The poem illustrates the scatological element frequently utilised in satire but in Slessor's work present only in this one poem, which judges an action taken in the building of the Sydney *Sun* in 1947:

Lines Written on the Occasion of the Transposition of the Ladies' and Gents' Lavatories on the 9th Floor

How beautiful it is to know,
  Whatever else our notions,
Some Higher Power than us below
  Controls our daily motions.
High at his lonely desk enshrined,
  Where no one dares to wander,
Some far, mysterious Mastermind
  On privvies deigns to ponder.
Oft had he passed the humble door,
  And thought that "ME" disgraced it
("ME" which was written "MEN" before
  Some egotist defaced it).
"The job will call for tact," he mused,
  "And some would say they dare not —
But I, for one, am not confused,
  And as for them, I care not."

(For he, unlike the vulgar herds
  Who think that crowds are funny,
Dropped only rich, superior turds
  In some exclusive dunny,
Some private, padlocked, holy nest
  Reserved for Lord and Master,
Where none but Sacred Bums may rest
  On thrones of alabaster.)

"All those who flout my will," he swore,
  "May pull the chain in Hades!"
Twas done. They painted on the door,

And "Gents" was turned to "Ladies."
Now what befalls? The die is cast,
The "Ladies" blush and flutter,
And "Men" flee forth, with eyes aghast,
Who button as they mutter.

With flies agape, they flee the place,
Their very language blisters —
And who can tell the redder face,
The Miss's or the Mr's?
"What miracle," they cry, "is this,
And who can solve the riddle?
Where Gentlemen once stood to piss,
Now Ladies sit to piddle!"

1. Graham Burns, *Kenneth Slessor*. 2nd ed; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975, 9.
2. *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor*, ed. A.K. Thomson. Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1968, 128.
3. Terry Sturm, "Kenneth Slessor's Poetry and Norman Lindsay,"*Southerly*, No.4, 1971, 291.
4. *Reconnoitres: Essays in Australian Literature in Honour of G.A. Wilkes*, ed. Margaret Harris & Elizabeth Webby. Melbourne: Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1992.
5. "Australian Poetry and Hugh McCrae, *"Bread and Wine: Selected Prose*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970, 96; or *Kenneth Slessor*, ed. Dennis Haskell. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991, 115 (hereafter cited as Haskell).
6. "The Quality of Magic,"*Southerly*, No.4, 1971, 254.
7. Haskell, 250.
8. *A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977, 16.
9. Letter to the *Bulletin*, 8 January, 1920.

10. *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, ed. Clement Semmler. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985, 313, 390; *The War Despatches of Kenneth Slessor*, ed. Clement Semmler. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987, 279-80; Haskell, 182.
11. John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditons in Sydney and Melbourne*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974, 22-41.
12. See Haskell, xvii-xviii; and Dennis Haskell, "'On water stranger and less clear': Conceptions of Time and Death in the Work of Kenneth Slessor," *Voices*, Vol.1, No.1 (Autumn 1991), 5-20.
13. *Bread and Wine*, 114; Haskell, 122.
14. National Library of Australia, MS 3020/27/65.
15. *Bread and Wine*, 127; Haskell, 129.
16. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings. Oxford University Press, 1970, 22 Nov. 1817.
17. Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."
18. Ms diary, 1 June 1927, National Library of Australia MS 3020/19/1.
19. *Bread and Wine*, 41; Haskell, 93.
20. National Library of Australia MS 3020/1/52 and MS 3020/1/219.

Chapter 3

NURTURERS TURNED NASTY? AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SATIRISTS

In the third of these papers I want to turn back to an issue raised briefly in the first, the work of Australian women satirists. Last year I wrote an account of "Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Australian Poetry" for an English magazine, *Critical Survey*[1] and, amongst other issues, gave my first consideration to satire in our poetic tradition. Casting about for women poetic satirists, I thought of Gwen Harwood, of course, and the later poems of Judith Wright, Ania Walwicz, possibly some of the work of Fay Zwicky and Dorothy Hewett, the parodies of Australian poets which I knew Jan Owen was writing, and some poems by Chris Mansell. I hope you can bear with this self-referencing, since it is not in the service of self-aggrandisement but of confession. (Brought up C of E, you can see, I have to go to confession in public.) I concluded that "Satire is a ... fairly strong feature of contemporary Australian poetry" but that "Despite Harwood's work and occasional satiric notes from Chris(tine) Mansell, Ania Walwicz and others, satire seems on the whole to be a masculine genre, which provides an interesting comment on gender roles in Australian society." I am still not certain, but I think I was probably wrong; there is, however, conflicting evidence. The article was written before Philip Neilsen's anthology had appeared, and one of the striking features of

