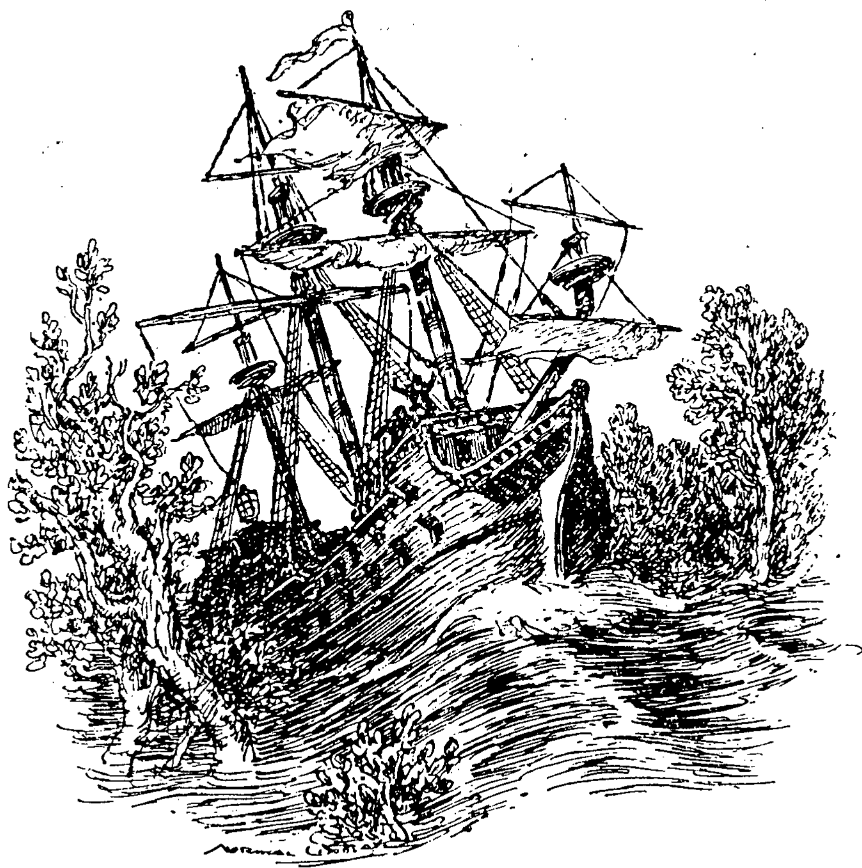
NOEL MACAINSH: IMPRESSIONISM IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE



Norman Lindsay: Illustration to Douglas Stewart's *The Garden of Ships.*

NOEL MACAINSH

IMPRESSIONISM IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

The concept of Impressionism has long been important in Australian painting. The Heidelberg School, the Impressionist works of Condor, Roberts, Buvelot, Ashton, Stretton, Gruner, Heysen, to give but a sample of outstanding names, are characteristic of one of the richest periods of Australian art-history. The published works of art-critics, such as Bernard Smith, James Gleeson, Alan McCulloch, have made us so familiar with the nature and origin of Australian Impressionism that virtually every educated Australian has some knowledge of this period.

This situation stands in marked contrast to the status of Impressionism as a concept in Australian literature. Indeed, it appears to be a common belief in Australia that Impressionism simply characterises a style of painting and, at best, can have only a metaphorical application to literature; and this despite the fact that critics in Europe, the home of Impressionism, have always recognised Impressionism as a broad and unified cultural phenomenon, wherein painting is but a part. In failing to give Impressionism its due status in Australian literature, we are depriving ourselves of a useful concept by means of which we can grasp the basic unity and surface diversity of a period of our literature that is just as rich in its own way as the period of Australian painting characterised by this name.

The matter of appending labels to complex phenomena is a vexed one. However, organised knowledge, which involves classification and description, requires that categories be determined even at the inevitable cost of qualification. Scholars have agreed more or less on terms characterising earlier periods of literature, but in the case of modern literature, agreement is not so ready. As René Wellek has remarked of European literature, "there is, however, far less agreement as to what term should be applied to the literature that followed the end of the dominance of realism in the 1880's and 1890's."[1] He himself prefers the term "symbolism." Another author, Clive Scott, contributing to the Penguin volume on Modernism, describes the general

features of early modern literature and states that "among the names, three stand out: Symbolism, Impressionism and Decadence. Their overall importance for our century is unquestioned; what they do leave is a continuing controversy about priorities."[2] The present writer is of the view that the particular characteristics of Australian literature, whether due in part to the influence of sunlight and landscape, or to the persuasive influence of artists such as Norman Lindsay, warrant consideration of the term Impressionism as a useful classification of a broad range of phenomena characterising the rise of literary modernism in Australia.

It is true of course that Impressionism has received notice by Australian literary critics. Max Harris, for instance, has said that Kenneth Slessor "was fascinated by . . . the devices of impressionist writing,"[3] and other critics have applied the term in passing. But this notice is marginal; the full force and application of the concept in describing a major phase of Australian writing is absent, which stands in marked contrast to the concepts of Romanticism, Naturalism, Realism, Nationalism, or even Utopianism and Vitalism. A part of the reason for this neglect of Impressionism may well be that its assumptions and attitudes have been so present, so all-pervasive, that we have hardly had time to stand back and see the forest clearly, instead of its various clumps, thickets and individual luxuriations. Also, certain impressionist assumptions and attitudes have so conflicted with our self-image, or at least with the dominant stereotypes of our literary perception, that we have not wanted to recognise them, either censoring them entirely from our view, or relegating their perception to a margin.

