

THE
PERSONAL
ELEMENT IN
AUSTRALIAN
POETRY

James McAuley

*Foundation for Australian
Literary Studies, Townsville*

MONOGRAPH No. 3

THE PERSONAL ELEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

How does the poet transmute the significant events of his life into poetry? Professor McAuley examines passages from the verse of various Australian poets to illustrate how, he believes, the psychological and emotional influences in their lives have been expressed in their work.

There emerges a brief estimate of the creative talent of twelve leading Australian poets: Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, Christopher Brennan, John Shaw Neilson, Mary Gilmore, Kenneth Slessor, A. D. Hope, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, Vincent Buckley, Evan Jones, and Vivian Smith.

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The Personal Element in Australian Poetry

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*Based on the 1968 Lectures of the
Foundation for Australian Literary Studies
at the University College of Townsville*

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FOREWORD

THE Townsville-based Foundation for Australian Literary Studies was established in July 1966 and constituted in November 1967 within the Department of English of the University College of Townsville, now the James Cook University of North Queensland.

The general aim of the Foundation is to investigate the literature of Australian life in all its phases and to propagate a knowledge of that literature.

To achieve that aim the Board of the Foundation fosters a number of research and teaching activities in Australian literature. One of these is a series of original lectures delivered annually at the former University College and open to the public. The lectures are published in book form in order to carry the lecturer's message further than such oral publication allows.

The lectures conform to a pre-determined plan. They are not spasmodic, but are organized so that each series has a unity of its own; in addition, the programme for the next few years aims at providing a general introduction to Australian writing in a library of related books.

It is planned to devote one book in this library to each series of lectures. Each series is to be delivered by a professional writer or producer or by a critic or teacher of Australian literature and drama. The little library thus formed is meant to provide a continuous commentary on the development of Australian writing.

Professor James McAuley's *The Personal Element in Australian Poetry* is the third book in the collection. It is based on the lectures delivered at Townsville in May 1968 under the chairmanship of Professor K. G. Hamilton, Head of the Department of English of the University of Queensland, the Honourable R. Else-Mitchell, of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, and the Deputy Mayor of Townsville, Mr C. E. Smith, M.B.E.

COLIN RODERICK
Executive Director, 1970

PREFACE

WHEN I was asked to contribute to the annual lecture series of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, I decided that I should try to develop a theme which has interested me for a long time, both as a poet and as one who takes pleasure in being an interpreter of literature.

The question is: What is the relation between poetry and personal experience; and, in particular, what are the ways in which a personal element enters poetry? The interest of this question has been sharpened in recent years by the turn of some contemporary poets towards an unprecedented expression of their personal experience, directly and in detail, in their poetry.

I have looked at some of the main Australian poets over the past century or so who have tried to find ways of dealing with personal experience. I hope I may have succeeded in drawing attention to some interesting aspects of their work. The only point I want to make by way of preface is that it is, at best, in a diluted sense that one could speak of continuity or a tradition along the line of the poets here considered. Harpur and Kendall went to the sources of influence prevailing in England in their time, though Kendall felt himself to be a fellow and successor of Harpur. The poets whom I've considered in the second lecture did not draw significantly upon their Australian predecessors, but went also to contemporary overseas sources of influence. Similarly, the living poets from whom I have quoted in the third lecture, while they may well have been encouraged by the knowledge that they had predecessors—and indeed they are all deeply read in the work of earlier Australian poets—have nevertheless taken up their task in a way that is related primarily to the poetry of their own time: they may have had some influence one upon another, but there is little sign of their work being rooted in Australian work of former times.

JAMES MCAULEY

I

EARLY VOICES

HARPUR AND KENDALL

I

THE writers I am considering in the first of these lectures are the first two Australian-born poets of merit, men who felt themselves to be standing at the beginning of an Australian tradition.