that book is the number of satires by women, and particularly the number of feminist satires. In undertaking the research for this lecture I realised that a number of poems — eleven in fact — not surprisingly featured in both *The Sting in the Wattle* and *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*.[2] Checking Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn's anthology reveals that of over 200 poems less than twenty could be considered satires, and the editors make no mention of satire in their introduction. Since satire can be a strong weapon of the disadvantaged, a greater proportion of satires might have been expected in an anthology which specifically aims to empower women poets.

Writing itself is generally seen to be a crucial part of the feminist movement. Hélène Cixous in her by now classic essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" exhorts women to take their "turn to speak," since "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."[3] Of course, writing for change need not take the form of satire, although satire seems a more immediate way of obtaining a voice within an existing power structure too firmly entrenched and too pervasive in language, behaviour and social role to be able to change quickly. Medusa is invoked when Kate Jennings, in an elegy for Martin Johnston, recalls that the year she "became / a 'women's libber' — graceless term — / ... all our set ... acted / as if I had acquired the aspect of a Gorgon."[4] Two decades later she does not feel that things have changed:

> Men inherit mantles; women are humoured.
> I know, I know! Generalizations like this
> make people mad. Twenty years ago,
> I ached to be taken seriously; instead, laughter.

Although the poem is an elegy, Jennings' thoughts turn naturally to gender roles and gender politics since they are

so much part of her own sense of self. The tone is one of gentle, but deeply felt, protest and an implicit assertion that generalisations are necessary in order to effect change. Traditional satire, on the eighteenth century model, has dealt very much with generalisations and the certainties that they involve, and perhaps a Blakean wariness of generalisation in post-Imagist twentieth century poetry has discouraged women from writing more feminist satires.

Certainly an Australian wariness of generalisations about "masculinity" and "femininity" has been an inhibiting factor. The emphasis from Australian women poets and critics has decidedly been on "masculine" and "feminine" as culturally encoded, rather than intrinsically biological, terms. Sneja Gunew declares: "I do not believe that the possession of a womb is automatically and mystically figured or inscribed in textualities. I do, however, believe that living as a woman, historically and materially, necessarily informs one's writing."[5] Jennifer Strauss believes "that it is questionable whether there is such an entity as an unmistakable feminine sensibility" and points to "the slipperiness of relationship between the terms masculine/feminine and male/female."[6] While recognising that the terms matter, Judith Wright, in a piece on her poetics, ironically titled "Transcending Womanliness," debunks the effort to define them:

> I prefer to leave it to linguists, critics and computers to decide what constitutes Gender-specific Poetics — though I'm sure there's a difference, and vive la difference as far as I'm concerned. In one of her gorgeous putdowns, Christina Stead dismissed some question from an earnest young interviewer on her methods and techniques: "It's boring for a writer, dear. Have another drink."[7]

The customary view of gender roles presents women as nurturers and carers, and therefore as empathisers, roles that discourage the attack which satire requires — satire,

then, is a role for the male warriors armed with linguistic clubs and swords. Of course the customary view is a stereotype, but stereotypes do not come from nowhere and may include an element of truth. One importance of the cultural view of the terms "feminine" and "masculine" propounded by Gunew, Strauss and others is that they describe qualities which are not monopolised by either gender. Strauss names them as "constellations of qualities: intuitiveness, subjectivity, passivity, stasis, a concern for inner space on the one hand, on the other intellectuality, objectivity, activity, movement, interest in external space. In short the Jungian *anima* and *animus*, both needed for wholeness of being in any individual."[8]