Impressionism has been called the last unified world-style of the West.[4] It takes its name and rise from Claude Monet's picture *L'impression*, exhibited in 1874 in Paris. Of the impressionist vision, it has been said that "atomization of the world of the mind and of matter, relativism and subjectivisim characterise the impressionist synthetic vision of the world."[5] The unity of light, meaning and mood is built up by specific charges of energy, fragments, moments, images, by "the red globes of light, the liquor-green,/the pulsing arrows and the running fire" (Slessor).[6] The emphasis is on sensory experience, movement, fleetingness and flux. Qualities tend to become disengaged from

their objects: a "chime" floats down from something out of sight, "mummied waves" are kept in a chest (Slessor); a lad is "goaded by the green" or asks "with beauty of the blue" (Neilson); a dance is pursued beyond its performance (Fitzgerald), and so on. Professor A.R. Chisholm writes that in John Shaw Neilson he finds "a perfect exemplification of Mallarmé's dictum that the poet has to paint not the thing, but the effect that it produces."[7] In this approach, language tends to become an act of perceiving and experiencing, rather than a description of activity, a confronting of reality with what Judith Wright, referring to Neilson, has called "the unshielded eye."[8] Hence the emphasis on the present tense, and on remembering as a recovery of the immediacy of the present tense of the past. In such a vision, of all as flux, truth is relative; hence the paganism, immanentism or nihilism of this phase of Australian literature. Painting led the way, though literature soon followed. It is noted that a lexicon of world-literature[9] gives Jens Peter Jacobsen's *Mogens* (1872) and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*, 1924) as suggested terminal points of Impressionist literature. It might be mentioned in passing that Henry Handel Richardson was much influenced by Jacobsen, in whose *Niels Lyhne* she found "a shock of recognition."[10] Jacobsen was a catalyst to her writing career.

Though the last generally valid European art-style to dominate all the arts, Impressionism was a stylistically complex phenomenon. In certain respects it was a progressive development from Naturalism, where the naturalistic emphasis on the concrete particular was taken further to an emphasis on the momentary and unique; Impressionism is truer to sensory experience. However, in so far as sensory experience becomes more divorced from concept, that is, loses its orientation on the hitherto unifying view of consciousness, Naturalism is left behind.

It would be unjustified to think that an aversion to Naturalism in Australia was solely a matter of artistic style, for the remarks of Norman Lindsay, Hugh McCrae and Kenneth Slessor, to name but a few, leave no doubt that it is the association of Naturalism with the mundane world of science, technology and mass working-class struggles, and the elevation of these concerns above questions of aesthetic value, that most excited

their antipathy. Norman Lindsay regarded the interference of Naturalism in modern art as "simply devastating."[11] This antipathy he shared with Frederich Nietzsche, who, as Judith Wright and others have contended, has had a significant influence on Australian writing.

Kenneth Slessor has remarked that "the powerful spell which Lionel Lindsay and Norman Lindsay cast around them, even as young men, swept over Hugh McCrae when he too was a young man."[12] And it is perhaps in Hugh McCrae's *Satyrs and Sunlight* (1909) that we find the clearest example of a virtual exclusion of the naturalist use of concept, in favour of immediate sense-experience, the supremacy of the moment over the syntheses of thought. Slessor implies this quality when he describes McCrae's poetry as "projectiles of lusty, leaping, dancing, heel-kicking and completely irrepressible raw poetry," [13] as "like the passage of a flight of fiery parakeets." [14] Lionel Lindsay warns us "not to be led astray by the dress of these poems – Greek chlamys or English Lincoln-green are of no moment; the spirit that animates them is that of the early twentieth century."[15] It is this "raw" poetry, the emphasis on immediacy in McCrae, that works against a concept, or, as Slessor has it, "the flood of colour and music and technical brilliance which makes his poems unique as well as that lack of coherent structure, or relationship between whole and part."[16] Language, as we know from Piaget and others, mediates between image and concept; it cannot exist at one pole only. Impressionism in literature tends to exalt the image at the expense of abstraction, regarding this latter as an evil; hence the brightness and clarity of image in McCrae, Slessor and others, often accompanied by paucity and ambiguity of thought. Slessor has told us that "there is no place for abstraction in this demand for the image . . . Lindsay's doctrine insists on the concrete image, and it is not without significance that most of the Australian poets whom he may be considered to have influenced show the same abhorrence of abstraction."[17] Such extreme emphasis is tantamount to a violation of language; it is a regression which, despite brilliance and immediacy, impairs communication.

The Impressionist constructs his object from the raw data of the senses, resorts to unconscious psychic mechanisms, and,

in part, gives us raw material of experience that at times seems more remote from customary reality than conceptually processed sense-data. The implication is that Impressionism is less illusionary than Naturalism, since it gives us elements of experience of the whole, instead of the whole itself. The early poetry of Kenneth Slessor, dominated by the Lindsay-inspired demand for the concrete image, exemplifies this procedure, where, as one critic writes, "at its worst, his poetry is a succession of images with little connection other than that of a robustious animalism."[18]

Here, it would be tempting to devote considerable space not only to the poetry of Slessor but also to that of John Shaw Neilson. Professor A.R. Chisholm has characterised Neilson as a symbolist, but this by no means excludes us from seeing these lovely light- and colour-filled poems as supreme instances of the Impressionist mode. They bring to mind Rilke's description of Impressionism as "a pantheism of light." Neilson writes:

> The schoolgirls hastening through the light
> Touch the unknowable Divine.
>
> "Schoolgirls Hastening"

And elsewhere he writes:

> I am assailed by colours
> By night, by day
> In a mad boat they would take me
> Red miles away.
>
> "The Scent O' the Lover"

His "symbolism" is surely a quality brought to his work by the reader, an incidental response generated by the presentation of a "raw" poetry, which, like any entry into strange territory, provokes interpretative effort by the percipient. Judith Wright expresses this by saying that "the light fell on him unfiltered,"[19] that is, he did not, as with Naturalism, bring a concept to bear on the selection and ordering of his experience. Or, to quote Judith Wright again, "he was free to accept his perceptions and use them without betraying their immediacy."[20] She cites some of Neilson's imagery, his lizard "as green as the light on a salad," and suggests that this simile springs "straight from a perception as unclouded and unselfconscious as a child's picture."[21] One could argue, likewise, that some of Kenneth Slessor's "grotesqueries" spring from an accurate, unmediated

"Impressionist" response.