Until recently the collected verse of neither of these poets was available. Harpur's work is still not available, and it may be quite some time before a modern edition on sound principles is published. Kendall's work is at last available, in an edition published in 1968. But if previous experience is a guide, it will lapse out of print after a relatively short period.

I am not ignoring the value of some useful selections and anthologies. But I do not think that the present position is at all satisfactory.

The time has come when a concerted effort should be made by publishers and scholars backed by the Commonwealth Literary Fund to bring back into print and keep in print the more important works of Australian literature. Publishers cannot be expected to keep these books in print unless they are guaranteed against loss. I hope the Fund will give favourable consideration to any submissions that may come forward along these lines. I think the sum involved would not be formidable. And in speaking of the more important books, I am thinking of literature in a wide sense, not merely of poetry and novels.

II

"When the personal element is prominent it is always the happiest kind of verse," Kendall wrote¹ in a letter to Dr Brere-

¹ Quoted by T. T. Reed, *Henry Kendall*. Adelaide, 1960, p. 34.

ton dated 20th February 1865. Many readers would agree with him. In English poetry something new entered when Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* as the modern equivalent of an epic poem, whose theme is a spiritual autobiography, in which certain moments of his experience are rendered with minute particularity.

Yet Wordsworth's self-revelation was highly selective. He does not tell us that he was left an orphan at an early age, and that he was very unhappy in his uncle's household. He does not tell us that his prospects in life were severely cramped because his father's employer, the half-mad Lord Lonsdale, cheated the Wordsworth children of their inheritance. He does not tell us of his affair in France with Annette Vallon, which contributed a great deal to the mental distress he lived through before his best poetry began to be written. He does not tell us of the deepest passionate attachment in his life, which was to his sister Dorothy. Clearly the subtitle of *The Prelude*, viz., "Growth of a Poet's Mind; an Autobiographical Poem", was not meant to offer an unreserved and indiscriminate frankness.

It is in our own day that the autobiographical tendency in poetry has reached, in certain writers, an unparalleled degree of self-exposure. The most influential poet writing in English is at the present moment Robert Lowell; and he became centrally important precisely at the moment when he took for his theme, without disguise, some of the intimately painful and embarrassing events of his private life. The artistic problems involved in this kind of writing, and its significance as a social or cultural symptom, are topics that invite meditation, but which I cannot pursue very far on this occasion.

The span of literary history from Wordsworth to Lowell is the span within which Australian poetry has developed. We should not be surprised if we find that the personal element is prominent in parts of Australian writing, from the work of Charles Harpur, the Wordsworthian, to the work of Vincent Buckley, who would, I think, own to an influence from Robert Lowell upon his recent poetry.

Let me make it clear, however, that in taking "the personal element" as my topic, I am not confining myself to poems which are strictly autobiographical in a concrete de-

tailed way. The personal element includes writing of this sort, but can reasonably be taken in a wider sense; and I want to say something about this before I begin my review of particular writers.

Just as "the painter always paints himself"—Leonardo's phrase—so the poet's personal imprint is upon even his most impersonal productions. "Language," says Ben Jonson, "most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent of it, the mind." The poet's temperament, the quality of his intellectual and moral perceptions, even his physiology, have a casual and conditioning role. The primitive physical being of poetry—its vital energy, resonance, elasticity, sensual complexion—are characteristically different for each poet. The more deeply we know a poet, the more we feel his individual touch and voice in everything he writes. One can analyse the characteristic differences between Harpur and Kendall, or Slessor and FitzGerald; but underlying the analysis is an ineffable sensation, complex but immediate. I often think that our unhappy failures with poetry in schools and universities are traceable to some aesthetic damage our culture inflicts on children in their formative years, so that they lose the capacity to feel the poem as a vibrant physical thing, and experience only some vague ghost of a poem, spectrally present in black marks on paper. Hence that blockage, that tone-deafness, that resentful bafflement, that withdrawal of response which occur so often—meaning that once again a chance of enjoyment, of permanent enrichment, has been lost. I hope I shall not wholly fail to stimulate some sense of this primary psychophysical individuality of each poet's impress in what follows.