However, it seems impossible to keep biology entirely at bay, and even naming certain characteristics "feminine" and others "masculine" implicitly claims that they are more prone to be relevant to their respective sex. If the characteristics are culturally induced, though, — and poetry does have at least some expressive force in the culture — a change in the culture should produce a change in the characteristics possessed by women and men respectively. Certainly the above ascription of feminine characteristics currently has force. Thus, Veronica Brady describes Rosemary Dobson's poetry as belonging to "what Hélène Cixous calls the Realm of the Gift ... essentially open, part of a circuit of giving and receiving"[9]; it is a poetry which requires us "to learn to listen" (107), to empathise. Brady comments that "it was Zeus who bore Athena fully formed from his head; women's gestation is more laborious, more of a process of attention and nurture" (107). These seem to me accurate comments about Dobson, and her work contains very little satire. Diane Fahey endorses Sylvia Brinton Perera's view of women as scapegoats:

> Few women do not have an active scapegoat complex. Glorified by themselves and the collective as chosen ones, and

> equally despised as illicit, alien, second-class and victim, they are too often the silent and patient vessels of necessary, but derogated, shadow qualities.[10]

This is a difficult position from which to discover the assertiveness intrinsic to satire which, at least as traditionally practised, would seem to require the "intellectuality, objectivity, activity" and interest in social, "external space" which Strauss allies with the masculine animus. Satire traditionally relies on what Veronica Brady calls "the masculine interrogation which insists on categorization, proximity and rationality, the principle of non-contradiction."[11] John Snyder in *Prospects of Power* declares, "Satire *means* to criticize, to aim reason at targets" (95). However, the role of reason in satire, even in the eighteenth century, can be exaggerated; Snyder continues, "but in the very act of critique, satire wanders its own verbalizing way" (95). The element of fantasy and rhetoric should never be forgotten.

A great deal of contemporary feminist theory, including the work of Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Marguerite Duras — expresses distrust of order, categorisation and reason as distinctly masculine systems of thought, ultimately deriving from phallic unity. Toril Moi has declared: "... it is masculine rationality that has always privileged reason, order and lucidity, and ... it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity."[12] Cixous' call is for women to write from the female body and the unconscious, to speak what is hidden. Irigaray seeks "an examination of the *operation of the 'grammar'* of each figure of discourse" and of "what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences.*"[13]

Although she may never have read such theorists, these terms could be seen to apply to one of Rosemary Dobson's few satires, "Piltdown Man"[14]:

Piltdown Man is shelved away
Piltdown Man has had his day,
nine split fragments joined in one,
parietal pieces of cranium.
All to himself in the British Museum
Piltdown Man is singing this song:

"Mandible, canine, turbinal,
stegodon, flint, and broken skull,
we all lay low in a gravel-bed —
if there ever was a body it lost its head.

"They found us out and they joined us up,
pieced my skull like a broken cup;
eminent men in the lecture-room
threw up their hats when I came in.

"Prolonged applause for antiquity,
stamping feet for stratigraphy —
I held the stage but it didn't last long:
fluorine tests have done me wrong.

"Radio counts that showed excess,
Spectrographic analysis —
applications of science proved
Piltdown Man has never lived."

Piltdown Man is quite disproved.
He never lived and he never loved.
A gravel-bed's a private place —
but whom (and what with) to embrace?
Oh listen hard and listen long
for the sad lost notes of the Piltdown song.

Piltdown Man is in the position Irigaray and others ascribe to woman — existing "within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition."[15] Lacking unity, he

does not make sense to the reasoning systems of science, but there is no doubt where Dobson stands. Piltdown Man's existence is manifest to all those who can hear the non-logic of song, although in contemporary, science-dominated society one must "listen hard and listen long," Dobson's repetition and rhyme validating the poem by enabling it to exhibit song-like qualities itself. In Dobson's *Collected Poems* "Piltdown Man" follows immediately after "Drowned Person," which provides a modern scientific analysis of the body of Shakespeare's Ophelia, and "Pollen Dispersal" which again presents mock-scientific speech only to end with an exclamatory single-line stanza: *"Peas-blossom, Mustard-seed* near Athens!" Her notes declare, "These two poems on pollen analysis and dispersal endeavour to show that Shakespeare, by intuition, and Science, by inquiry, arrive at the same truths" (218). However, the emphasis in the poems seems to be on the lyrical articulation of silences; the truths of science may be "truths," when they are not falsehoods, but they do not sing.