Unlike Impressionism, Naturalism has long been recognised as a dominant mode in Australian literature; its boundaries with Impressionism, however, are fluid; they are not to be sharply demarcated either in tone or in the concept. It is interesting to look further afield and note that with the French writers, Flaubert, Gautier, the Goncourts, for example, all of whom were studied by Henry Handel Richardson in her formative period, the naturalist method was pursued in association with a rationalist social criticism, but that in the course of time, and particularly after the events of 1871 in France, the attitude of such writers to literature became increasingly "aesthetic," while their politics, in the face of increasing industrialisation and mass organisation became more conservative. An atmosphere of crisis led to a renewal of idealistic and mystical tendencies and called forth a movement of spiritual belief as a reaction against the prevailing pessimism. Only in the later course of this development did Impressionism lose its connection with Naturalism and transform itself, in literature, into a new form of romanticism. The grosser aspect of this was to be found of course in Spiritualism, a movement not yet adequately surveyed in its influence on Australian writers. Such a survey could well include Henry Handel Richardson, Norman Lindsay, Christopher Brennan, Mrs Campbell Praed, and others. On a more mundane level than Spiritualism, the striving of Impressionism to hold the passing moment, its yielding to the mood of the moment, its aim of living fully in the present moment, is the consequence of an anti-bourgeois world-view, a revolt against the routine and discipline of bourgeois life.

In the case of Henry Handel Richardson, whose formative period as a writer was spent in Europe, we find the transition from Naturalism to Impressionism particularly well illustrated. Australian critics generally regard Richardson's work as naturalistic, but are clearly uneasy about this; Vincent Buckley, for instance, writes of "surface naturalism," and Dorothy Green finds it necessary to define and defend the kind of "Naturalism" she finds in Richardson's work. The present writer has elsewhere argued for an Impressionist view of Richardson's work generally.[22] Already in *Maurice Guest,* particularly through the commentaries of Heinz Krafft (whose

name surely alludes to the sexologist Krafft-Ebing rather than to *Kraft* 'force,' as commonly supposed), we find the whole Impressionist milieu of Europe invoked, and later we find Richard Mahony going to the heart of Richardson's work when he says "*panta rei* is the enternal truth. *Semper idem* the lie we long to see confirmed."[23] Here, succinctly, is the Impressionist response.

As in Europe, we find in Australia a literary reaction against the dominant naturalist mode, and this from rather similar reasons: just as European Naturalism was found there to be indelicate, indecent, the expression of a flat, materialistic world-view, the vehicle of a crude heavily laid-on propaganda, a collection of tedious, arid banalities, so in Australia there was a reaction against the crudities, aridities and simplistic life-attitudes and politics of the "bush" ballad and story writers. William Hay, for one, had already lamented that "our literature . . . had slumped into fifth-rate tales of the paddock and stockyard variety."[24] And much later on, A.D. Hope, looking in retrospect at the "little Renascence" attempted by the Lindsay-associated writers in Sydney of the twenties, refers to the "commendable wish to get away from the stock-rail and bowyangs school, the great mateship picnic, and the literary canons of Clancy's Thumbnail Dipped in Tar. They wanted Australian writing to re-enter the European tradition of letters. . . ."[25] Despite the great variation in detail, there came about in Australia, as in Europe, a movement in literature that was concerned to defend the "higher" interests of mankind, the creative life, spiritual values, against the dominant literary style of the times. The mysteries and depths of the soul, the power of the irrational and unconscious aspect of life were contemplated; Symbolism gained notice; Baudelaire, Mallarmé, the Pre-Raphaelites, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Aestheticism, all came into view and asserted their influence here.

That *panta rei*, rather than *semper idem*, is the "eternal truth" was also emphasized by developments in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the second industrial revolution, when the refinement of modern technology brought an hitherto unheard of increase in the tempo of life, a new dynamic feeling that found expression in Impressionism. Associated with this was the striking phenomenon of the development of centres of

culture into cities in the modern sense. It is cities that provide the milieu in which the new style can flourish. Impressionism is a city art, discovering not only the city as landscape, and bringing painting from the country to the city, but seeing the world through city eyes and reacting to impressions with the tense nerves of modern, technical man. Impressionism is a city style because it depicts, like Slessor's "William Street" or "Last Trams," the changeability, the nervous rhythm, the sudden, sharp but just as quickly eliminated impressions of city life. Precisely because of this, it signifies a huge expansion of sensory awareness, a newly sharpened sensibility, a new sensitivity of the nerves. Modern man, who transforms all being into movement and change, for whom the experience of the world is more and more a time-experience, is the product of this development.