But there is another, less obvious problem that needs comment. I can introduce it by drawing attention to the two different meanings which the words "lyric" and "lyrical" have acquired in critical discussion. A lyric often means words set to music, or, by a natural extension, a poem that has a song-like character. On the other hand, if you look up some of the standard reference works you will see that the term "lyric" is also freely applied to "a short poem expressing personal

feelings".² These are not two different ways of specifying the same thing. The two definitions point in different directions. True it is that song-lyric normally expresses feelings: they may be public and communal, as in a song celebrating a victory, or a drinking song, or a liturgical hymn; or they may be private and individual, as in many songs expressing love, hope, grief, nostalgia and so on. I suppose that by "personal feeling" in the above definition the more private and individual feelings are meant. But what should be noticed is that the more song-like the poem, the less particularized the personal situation tends to become. Song-lyric tends to disengage the feeling from the concrete situation in which it was imbedded and give it a generalized expression, rendering it, in a sense, impersonal. It tends to become everyman's or anyman's feeling. The writer of song-lyric knows how to conjugate the verb *amare*: but he tells us little about who loves whom under what conditions. On the other hand, there are short poems in which the concrete particulars of an individual situation are rendered; the feeling in such a poem comes to us, not as an almost abstract universal thing, but as specified by the circumstances in which it arises. This is personal utterance in a very particular sense: it supplies us with a good deal of information. In such a poem even accidental or apparently irrelevant details may be given, because they serve the poet's purpose. For instance, these accidental details may be caught up opportunistically to provide an *ad hoc* symbolism. Or they may simply force us to an acknowledgement that life is like that; life rarely allows emotions to emerge in a pure state, unmodified by complications and little ironies or irrelevancies. A good deal of modern poetry is personal in this sense; its aim is to give us the kind of felt life that is conveyed by concrete particularity. Such poetry has tended to stay close to talk rather than move towards song.

It is within the general area marked out by these preliminary observations that my exploration of some Australian poets' work will move.

² Catherine Ing, in Cassell's *Encyclopaedia of Literature*, vol. 1, s.v. "Lyric".

III

We still have no modern edition of Charles Harpur.

What we do have, however, is an excellent biography of Harpur by J. Normington-Rawling, the work of many years, published in 1962. It gives us a better understanding of much of the poetry. I do not hesitate to say that it sharpens the poignancy and greatly increases the interest of certain poems, whose purely artistic merits are not of a very high order.

Harpur, as Normington-Rawling brings him before us, was not a wholly pleasant or wholly admirable person. But since few of us are, we need not make too much of that. The impressive thing about him was that he set himself to become the first Australian poet. This conscious self-dedication he recorded in the poem "The Dream by the Fountain", written in 1843 in the Hunter Valley, near Singleton, when Charles had abandoned Sydney and his postal clerkship (one jump ahead of dismissal for insubordination) and joined his brother. Charles Harpur was then about thirty years of age, unmarried, and with no clear material prospects.

The poem tells of a vision of the muse, who tells the poet that she has watched him since boyhood, kept him in her sight even when he left the Hawkesbury for the city; and now she proposes to him that he become the bard of his country:

*"Listen, belov'd one! I promise thee glory
Such as shall rise like the day-star apart,
To brighten the source of Australia's broad story,
But for this thou must give to the future thy heart!*

*"Be then the bard of thy country! O rather
Should such be thy choice than a monarchy wide!
Lo! 'tis the land of the grave of thy father!
'Tis the cradle of Liberty! think and decide."*

*Joy glowed in my heart as she ceased. Unreplying,
I gazed, mute with love, on her soul-moulded charms.
Deeper they glowed, her lips trembled, and, sighing,
She rushed to my heart and dissolved in my arms.*