It is interesting that Dobson's satires can seem to seek liberating approaches to a masculine construction of the world while being formally and fairly conventionally ordered and completed. By contrast, Irigaray's call is to counter "this logic" with "a *disruptive excess*"[16] which "would reject all closure or circularity in discourse" (153). Julia Kristeva's stance on feminist issues is often very different to Irigarary's, but she also believes that women should "reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society."[17] Cixous' attitude is neatly summarised by Susan Suleiman:

> Men, with a few notable exceptions among the poets, have been too prone to fall victim to the ideology of phallocentrism — whence their submission to the rules of logic, syntax, linearity, homogeneity, and realist representation. Cixous called, instead, for a kind of writing that would break open the

> chains of syntax, escape from the repressiveness of linear logic and teleological "storytelling," and allow for the emergence of a language "close to the body"; this language, linked, for Cixous, to the voice and the body of the mother, would allow the "wildness" of the unconscious to emerge over the tame reasoning of the superego or the Law.[18]

Cixous' appeal for a language "close to the [female] body" and the unconscious would, similarly to Irigaray and Kristeva's calls, produce a linguistic equivalent of something like the carnivalesque — disorderly in relation to conventional logic, comic, reliant on rhythm, multiple and open-ended, perhaps mocking. Yet the poems of Australian women which assert feminine values, in satire and in other genres, on the whole do not work like this. Rodriguez, Harwood, Dobson, Zwicky, Jennings, Wright, Jerri Kroll, Jan Owen, Hewett and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, to take a fairly random but significant list of names, work with more ordered structures and apparently more conscious and more logical purpose than the French theorists demand. Yet I think these poets, and any sensible reader, would argue that their poems do not fail on this ground, any more than Dobson's three satires do. One of the difficulties of discussion about gender is that this crucial concept intersects with other, perhaps equally crucial concepts, such as race, age and, particularly, class. There may be more to feminism on earth than fits French philosophy. These women poets seem to share with their male counterparts an Australian sense of pragmatism. Of course, any poem to some extent has elements of the French theoretical programme, since poetry works to a large extent with irrational elements of rhythm, imagistic resonance and sound patterns, whose appeal is to the unconscious. But there seems no reason to believe that male chauvinist poems, with emotional appeals to prejudices, could not be written in this way.

Two Australian women satirists whose poems might seem to accord with contemporary theory, and perhaps are written out of awareness of that theory, are Susan Hampton and Ania Walwicz. A good example of Susan Hampton's work in this vein is included in Philip Neilsen's anthology, the prose poem "The Frilling Machine":

> ... The frilling machine was a large metal object with a rubber strip doorway and a conveyor belt floor, like the thing at the airport that checks you for guns. Except that it was enclosed, and you had to open a door at the other end to get out. It was for girls only. There was a similar shaped machine for boys, but I never found out what it was called.
> ...
> Every Monday after assembly I was taken with a few others to the machine and topped up. By Friday I was back to normal, my frills having worn off. On Mondays the deputy would eye me, me and a few mates, and dutifully, resentfully, with a shrinking substantiality, we'd walk single file to the machine and go in. Once they added a special liquid to the workings and we were blonde for a year. Old men pawed us, the boys took an interest in us, our fathers called us their little darlings.
> Another time when I was raptly watching the teacher, whose mouth when she taught us our tables was pouched as if made for a kiss, I was sent to the machine and it overreacted. In the shade under the pepper trees afterwards, I noticed my arms had levers of curled-up skin. It didn't hurt, it just looked really different, like the white paper cutlet frills on a roast rack of lamb, all down my arms. I went straight home and my mother told me to wear long sleeves. During lessons I would press through the cotton, bending the skin back into place, but it sprang up again. Much later the flaps subsided, and the skin rejoined quietly overnight to muscle again. These are the faint markings on my arms. (217–18)