In Australia, the true role of the city in our literature is only now beginning to be explored. Alan Frost,[26] for example, examines some sixteen recent works of "historiography of our imaginative evolution," and thinks that "the received view of our imaginative evolution has finally the reality of a mythic, rather than a historical account."[27] He queries the dominance of the "bush" ethos in our cultural perspective, and cites W.G. Goppell's *Australia in Figures* to show that "a majority of our people has always inhabited the major cities." Judith Woodward points out that by 1891, two-thirds of the Australian population lived in cities and towns, and goes on to argue that the literature of the late nineteenth century in Australia was predominantly city-influenced, and that "in essence the whole 'bush myth' built up in most of late nineteenth century literature could be said to be in large part the literary response of a predominantly urban society to itself – the outcome of the urban conditioning of Australian cities at this time."[28]

It may seem striking that the big city with its conglomeration and intercourse of people should have produced an art rooted in intimacy and the feeling of individual difference and loneliness. However, it is well known that nothing is so inwardly isolating as the close proximity of far too many people, and nowhere does one feel so alone and abandoned as in a large crowd of strangers. The basic feeling that accompanies life in such surroundings, the feeling of, on the one hand, being

alone and unnoticed, and, on the other hand, the impression of hurrying traffic, of incessant movement, of constant change, produces the Impressionist feeling for life, combining the subtlest moods and atmospheres with rapid change of sensations. Norman Lindsay, for instance, recalls that in 1901 when Lindsay himself was 21 years of age, Sydney was a sailors' town, a forest of masts in the harbour, a cosmopolitan throng on the shore, full of constantly changing sounds and sights.[29] And it may be noted that Louis Stone's novel set in Sydney, *Jonah* (1911), has been aptly described by Dorothy Green as a "Cinematic Novel,"[30] because of its rapid succession of scenes reflecting the quality of life in the town. Also, Professor Wilkes has said of Christina Stead's description of Sydney, in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), that "despite the semblance of naturalism, the technique is more that of 'collage.' "[31] And Kenneth Slessor's 1952 "Portrait of Sydney" is also a kaleidoscopic succession of ever-proliferating details. Even the harbour is on the move:

> The character and the life of Sydney are shaped continually and imperceptibly by the fingers of the Harbour, groping across the piers and jetties, clutching deeply into the hills, the water dyed a whole paint-box's armoury of colour with every breath of air, every shift of light or shade, according to the tide, the clock, the weather and the state of the moon. The water is like silk, like pewter, like blood, like a leopard's skin, and occasionally merely like water. Its pigments run into themselves, from amber and aquamarine through cobalt to the deep and tranquil molasses of a summer midnight. Sometimes it dances with flakes of fire, sometimes it is blank and anonymous with fog, sometimes it shouts as joyously as a mirror. Flights and volleys of yachts drift over it continuously, scattered like the fragments of a white flower, yet forming in the end into the helter-skelter pattern of a race.[32]

Here it might be remarked parenthetically that the painter Monet, from whom Impressionism takes its name, is said to have been drawn to the sea at Antibes by the fact that water acted as a prism and broke light up into its primary colours.

Australian poetry of the early modern period is dominated

by the sense of movement, over duration and endurance, the feeling that every phenomenon is a fleeting and unique constellation, an onward gliding wave of the stream, into which one never steps twice. This feeling is of the essence of Impressionism. The impressionist method predominantly consists of using all its artistic resources to express this Heracleitean world-feeling and to show that reality is not a static state of being but a becoming, a perpetual happening. The typical impressionist motif concerns the presentation of a moment, a brief perception of balance in the play of opposing forces. R.D. Fitzgerald's poetry, for instance, affords us a repeated contrasting of the evanescent and the enduring; he meditates on the paradoxical permanence of change, on the fragile swallow that outlasts the cliff in which it builds, or Pavlova's dance, ephemeral but repeated in recollection or re-enactment. With Kenneth Slessor, there is the chill vision of an enduring flux, in which all creatures are consumed, the paradox of the "granite flow,/ eternal, changeless flux of humanity" ("Heine in Paris").[33]

Earlier, with Christopher Brennan, we find that the evolutionary flux bears us on an incessant "wandering," whether we will or not. William Baylebridge too wrote his poetry out of this same world view. Hugh McCrae, with his celebration of the moment, John Shaw Nielson with his sense of the hurrying seasons, Judith Wright with her Heracleitean world-fire,[34] could all be examined on these lines. Many other writers might be added to this list. Slessor's "Train Journey" and A.D. Hope's "Observation Car" come to mind as images of the predetermined direction and dominance of change, of the poet's passivity in the face of this change, and of his distaste for the new world through which he is borne. The impressionist attitude is highly pervasive.

Such a world, whose phenomena undergo constant change through innumerable, imperceptible transitions, produces the impression of a continuum in which everything flows together and in which there are no differences other than the various attitudes and viewpoints of the spectator. An art that is appropriate to such a world will not only emphasise the momentary and transitory nature of phenomena, will not simply see Man as the measure of all things, but will seek criteria of truth in the individual here and now; the truth of the moment will usurp

every other truth; chance will appear to be the principle of all being. As R.D. Fitzgerald puts it:

> Life, toss up your florin;
> "Heads", I call.
> Regret be far and foreign
> whichever fall,
> whether for losing or winning
> the stake scarce to be won –
> it's a fine flash of silver, spinning
> in the gay sun.[35]

This primacy of the moment, of change and chance, means aesthetically, the dominance of a feeling, a mood, over life; that is, the prevalence of a sense of authentic relationship to things apart from their changeability. Christopher Brennan is explicit on the importance of "mood": "Imagination . . . deals directly with the living spiritual unity of 'mood', to which it gives the only possible expression. When you can extract from the expressed poem any residue of 'idea' or the like, you may be sure either that you have not properly read the poem (which is most probable) or that the poem contains unpoetic elements."[36] And elsewhere, it is the moods of "joy," "vitality," "emotion," "beauty and passion," such as described in Vincent Buckley's well-known essay on "Utopianism and Vitalism,"[37] that are emphasized as the pre-eminently desirable qualities of art, based on a personal sense of identity with a higher impulse that goes beyond the struggle "for existence."[38] At the same time, this mood expresses a basically passive attitude to life, a coming to terms with one's role as spectator, a standpoint of keeping one's distance, of waiting, of being non-engaged – in short, the aesthetic attitude. Impressionism forms the high point of aesthetic culture and signifies the extreme consequence of the romantic disinclination for a practical, active life.