I presume that the last stanza implies the poet's consent to

the muse's proposition. Hence her rush into his embrace, where she "dissolved": I read this to mean that she became indistinguishably one with him, not that she vanished into nothingness. It will be noted that the muse in this poem is specifically Australian:

*I am the muse of the evergreen forest
I am the spouse of thy spirit, lone bard!*

Nevertheless she has no distinctive Australian dress: she looks like a nymph of Diana and carries a lyre. Moreover she clearly has Wordsworthian notions about the importance of growing up in the countryside, the perils of going to the city where the fashionable herd prevail, and the liberation produced by a return to the country. She also has generally progressive views of a liberal-republican sort: this is why he must "give to the *future* thy heart" and prefer the office of bard to "a monarchy wide" in the event of a crown being offered him. One would have thought that the failure to hold his previous appointment as a public servant would have discouraged any offers for a more exalted public post.

It is not a good poem, and in parts it is rather bad. But I cannot now read it without seeing it in relation to Harpur's lonely and largely frustrated ambition, and I confess I am greatly moved by the thought of that bitter struggle. Harpur was very conscious of being Australian-born. He was the son of an Irish convict father, sent out for highway robbery, and of a convict mother, named Sarah Chidley, whose offence Normington-Rawling disdains to name.³ He felt not only his isolation but also, very keenly, the patronizing glance, or the malice of the immigrant intelligentsia, such as they were, who formed Sydney's cultural establishment. He let himself be angered into intemperate and foolish attacks on critics who were behaving as critics behave.

Harpur's personal poetry includes the sonnets which record his wooing of Mary Doyle, under the name of Rosa.

³ "To ask what she was guilty of might seem to offer some extenuation of the guilt of those who sent her [a child of 13 or 14] here." (*Charles Harpur: An Australian*, by J. Normington-Rawling, Sydney, 1962.) Finely said, by anyone but a biographer. It leaves Judith Wright able only to say vaguely that Sarah Chidley was tried "for what we would now think a very minor offence" (*Charles Harpur*, p. 4); and it leads me to ask, what was the offence?

But the most interesting part of his work from this point of view is the three poems published under the general title "Monodies" in the 1883 edition.

The first is an elegiac meditation on his father, whom we have already mentioned. Joseph Harpur senior was lucky enough to receive Macarthur's patronage: he secured a conditional pardon; became constable; cohabited with Sarah Chidley, his future wife, as the wont then was—three children, including Charles, were born out of wedlock; became town clerk of Parramatta; tried farming; with Samuel Marsden's help became schoolmaster at Windsor, was ruined in the 1829 bust; and died poor on a small pension. Harpur senior thus attained respectability and precarious advancement, dashed by disappointments; he was also in later life a staunch Methodist, actively interested in supporting missionary work.

The real theme of the monody on his father is not fully developed. Joseph Harpur was a believing Christian. His son Charles, however, rejected Christianity; he was a humanist with a thin wash of deism—of a type that was to become common in Australia. Harpur looked back over the hard life of his father in his dealings with "that great Delilah, the harlot world", and thought also of the comfortlessness of his father's later years:

*Nor was there in the lives of those he loved,
Even had he been susceptible of cheer,
Enough of fortune to warm into peace
A little longer ere he passed away
The remnant of his chilled humanity.
Wet are mine eyes, and my heart aches, to think
How much of evil ridged his course of time
And earthly pilgrimage.*

Harpur reflects that few can suffer such mischances and sorrows and retain trust in divine providence; nevertheless his father did:

*Yet died he a believer in the truth
And fatherhood of the Holy One—a God
Help-mighty, nor unmindful of mankind;
Yea, in the heavenward reaching light of faith*

*His soul went forth, as in a sunbeam's track
Some close-caged bird, from a long bondage freed,
Goes winging up—up through the open sky,
Rejoicing in the widening glow that paths
The final victory of its native wings!*

The poem succeeds to a considerable degree in confronting this religious assurance of the father with the bitter, almost despairing doubt, of the son. It does not wholly succeed, because Harpur's own reflections glance along the side of the problem rather than face it unambiguously, probably under the pressure of conventional opinion.