Although first written in the late nineteenth century the prose poem remains a radical form, a deliberate

contradiction in terms. If we accept that this is poetry, or sufficiently poetry to be included in a poetry anthology, the poem next raises the question "Is this satire?" Or is it parody? Somehow, these questions of genre sound ridiculously pedantic, and one realises that in such a reader response the poem satirises the masculine tendency to classification and rational order. It is tempting to say that the poem "sings" beyond them, fulfilling another requirement of the French theorists. However, the poem, being a prose poem, does not "sing" much at all. It is less reliant on rhythm and musicality than, say, the satires of Rosemary Dobson or Gwen Harwood. It also seems to me complete rather than open-ended, and carefully thought out rather than leaping from the unconscious. There is not much of the carnivalesque about it, even though the element of fantasy is strongly present. The poem is a kind of allegory, with the frilling machine standing for gender enculturation while also mocking the machined nature of modern patriarchal society and of its education system. The female teacher in maths lessons has her mouth prepared as if for a kiss. There is a separate machine, its name not known, for boys, and all the males take an interest in the girls once they are dollied up in frills and blonde. The narrator finds not just her hair and clothes but her body frilled too, and even now has traces of that enculturation in her psyche. The poem's deft technique involves presenting the psyche in terms of the body and it does so in a cool tone with no narrative judgements.

For whatever reason, Ania Walwicz does not appear in *The Sting in the Wattle* but because of its manner virtually all of her writing might be considered as satire or parody. Like Hampton's "The Frilling Machine," her pieces are prose poems but they make even less concession to formal convention, being unparagraphed, sometimes avoiding upper case letters altogether, and often being ungrammatical. Walwicz describes them as "prose / poetry written

in blocks."[19] The grammatical fracturing gives a sense of incompleteness to individual sentences and to pieces as a whole, and might be seen as a challenge to masculine modes of thought, as in "Australia," which is portrayed as male. It is not a recent poem but its subject and its anthologisation in *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* makes it a useful focus of attention:

> You big ugly. You too empty. You desert with your nothing nothing nothing. You scorched suntanned. Old too quickly. Acres of suburbs watching the telly. You bore me. Freckle silly children. You nothing much. With your big sea. Beach beach beach. I've seen enough already ... You insult me. You don't know how to be with me. Road road tree tree. I came from crowded and many. I came from rich. You have nothing to offer. You're poor and spread thin. You big. So what. I'm small. It's what's in. You silent on Sunday. Nobody on your streets. You dead at night. You go to sleep too early. You don't excite me. You scare me with your hopeless. You want everyone to be the same. You're dumb. You do like anybody else. You engaged Doreen. You big cow. You average average. Cold day at school playing around at lunchtime. Running around for nothing. You never accept me. For your own ... You don't adopt me ... You go crazy on Saturday night. You get drunk. You don't like me and you don't like women. You put your arm around men in bars ... Wait for other people to tell you what to do. Follow the leader. Can't imagine. Work horse. Thick legs. You go to work in the morning. You shiver on a tram.

Although the "I" of the poem — if this can be called a "poem" — can hardly be equated with Walwicz, it does draw on her experience as a migrant living in Melbourne. Like Hampton's poem it is not very musical, although it should be noted that Walwicz very much performs her poems and the performance characteristics, of course, are largely lost on the page. The poem is very reliant on repetitions and slight variations in sentence length and

rhythm. Unlike Hampton's poem, its method is to jump so continuously as to make it difficult for the reader to settle into an attitude towards it. Yet the poem itself, in contrast to Hampton's, is full of attitudes, indeed is structured on them: it begins and ends with accusations. This makes it hard to see it as springing from the unconscious, Cixous-like, despite its grammatical disjunctions. Rather, these disjunctions seem deliberate, part of a conscious manner, so that the work seems less of a satire of male thought than it first appears. The attitudinising means that the poem has all the subtlety of a flying brick. Any work built on an experimental manner and attitudes depends on the quality of the attitudes once the surprise of experiment has worn off. The poem presents a very homogenised, and in fact clichéd notion of "Australia," and this lack of depth undercuts all its criticisms. Walwicz claims that her aim is "the notation and the enactment of inner states of feeling / being"[20] but to my mind, virtually all Walwicz's work is simplistic and terribly reliant on surface effects, and this destroys any power it might have had as feminist critique, satire or parody. Although Walwicz claims, with unflinching rhetoric, "The reader is engulfed in the flow of the language and becomes both the observer and the speaker of the words" (69), her language is fractured rather than flowing, even in performance, and its mannerism is likely to prevent any reader from "becoming" the speaker. Unlike Hampton's, Walwicz's imagery rarely, if ever, has any resonance, and the lack of depth of thought means that the experimental manner quickly descends into gimmickry. The attack in pieces such as "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World" is undercut by repetitive obviousness, while at the other extreme Walwicz's "oolee" pieces[21] ("ooleeooleeoolee oolee dee deedee dah doo oh deedee mah oolee mah do dadeedah ...") are so oblique and doo wah diddy diddy dum diddy doo as to be pointlessly self-indulgent. Although it is totally contrary to Walwicz's intentions, her

work's closest affiliation seems to me to be with the male-dominated worlds of advertising and video clips.