One could point here to numerous literary lives lived more or less miserably under the contradictory imperatives of being free as a bird and of procuring an income, of compromising with the real world while believing in one's heart in an aesthetic that disdains such a world. Perhaps Kenneth Slessor's description of Norman Lindsay's doctrine will suffice as a model of such attitudes. He describes it as

> a severe, uncompromising and even rather chillingly Olympian doctrine which has nothing to do, except scornfully, with sociology, political economy, humanitarianism, demagogy, jurisprudence, dialectics, theology, 'social consciousness', scientific inquiry, or any of the practical aspects of ordering and regulating human existence.[39]

When Norman Lindsay's "Curate in Bohemia" asks, at the end of the novel of the same name, what he should do for a living, after laying down his "dog-collar,'" he is advised not to worry about making a living, just to "go in for Art." And Professor Wilkes has remarked of Hugh McCrae that "he seemed almost to conform to the storybook conception of the poet, quite incapable of understanding such things as 'stock exchanges and arbitration courts, booms and depressions', and instead finding his delight in 'things of no importance whatever – the curl of a leaf, the call of a bird, the play of sunlight on water.'"[40]

Whatever may have been the activities pursued outside their literary works, Richardson, Brennan, Slessor, Martin Boyd, Norman Lindsay, to name but a few leading examples, exhibit an essential social passivity in their writings; shocking the bourgeois, by high jinks, social and sexual improprieties, the grotesque, was about as far as it would go. The essential position of each of these writers was politically conservative. Even William Baylebridge, who entertained an imperialist vision of a changed world, could never take a step towards it outside of his own writings. He was a very shy imperialist.

The aesthetic world-view of Impressionism also brought with it a widespread incest of art; artists create works for artists; art-works and the art-experience become subjects of art. Nature untouched by culture loses its aesthetic appeal, and the ideal of naturalness is replaced by the ideal of art. Compared with earlier writers, particularly Harpur and Kendall, major Australian poets, from Brennan onwards, pay little attention to landscape as such. In McCrae and Slessor, it has a décor-like quality. Even Shaw Neilson works his delicate perceptions of Nature into an intimate, Pre-Raphaelite language of love, flowers, schoolgirls, the hastening seasons of life, and "Stony Town", which Judith Wright describes as "a city in the heart," in which Neilson's physical circumstances forced him to spend his life.[41]

In painting, we are of course familiar with the need to stand back from the impressionist picture-surface, so that the elements, the flecks, spots, can suggest to us the totality of the objects depicted. This distancing is characteristic, and is associated with the typical Impressionist treatment of all subjects as though they were landscapes, spectacles, portraits; there is a reduction of the heroic element,[42] and an increase in the choice of "appropriate" subjects, that is, "art" subjects, the art-experience itself, an incestuousness of art for artists.

This experience is sometimes veiled, for example in Kenneth Slessor, where the image of the artist recording in his almost sealed-off room, as with his Albrecht Dürer in the poem "Nuremberg," is repeated in a variety of contexts; for instance, Captain Dobbin recording in his villa, the poet as recording passenger in "Train Journey," and the recording meditator of "Five Bells." The artist recording in his chamber is the central stance of Slessor. For such an attitude, it seems that the civilised world is an artist's studio, and the best art-connossieurs are the artists themselves. The assumption is that in order to appreciate art, one must have devoted one's life to art, that is, be practising an art. Douglas Stewart's poem, "The Pictures," is a fine statement of this theme:

These were the people high and far and lonely;
Laughed, loved and lived indeed; and yet were bidden
Walk outside life, care nothing, so that only
They might distil from the visible world its hidden
Order and grace and clarity. As they have done
Here in their pictures cool as the light of the moon.

Woman and flower and wave, gleaming and shadowy,
Seen for the first time in their full reality
They burn now in the moonlight's soft intensity
Like ghosts on the wall: that light is from eternity. . . .[43]

This enthusiasm for the artificiality of culture is a form of romantic escapism. One chooses the artificial, fictive life, because reality can never be so beautiful as the illusion and because every contact with reality, every attempt to realise dreams and wishes must lead to their depravation. However, in fleeing from social reality, one now flees, not to Nature, as did Harpur, Kendall and others, but to a higher, sublimated, artificial world, to the world of Harlequin and Columbine, to

nymphs and satyrs, to European culture, to what Max Harris has called, in the case of Slessor, a preoccupation with "animating the past to give it a more persuasive reality than the present."[44] As T. Inglis Moore has said of Slessor, "love and beauty are exalted in a cosmopolitan universe where Slessor dreams with Heine in Paris, sees Dürer graving at intaglios in Nuremberg, paints the courts of Kublai Khan, drinks of nescience with Lao-Tzu, and renders the music of Wagner and Beethoven, Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. It is an exotic world. . . . "[45] The spiritual and imaginary forms always stand above the natural, the practical.

The aesthetic hedonism in Europe of the 1880's, frequently termed "decadence," was associated with features that were not necessarily to be found with aestheticism, namely, with a mood of cultural decline and crisis, the consciousness of being in the "late-phase," of standing at the end of a civilisation. With this feeling of decadence went a sympathy with the old, weary, over-refined cultures, with Hellenism, the late-phase of Rome, with Rococo, and with the "impressionistic" old-age style of the great masters. Earlier periods had known the feeling of standing before a turning point in cultural history, but now the concept of an old and tired Europe, of over-cultivation and degeneration, was associated with the idea of a spiritual elite. P. R. Stephensen, who had at first seen Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* as but a symptom of European and English defeatism, subsequently came to take this work more seriously and to see England as decadent, necessitating more than ever a local, Australian effort at salvation. He was a staunch advocate of the Queenslander William Baylebridge. He exhorted Australians to "read Baylebridge's splendidly-titled work, *This Vital Flesh* – and realise that Australia's national philosophy is entirely Antipodean to that of England-in-decline."[46] It was Baylebridge, who, with Spenglerian gloom, saw "something sinister" emerging, threatening "man's earth and works." He intuited a crisis, a possible annihilation of the spirit of man, and demanded that "all who value that spirit must strike now the strongest blow for it that their powers permit."[47] Much of this feeling and attitude can be found in Lindsay, Slessor, and McCrae. O'Dowd certainly has it, as does A.D. Hope; his poem "Pyramis – Or the House of Ascent" invokes the genius-cult,

building art-works in the desert of modern, normal living. Hope's poem, "Australia," likewise has an elitist and *fin-de-siècle* air about it.