At any rate, it is clear that Harpur does not share his father's confidence in God's fatherly concern. Beyond the grave he sees, not the Heavenly City but two facts for which one might be "grimly grateful": first, that, whatever our eternal state, we shall have at least a deliverance from uncertainty and doubt, "the clinging curse of mortals"—our lot then will at least not change; secondly that we shall at least have done with the pain and disappointment of life:

*The dead
Have this immunity at least—a lot
Final and fixed, as evermore within
The gates of the Eternal! For the past
Is wholly God's, and therefore, like himself,
Knows no reverse, no change—but lies for aye
Stretched in the sabbath of its vast repose.*

This is made to sound like a pious consolation, but it is not. All it hopes from death is an end of life's troubles. All Harpur sees in eternity is that the past is past: it lies silent, unredeemed—unjust and unjustified, but at least over: God's appalling property and responsibility, which can hurt man no longer. God's peace is that of a lifeless cemetery under the noon blaze of an indifferent sun.

But while this seems to me to be the meaning latent within the poem, it is not quite fully articulated and therefore falls short of full effectiveness.

The second monody in the 1883 edition is a lament for his son Charley, who accidentally shot himself while out duck-

shooting with his brother Washington. Charley was thirteen years old, the second of five children. The fatality happened fifteen months before Harpur's own death in 1868, of consumption, at the age of fifty-five. Already ailing when the blow fell, he was quite crushed. Charley was buried on a hill in sight of the house. Washington's mind was for a time unbalanced by the shock of what he had seen.

As in the monody on his father, the instrument Harpur employs is meditative blank verse modelled on Wordsworth's: unhurried, caring more for accurate statement than for the danger of bathos, using a plain and at times even semi-colloquial language, yet half-stiffening too often in a clumsy formality, or succumbing to eighteenth-century Miltonisms—and, for all its concern for true statement, not immune from rhetorical inflation to provide an apparent rather than real resolution of the problem. Harpur could not, in this or any of his poems, get the unpredictably wonderful effects out of the instrument which Wordsworth sometimes got; he also remained too much a disciple of the bard to avoid the less fortunate effects. His inability to find and hold the right diction and tone is evident in the opening line, with its collision between the familiar "Charley" and the literary "thou":

*My dear, dear Charley! can it be that thou
Art gone from us for ever? . .*

So it goes on, afflicting us with phrases that are inadequate or embarrassing. Harpur had not acquired the means of writing intimately and familiarly with a steady control of tone. The poem is not a good one, but it has some moments of power; and when once our sympathetic interest in Harpur is roused, we can bring an interest to the poem which it could not entirely generate by its own merit.

For example, Harpur does to some extent succeed in bringing home that feeling of unreality that often comes with bereavement:

*it is hard
(So dreamlike wild it seems) to realize
The shuddering certainty . . .*

The main theme of the poem is, as in the monody of his

father, the poet's unresolved questioning of what lies beyond the grave. The poet sits beside the grave on the hill,

*as upon life's bleak brink,
To stare out deathward through his blinding tears.*

The other children, when Charley's name is mentioned (or "breathed" as Harpur has to put it),

*Look away askingly out into space,
As if they thought thy spirit might be there. . . .*

Harpur dwells most on his wife's grief, even though the simple pathos is partly clouded with Wordsworthian mimicry:

*All things are changed now through the loss of thee!
All home consuetudes, and household wonts,
And motherly providences, which before
Did fill the passing hour so pleasantly,
Changed now and irksome, as if life itself
With all its motives suddenly had grown
Delusive as a dream, then will she come,
And gaze out hitherward, and up to heaven,
With eyes so asking that they seem to say,
"Where is my darling, and why was he torn
Away so rudely from a love like mine?"*