Walwicz's writing, like the French feminist theories I have been discussing, is seen as postmodern. Contemporary feminism has a complicated relationship with post-modernism. On the one hand it seeks to be allied to experimentalism which subverts a prevailing (patriarchal) order of values. On the other hand, postmodernism's destabilisation and relativising of all meaning can seem inimical to feminism's claim of certain definite truths — for example, that male values dominate in western, including Australian, society and literature. The strategy that feminist theory has recommended in these circumstances, and in the context of using a language riddled with male values, is that of parody. In researching for this paper I found virtually nothing written on feminism and satire, but there is a good deal written on feminism and parody — as there is on postmodernism and parody. Irigaray declares:

> There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one 'path,' the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) 'subject', that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.[22]

In this way feminism and postmodernism might be reconciled. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism in terms of a "double encoding as both complicity and critique"[23] and this seems an exact description of parody. For feminism it accords with the "conception of womanliness as a mask" or "as a masquerade," to use Joan Riviere's terms of 1929.[24]

One form which feminist parody has taken is the retelling of classical myths, of which Cixous' reinscription of Medusa

is the most famous. Jennifer Strauss declares that "one useful form of feminist criticism is to re-write the canonical texts, switch to a female protagonist, let her tell *the story (not merely her story, thank you).*"[25] Australian poetry provides a number of examples, including Strauss' own "Bluebeard Re-Scripted,"[26] Jill Hellyer's "Jonah's Wife"[27] ("The belly of a whale! ? A quaint excuse ... I know a likelier tale.") and Sylvia Kantaris' "Annunciation" and "The Tenth Muse"[28], who:

> ... grunts ... things
> I'd rather not hear ...
> and keeps repeating "Women
> haven't got the knack"
> in my most delicately strung and scented ear.

Curiously enough, not all feminist rewrites are either parodies or satires. For example, Dorothy Hewett's sequences "Rapunzel in Suburbia" and "Alice in Wormland" get their energy by playing off a romantic lyricism against touches of irony, but the irony is not directed at the original myths and is often far from the dominant note. Fay Zwicky is a fine satirist but when she has Mrs Noah speak (to God) in her "Ark Voices" we hear a sometimes impudent but often respectful voice:

> Noah looks into space.
> He sees the small as small
> The great as great ...
> I see the small as too little
> the great as too much.
> Does that diminish me?[29]

Patricia Yaeger has written that "As women play with old texts the burden of the tradition is lightened,"[30] but clearly this lightening can be undertaken by establishing the presence of women in stories such as that of the Flood, rather than in parodying the stories altogether.[31]

Such poems may be seen as part of another path in feminist poetry which runs entirely counter to the necessity of parody proclaimed by Irigaray. This is the process by which women poets assert their own subjectivity and, sometimes, the importance of the personal sphere. This is more likely to produce lyric poetry than satire since satire is so much concerned with the public sphere but in a credo Colleen Burke has satirised the need to assert the personal:

> "Why is your poetry so personal?" This is a question often asked by male friends. All I can say is that my poetry is an expression of my life and sometimes life is personal.[32]

Kate Jennings has written a satire which shrugs off the worry of feminists such as Jessica Benjamin that "the feminist focus on personal life, and for that matter the preoccupation with inner life that characterises psychoanalysis is fated to surrender the great issues of power."[33] This poem is "Gardening in Containers,"[34] which concerns gardening in "a village of pots" in a small American condominium:

> I am absorbed by this small excuse for a garden
> as if it were a first child ...
>
> It is true my garden lacks the sweep of masculine vision.
> Its scale is apologetic.
> Men still make the big gardens,
> scheme the big schemes.
> Soon I shall take to painting my garden
> in watercolours so artless and innocent as to be a lie.