The problem of decadence, this "mildew of the spirit," looms large, for example, in the novels of Martin Boyd, born in Lucerne in 1893. The last heirs of rich families, Boyd's characters lead parasitic, eccentric existences through Italy or France, in quest of inner support. They suffer from a laming indecisiveness, from eternal self-analysis, from a morbid aestheticism. Stephen, in *Lucinda Brayford*, reacts neurotically and artificially to every kind of impression. Boyd's characters preach a relativity of all values, paired with cynicism. The role of chance is repeatedly coupled with grotesque situations in which good may spring from evil. The *fin-de-siècle* sense of the morbid in art finds expression in a vague homosexuality, as in Paul, in *Lucinda Brayford*, whose artistic sensibility is developed far beyond the average; or in the character of Dominic, in *A Difficult Young Man*, an engaging mixture of perverse sadism, sick ambition and human warmth. Socially, politically, Boyd's sympathies are with the Australian upper classes. Here, one is reminded of Stephensen's remarks in "The Foundations of Culture in Australia":

> Throughout the nineteenth century in Australia, from the earliest writers, whether they were convict gentlemen or military gentlemen, or black sheep sent out to the colonies with a remittance, or merely colonial gentlemen dabbling in 'letters,' there was a pronounced note in 'Australian' literature of regret at the colonial lack of culture. These sentimental exiles, no less than Professor Cowling, regretted the lack of castles and ruins here, regretted that Australia was not like England. Their state of mind, nostalgia for the homeland, is common to all exiles. In Australia, owing frequently to the circumstances of the exile, nostalgia took an acute form.[48]

Associated with the aesthetic attitude of the Impressionist writer is also a conception of love essentially expressive of a puberty-psychology, spiced with guilt, a sense of sin. This expresses itself in two forms of female, namely, in the form of the delicate child-woman, an etherial, "pure" creature, who may die young and leave idealised memories, or as the *femme*

fatale who fascinates and torments the poet. The former is particularly well represented in the poetry of John Shaw Neilson. His "little white girl so pale and pretty," "almost a woman, half awake" who takes "the colour that the angels wear," is matched by similar figures in the immediate successors to the Pre-Raphaelites in England. Oscar Wilde's "Requiescat" may suffice as an example:

> Tread lightly, she is near,
> Under the snow.
> Speak gently, she can hear
> The daisies grow. . . .
>
> Lily-white, white as snow,
> She hardly knew
> She was a woman, so
> Sweetly she grew. . . .

Also, Brennan's Novalis-like transfiguration of his fifteen year-old fiancée, left behind in Germany, finds precursors in Ruskin, Ernest Dowson and James Thompson. Thompson, whose beloved, Mathilda Weller, died at fourteen years of age, also cultivated a literary relationship to Novalis. Verlaine, whom Brennan describes as turning "to the simple joys of true love," married his "child wife," as Verlaine himself called her in English, and lived, like Brennan, to see the end of his idyll. A duel is said to have been fought with plates across the dinner-table. It is in Brennan, also, that we find the *femme fatale*, Lilith, in whom all evil lies. Another variant of this figure is to be found in A.D. Hope, where various versions of woman as dragon are presented, who either simply lets the poet "slide weakly out of her and lie/like a wet worm upon the boards,"[49] or sees "with joy his body torn apart."[50] Another variant is the prostitute, the bold, saucy lass who rebels against bourgeois morals and the family. She is sensed as a kindred spirit not least because, as prostitute, she observed at close hand the passions of others while remaining inwardly alone, cold, non-participant, an outsider, like the writer himself. Or, as a prostitute herself rather sharply puts it:

> The woman as whore is a literary archetype . . . insisted on by the men who create our high culture. It is difficult not to find the literary man's impressions of prostitution particularly annoying. . . . The glori-

> fication of the golden-hearted whore is a cheap and easy stunt: in identifying with her the poet feeds his self-pity, in condescending to her he congratulates himself on his humanity.[51]

This type of woman, rarely sensed as a unique person in her own right, abounds in the works of Lindsay, Slessor, Hope, McCrae, and others. The lack of specific location in the real world indicates the source of these types of women in the poet's own psyche. These subjective deviations from actuality are parallel in their sexual infantilism to the other regressive, distancing features of impressionist literature. That these versions of sexuality have found, and still find, favourable echo from a public, suggests a correspondence with a repressive, puritanical social code. One notes here also the presence of masochistic and sadistic features, as well as the theme of death. It would be interesting to follow the matter further.