The poet then directly questions heaven. Why does heaven seem so vacant and silent? Why can we have no intimation from beyond the grave that the dead still exist and love us? Is it well, he asks, that our love should have no message from heaven, but

*. . . Stare tear-blinded from its hither shore
And shriek to it in vain?*

Is it any wonder that we are often tempted to end life, in order to get away from our gloomy disquieting doubts:

*We are often fain
To leap from them at once, though out of life,
Madly desirous to have done with time?*

In the conclusion of the poem the poet reins in the passion-

ate emotion which has carried him towards doubt. He says he will try to believe that God took the child in mercy, however cruel the loss, and that the child is truly waiting at home in heaven. The conclusion is not exactly false: he says he will *try* to believe—he is not simply collapsing into an insincere use of pious rhetoric. Yet the rhetorical handling does tend to alienate us rather than draw us close, as he cries:

*Ah! whither has emotion, wild with loss,
Carried me doubtward?*

The third monody has less articulated argument in it and less concrete detail. It is a lyrical poem rather than a discursive one, and it renders a single strong emotion. In its own kind it seems to me a better poem than the other two, because its language and theme are more unified and effective. It may be objected that it is written to a Wordsworthian formula, and that the poetic value of its details is not very high: nevertheless the wave of emotion passes through the body of the poem with cumulative power, and with a musicality too often lacking in Harpur. But if someone wants to make a different critical evaluation of this poem as compared with the others, I will not really mind. Evaluation, especially when different kinds of poems are being compared, is at least partly a matter of different demands, which cannot easily be litigated; though some critics try to impose their particular demands by dictatorship.

I do not know of any conclusive evidence to fix the identity of the person addressed in this third monody. In line 7 he is called "my brother", and the most natural interpretation available to me is to assume that this means literally a brother; in which case it is not Joseph, who was closest to him for most of his life but outlived him; nor William, who went to sea and was not heard of again; but John, whom the poet admired, and who was thrown from a horse and killed in 1847. Although the poem is placed third in the 1883 edition, this does not mean it was composed after the monody for Charley; and the statement in the poem that he still wanders with venturous tread over the hills and along the rivers fits an earlier date. The poem needs no further comment and I give it entire:

*Since thou art dead—since thou art dead
Though to look up is still to see
The blue heaven bending o'er my head
So big with good, showered bounteously;
Though scenes of love be round me spread,
And o'er the hills, as once with thee,
My brother, still with venturous tread
I wander where broad rivers fret
And lighten onward toward the sea,
As erst unchanged, unchanging; yet
How different is the world to me.*

*The light, as with a living robe,
Doth clothe all nature as of yore;
The sun with his great golden globe
Doth crown yon hill when night is o'er;
The moon and stars o'erwatch the earth
As I have seen them from my birth;
But O! thou light, and sun, and moon,
And O! ye stars so bright and boon,
Though I as fervently may feel
All the great glories you reveal
As ever I have felt before—
Your genial warmth, your mystic sheen—
Yet all to me that you have been
You never can be more.*

IV

I confess that what draws me to these poems which I have mentioned is the personal element in them, more than their artistic excellence. If asked to name Harpur's best poems, I should be inclined to accept the common opinion that objective pieces such as "Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest" and "The Creek of the Four Graves" are both more original and artistically better realized. Yet these are pieces of but moderate poetic interest, magnified in our eyes by their lonely eminence in Australian writing as it then was. It seems to me to be true, and perfectly proper, that we, who stand in a special relation to the earlier phases of our cultural history, should accord their products a degree of