It is clear that Australian women poets do not always follow the rules of the feminist theory I have been outlining, perhaps encouraged that poetry generally — even satire — exists somewhat on the fringes of male, reasoning, categorising discourse anyway, drawing substantially on powers of rhythm and imagery associated with the

unconscious. Much contemporary feminist theory grows out of psychoanalytical theory, as Jessica Benjamin's comment indicates.[35] *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* includes one satire which might be read as subversive of both patriarchy and psychoanalysis, Nancy Gordon's "The Night She Explored Her Psyche":

You must you know explore your psyche —
he offered her a cigarette.
Oh so correct spectacles
behind the polished desk
with the kleenex and her file
which he started to read on the hour
came to the door at five past
showed her in with the small chat to get her started.

She sat
Mummie had drilled her well
skirt pulled over her knees.
When the strings were pulled
she danced.
At twenty-five past the hour
he showed her out
she hadn't finished the cigarette.

That night
she took her psyche
into the hot still moonlit air
and the scent of the datura.
Then clear like a bell
moonlight awake
the wagtail called.
It went in like a probe
her psyche she found
was spun sugar.
Mother father brother
embedded like plums.

She put in a thumb
and ate them.

This presentation of one's psyche as if it were a container in one's house rather than one's very self seems mocking, from the title to the last lines in which "she" emulates Little Jack Horner in an act of self-creation, chewing up the rest of her family. It is an act prompted by instinct and nature, the "moonlit air," the scent of datura (which has narcotic properties) and the call of a bird. The poem seems to proclaim a poetic independence from theory. Less formal than the work of, say, Dobson but more than that of Hampton, the poem is open-ended but far from the Cixousian ideal of inspirational appeal to the unconscious.

In some ways by not following Cixous' prescription the Australian poets are. For Cixous' call for a certain kind of writing might be seen as a programme, a masculinist notion, especially when its need is deduced from philosophising about male language practice. Behind much of the theorising is an essentialist concept of language: logic and reasoning have been the modes of thought most highly valued by men, therefore these modes of thought are essentially or entirely male. For Irigaray "a direct feminine challenge" to patriarchy "means demanding to speak as a (masculine) 'subject'" but a poem such as Sylvia Kantaris' "News From the Front," XXII[36] makes just such a challenge:

... He wanted me to stare
into a looking-glass like that fat Venus
by Velazquez — to make me calm, he said:
"Women should be calm as the moon ..."
... at the Picasso exhibition
next morning, we saw woman after woman
with sickle moons instead of heads, all mouth ...
If that's the way they all really see us,
No wonder they shut us up in mirrors.

Who could hear this as the voice of a masculine subject? Subject positions take a different colouring when we move from the abstractions of philosophy to the concrete details of particular situations. Strauss warns that "the hope of finally discovering a quintessentially feminine language ... is likely to become only another prison house of dualism."[37] I also believe that while men might value logic and reasoning as discourses there is nothing logical or reason-able about male chauvinism. I cannot see that *anyone* has anything to gain from it in the long term, and I doubt that it ever arose from reasoning. It is more likely to have arisen from fear and anxiety about difference and about male sexual needs — in other words from that realm of the unconscious which Cixous applauds. To be fair to Cixous, women's unconscious minds may come up with different anxieties and different celebrations than men's. Jennifer Strauss has protested that:

> a devotion to "normative" syntax (discursive, argumentative, sequential) is part of my writing in general, and does not disturb my conviction that I am a woman as I write ... I am ... somewhat indignant at discovering yet *another* way in which my experience is to be discounted because it doesn't correspond to someone else's theory of the womanly.[38]

The evidence of Australian women's poetry is that she speaks for more than herself alone. A number of Australian women poets have even written satires which proclaim the need for passion in conventional syntax and grammar and in reasoning lines. Dorothy Auchterlonie's "Night at the Opera" presents a Tristan and Isolde lodged in dull suburban respectability until a widowed Isolde, thinking on her troublesome younger son's affair with a married woman, "turns her gaze, compelled against her will, / ... / And through the thundering surf, the anguished foam, / The horns begin to rise, summoning her home."[39] Judith Wright's marvellous satire, "Typists in the Phoenix