Essentially, Impressionism is not a radical, plebian movement that could alienate a bourgeois public; rather, it is an elevated, even aristocratic style, elegant and rich, nervous and sensitive, sensual and hedonistic, responsive to luxuries and rarities, to strictly personal experiences, to experiences of loneliness, and separation. It is chiefly the product of writers who come from modest circumstances with restricted education, and who concern themselves far less with intellectual and aesthetic problems than artists of an earlier generation. Its sensualism and hedonism, its programme of enjoying life and enthusing about it, of making an art-work out of one's life and making an unforgettable and irreplaceable experience out of every hour of this life, at times acquired even a character of amoralism and enmity of society. This anti-philistinism directed itself, not against capitalism, but against the enemies of art. The attitude of *épater le bourgeois* that we find in the various artists associated with the Lindsays, although more widely spread than this, has affinities, less with Bohemianism as commonly thought of, that is with the Left Bank variety, than with that kind of dandyism, which, in England, is characterised by a union of Mayfair and Bohemia. In Australia, as the writings of L.E. Fredman,[52] Jack Lindsay[53] and others show, we do not find Bohemianism in the pure form, as in France, nor do we find quite the withdrawn ivory-tower existence of a Mallarmé. In the

dandy, the upwardly declassed Bohemian, such as to be found in the novels of Martin Boyd, we find not only protest against the triviality and routine of the middle classes, but protest against the levelling tendencies of democracy. This dandyism, the gentleman who is an artist, represents the last heroism, the last stance of pride, self-discipline and taste in an age of decadence, of decline into the banal world of the masses. This stance of the artist implies an inner superiority and independence, a freedom from expedience, from practical necessity. The "jewelled style," the "exquisite," the goldsmith's style in words, the aestheticism of Pater, Ruskin, Morris, within the general Impressionist movement, bring an attitude of Epicureanism, of savouring the beautiful moments in the hurrying stream of time. Victor Daley, Hugh McCrae and Kenneth Slessor provide perhaps the best examples here. This attitude is of course associated with the previously mentioned interest in the exotic, and it suggests that, as well as the Tartary of McCrae and Slessor, the culture of the Australian aboriginal may also have been approached from an Impressionist perspective, in the Jindyworobak movement, as another relief from developments in Western civilisation. It is noted that Flexmore Hudson[54] who was an exponent of aboriginal culture in the Jindyworobak movement, preserved a great respect for Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher of European "decadence."

One of the purest expressions of Impressionist thought is to be found in the philosophy of Henri Bergson, particularly in his interpretation of time, the very heart-element of Impressionism. The uniqueness of the moment which had never been before and which would never be repeated was the basic experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is a central concern in Brennan, Baylebridge, Fitzgerald, Slessor, Nielson, Judith Wright, and even A.D. Hope, to name but a few outstanding writers. Meditations on time are a central concern of Impressionism in Australian literature. In response to, in defence against the experience of the accelerated stream of all-devouring time, the principle of time was seen by Bergson not as that in which all ideas and ideals, all life and spirit loses its worth, but rather as the form in which we can regain our spiritual being from the ever-dying forms of matter; through time we become what we are; every moment adds to us. The

way to win this experience of being is to use the moment, now, for recollection, to recover, like Bergson's fellow countryman, Marcel Proust, the present tense of the past; art is the form of our perspective on the past; as with Slessor, art is the self-consoling and self-deception of someone buried alive. When Slessor turned round and looked at his own age, he confessed that he was

> tired of life's new-fashioned plan,
> I long to be barbarian.
> I'm sick of modern man, I wish
> You were still living Kublai-Khan.
>
> "Marco Polo"

Or when he looked to see what was ahead for Joe Lynch, it was

> The Nothing that is neither long nor short.
>
> "Five Bells"

The role of Bergson's thought and Pragmatism in Australian poetry has been examined by the present author elsewhere;[55] they are integral to Impressionism. The common theme of all the heterogenous philosophical directions around the turn of the century was that in some way "the world was a fiction." Pragmatism, whatever form it took, whether via Nietzsche, Bergson, F.C.S. Schiller, Shaw or Whitehead, appealed because of its emphasis on an extra-rational, intuitive, direct way to reconstruct reality. Harry Heseltine has written of Kenneth Slessor, that "impervious to human need, Slessor's physical world is also totally resistant to time. The separate pieces of his *oeuvre* are characteristically set in the absolute present, both past and future almost unknowable."[56] Heseltine sees this as Slessor's "major contribution to the advancement of our verse."[57] But other commentators, such as Clive Scott, see this central tendency of Impressionism as a cul-de-sac, a windowless subjectivity endangering all meaning, leading to a sense of oppression by the world. Scott, referring to the dominance of the present tense, writes of the poet "who surrenders himself to a tense that guarantees nothing, neither a direction, a meaning, nor indeed an ending."[58] One response to this problem it that the irony, "as the only way to maintain the relativistic view without a compromise, in good faith, namely, the countering of the variable transmissions from the world with one's own

variability."[59] The prevalence of irony in modern Australian poetry is examined by Chris Wallace-Crabbe, in his "The Habit of Irony? Australian Poets of the Fifties."[60]

It is hardly possible here to indicate the wealth and variety of Impressionist culture in Australian literature. For many of us today, the assumptions of this culture still seem natural. It is not so long since Slessor died, and R.D. Fitzgerald is still writing, as are Judith Wright and Douglas Stewart. As with Australian Impressionist painting, some of the most luminous, memorable works of our literature belong to a period and style that is only now beginning to reveal to us its contours, like a great light-filled ship that slowly recedes from the wharf whereon a short time before we stood and conversed with its passengers. It recedes into that Time which was its heartfelt concern.

NOTES

1. Rene Wellek, "The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History," in his *Discriminations: Further Concepts in Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p.91.

2. Clive Scott, "Symbolism, Decadence and Impressionism," in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.206.

3. Max Harris, *Kenneth Slessor*, Australian Writers and their Work (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.41.

4. Scott, p.206.

5. Scott, p.225.

[6] Kenneth Slessor, *Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), p.99.

[7] *The Poems of Shaw Neilson,* ed. A.R. Chisolm (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), p.16.

[8] Judith Wright, "The Unshielded Eye: The Paradox of Shaw Neilson," *Quadrant,* 3, No.4 (Spring 1959), pp. 61-75, reprinted in *Australian Literary Criticism,* ed. Grahame Johnston (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.54-68.