Building," presents typists and clerks sealed off from the natural world but not entirely from natural impulses in the ironically named "Phoenix Building." In neat five-line stanzas rhyming a-b-c-b-a, "Drawn by late-afternoon desires / the poles of mind meet lust's equators" but in the end "Shirley and her clerk / in tiled and fireproof corridors / touch and fall apart. No fires / consume the banked comptometers."[40] A lack of carnivalising passion is also satirised neatly in Gwen Harwood's depiction of academics at play, "Cocktails at Seven,"[41] or even in her portrayal of Professor Eisenbart, *"Too old to love, too young to die."*[42]

Of course, Harwood has done her share of satiric masquerading, but sometimes as men such as Francis Geyer and Timothy Kline. She is, however, a various poet and has also claimed to present herself directly, speaking "from my heart, my heart and nobody else's,"[43] in those poems addressed to present and past friends. She is unquestionably our best-known woman poetic satirist and the unhesitating intellectual and emotional strength of her voice has perhaps had an influence in encouraging women poets to a diversity of feminist — in the broadest sense of the term — poems. Women satirists I have found to be even less concerned with the tall poppies than their male counterparts, and less concerned with satirising Australian mediocrity, although Judith Wright's "Phoenix Building" and Anne Elder's "Seen Out"[44] are examples, as is Edith Speer's "Can't They Think of Anything Else to Do,"[45] which targets non-feminist "Wives and mothers" ("I see how you cling for dear life / to hubby and bubby, my dears, / ... You bore me to tears ..."). Women poets are more concerned with satires on relationships generally, including, for example in Judith Rodriguez's "Strop,"[46] violent relationships. They can be indirect, like "Strop," or forthright, as in Debbie Westbury's "You Should Have Married a Canary"[47] ("they're quite at home in cages"). Australian women's poetic satires can be gentle and domestic, like Jean Kent's "To the Ironing-

board,"[48] which provides a brilliant use of the transferred epithet: "I know you had other plans. Once. / You wanted to be ; a ballerina but / your feet were too big"; or sardonic and social, as in Judith Wright's "Report of a Working Party"[49] or Jerri Kroll's "Few FX, Voices, No Chorus"[50] ("Our 20th century loves the monologue: / the woman trapped in her washing machine, / nose squashed to the window, weeping suds." Like most of the best satires they include a good deal of fantasy and humour, and they are on the whole remarkably good-natured rather than savage, even in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's satires on Aboriginal repression. In "No More Boomerang"[51] her brief quatrains make a marvellous use of bathetic, falling cadences in the fourth lines:

> No more corroboree,
> Gay dance and din.
> Now we got movies,
> And pay to go in.
>
> ...
>
> One time naked,
> Who never knew shame;
> Now we put clothes on
> To hide whatsaname.

This, like many other satiric poems by women, is not particularly feminist. Nor are the many satires by women poets which deal with literature, especially poetry, and its reception. This is *the* subject which seems far more prominent in satires from Australian women than in satires from Australian men, and many poets seem compelled to return to it, including Judith Wright in "For Jack Blight," "Poem" and "Advice to a Young Poet"[52]; Fay Zwicky in "Literary Board,"[53] "The Poet Gives a Reading," "The Poet Puts it Away" and "The Poet Asks Forgiveness"[54]; and Judith Rodriguez in "A lifetime devoted to literature," "In

the vanguard" and "Is it poetry? they ask."[55] Perhaps most notable of all are Gwen Harwood's three "Later Texts," the first of which begins:

> She sits in the park, wishing she'd never written
> about that dowdy housewife and her brood.
> Better, The Memoirs of a Mad Sex-Kitten,
> or a high-minded Ode to Motherhood ...

and the last of which, "Eloisa to Abelard," provides an acrostic which reads "BLESS THE EDITOR."[56]

This paper makes no pretensions to be comprehensive, and any man talks about feminism rather like a soldier stepping gingerly through a minefield. I have simply tried to make an exploratory beginning on that scholar's dream, a neglected subject on which more work needs to be done. I am waiting for someone to write "The Woman from Snowy River," wondering what would she do or say, not that the bloke from Snowy River says much. This might be Irigarayan mimicry with an Australian vengeance, but I hope I've left you with the impression that Australian poetic satire is a rich field, where women and men alike "shoot Folly as it flies"[57] with what Harwood calls "a spark of irresponsible delight,"[58] that is, with wit and lyricism.

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