[9] H. Pongs, *Das kleine Lexikon der Weltliteratur* (Stuttgart: Union Verlag, 1963), p.843.

[10] Noel Macainsh, "The Shock of Recognition – Henry Handel Richardson and J.P. Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne,*" *Southerly*, 36, No.1 (1976), pp.99-111.

[11] Norman Lindsay, *Creative Effort: An Essay in Affirmation* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1924), p.83.

[12] Kenneth Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Hugh McCrae," *Southerly*, 17, No.3 (1956), reprinted in *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor,* ed. A.K. Thomson (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1968), p.173.

[13] Slessor, "Australian Poetry," p.174.

[14] Slessor, "Australian Poetry," p.176.

[15] As quoted by Slessor, "Australian Poetry." p.176.

[16] Slessor, "Australian Poetry," p.178.

[17] Kenneth Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Noman Lindsay," *Southerly*, 16, No.2 (1955), reprinted in *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor,* ed. A.K. Thomson, pp.168-69.

[18] A.C.W. Mitchell, "Kenneth Slessor and the Grotesque," *Australian Literary Studies,* 1, No.4 (December 1964), p.245.

[19] Wright, rpt. in Johnston, p.57.

[20] Wright, rpt. in Johnston, p.57.

[21] Wright, rpt. in Johnston, p.56.

[22] Macainsh, pp.105 ff.

[23] Henry Handel Richardson, *The Way Home* (1925; rpt. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1971), p.162.

[24] F. Earle Hooper, "A Memoir," *Southerly*, 7, No.3 (1946), p.136.

[25] A.D. Hope, "Slessor Twenty Years After," *The Bulletin*, 1 June 1963, reprinted in *Critical Essays on Kenneth Slessor,* ed. A.K. Thomson, p.128.

[26] Alan Frost, "What Created, What Perceived? Early Responses to New South Wales," *Australian Literary Studies,* 7, No.2 (October 1975), pp.185-205.

[27] Frost, p.187.

[28] Judith M. Woodward, "Urban Influence on Australian Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Australian Literary Studies,* 7, No.2 (October 1975), p.119.

[29] Norman Lindsay, *Bohemians of the Bulletin* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), p.1.

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[31] G.A. Wilkes, *Australian Literature: A Conspectus* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969), p.100.

[32] Kenneth Slessor, *Bread and Wine* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970), pp.5-6.

[33] Slessor, *Poems*, p.13.

[34] Shirley Walker, "Herakleitean Elements in the Poetry of Judith Wright," *Southerly*, 35. No.2 (1975), pp.183-91.

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[38] Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Norman Lindsay, " rpt, in Thomson, p.165.

[39] Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Norman Lindsay," rpt. in Thomson, p.164.

[40] Wilkes, pp.51-52.

[41] Wright, rpt. in Johnson, p.63.

[42] cf. Noel Macainsh, "Sincerity and Flight – 100 Years of Australian Poetry," *Westerly*, 1976, No.2, pp.53-61.

[43] Douglas Stewart, *Collected Poems 1936-67* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967), p.57.

[44] Max Harris, p.42.

[45] T. Inglis Moore, "Kenneth Slessor," rpt. in Thomson, p.117.

[46] *The Publicist*, No.1, July 1936, p.7.

[47] William Baylebridge, *This Vital Flesh* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), pp.x-xi.

[48] P.R. Stephensen, "The Foundations of Culture in Australia – An Essay Towards National Self Respect," *The Australian Mercury*, July 1935, p.15.

[49] A.D. Hope, *Collected Poems 1930-1965* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1968), p.46.

[50] Hope, p.93.

[51] Kate Millett, *The Prostitution Papers* (1971; rpt. St Albans: Paladin, 1975), p.51.

[52] L.E. Fredman, "Melbourne Bohemia in the Nineteenth Century," *Southerly*, 18, No.2 (1957), pp.83-91.

[53] Jack Lindsay, *The Roaring Twenties* (London: Bodley Head, 1960).

[54] cf. Flexmore Hudson, *Pools of the Cinnabar Range* (Melbourne: Robertson and Mullers, 1959), p.4.

[55] Noel Macainsh, "Pragmatism and Australian Poets," *Quadrant*, 21, No.1 (July 1977), pp.41-44.

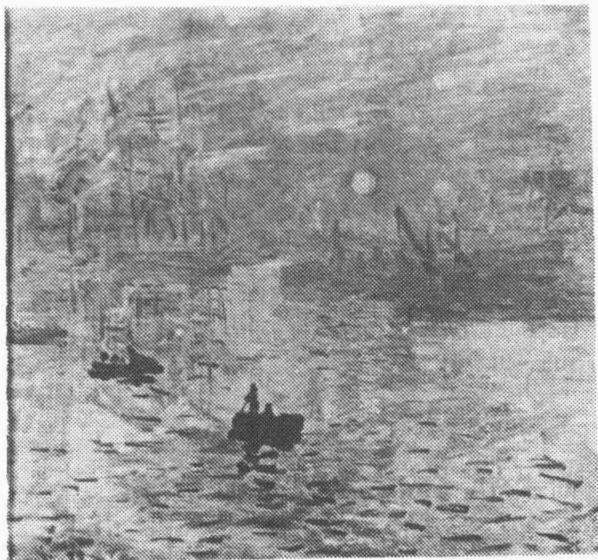
[56] *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, ed. Harry Heseltine (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1972), pp.46-47.

[57] Heseltine, p.47.

[58] Scott, p.224.

[59] Scott, p.226.

[60] Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "The Habit of Irony? Australian Poets of the Fifties," *Meanjin Quarterly*, 20, No.2 (1961), pp.164-74.



Claude Monet: *L'impression* 1872. A seminal picture.