interest which we would not expect others to share. Few of us read much of the voluminous mass of mid-Victorian poetry which is of moderate quality; if we make an exception in favour of one or two Australian poets it will doubtless be because they belong to us. The strictly artistic value we may assign to the poetry (so far as a strictly artistic value can indeed be isolated in critical practice) may be only moderate, but moderate values are not unreal ones, and not despicable. My labouring of these truisms may seem to betray a lingering trace of uneasiness about the maintenance of critical integrity in evaluating our literary heritage, and also a slightly over-anxious need to distinguish between mere nationalism and a reasonable concern—piety in the Vergilian sense—directed to our cultural tradition. I will not deny such charges if they are made, being of a generation for whom these issues were alive and very important. The issues have now changed their form in a favourable way, and are less pressing; though I do not believe that they will quite disappear while Australia stands—as it necessarily continues to do—in a peripheral relation to the powerful metropolitan centres of cultural diffusion. We can do our own things here, but our complex relation to the main tendencies elsewhere will continue to be a problem we need to discuss, a problem capable of arousing ambiguous and varying reactions.

Kendall got to know Harpur in the later part of Harpur's life. The relationship exhibits Kendall at his best. He admired Harpur's work, but not uncritically; he was unselfishly diligent in acting as literary agent in Sydney for Harpur. The older poet took the admiration readily, but did not in return evince much sympathetic interest in Kendall's work (but it is not uncommon for one poet to fail to be impressed by the different work of another, especially if there is a big age difference). Harpur sometimes rewarded Kendall's disinterested devotion with hurtful and splenetic letters which Normington-Rawling ascribes to "envy or jealousy of the other's opportunities"; but Kendall would write back soothingly. The thing which made Harpur especially important to Kendall, and worthy of loyalty, was expressed in an early letter of homage: it was Harpur's lonely struggle to be the first Australian poet:

You have a noble soul which never appears to be baffled, though it has so long worked against opposition and unkindness. I grow sick when listening to people talking about the "unfortunate Keats" and "the sorrows of Chatterton"—remembering your brave life.

Immediately after Harpur's death, Kendall published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a characteristic poem in his memory:

*Where Harpur lies, the rainy streams
And wet hill-heads, and hollows weeping,
Are swift with wind, and white with gleams,
And hoarse with sounds of storms unsleeping.*

* * * *

*So let him sleep! the rugged hymns
And broken lights of woods above him!*

The phrases "rugged hymns" and "broken lights of woods" in these two lines seem to me finely appropriate to Harpur's poetry. He goes on to praise the singer "whose hands attuned the Harp Australian"—using an idiom which we now associate more with burlesque romanticism than with serious poetry. Kendall notes that a main theme of Harpur's was "the burden of a perished faith". He also stresses Harpur's Wordsworthian dependence on inspiration from nature, but concludes that this did not make him neglect the common themes of human experience. What he felt for Harpur did not receive full expression in this poem. We need to add to it comments on the harsh lot of the writer in Australia which he makes in other elegies. In the poem in memory of Gordon, whom he knew in Melbourne, he speaks of

*The wild specific curse which seems to cling
For ever to the Poet's twofold life!*

In the elegy for Marcus Clarke he thinks back to Harpur, and then says of Clarke's misfortunes:

*Few knew the cross he had to bear,
And moan beneath from day to day,
His were the bitter hours that wear
The human heart away.*

*The laurels in the pit were won:
He had to take the lot austere
That ever seems to wait upon
The man of letters here.*

Of the brilliant luckless Daniel Deniehy, friend of Harpur and of Kendall, he wrote of the mourners

*Speaking low of one who, failing, suffered all the poet's
pain,
Dying with the dead leaves round him—hopes which never
grow again.*

They are bitter and saddened comments, but not untrue. The lives of the few men of literary talent in those decades make a depressing tale.

Not the least dreadful is Kendall's own suffering. From it he drew those strains in which the personal element is clearly visible, and which give him whatever place he will continue to hold as a poet. I put it thus doubtfully, because, as his devoted editor, Bishop Reed, has noted in a valuable essay, critical estimates of Kendall have fluctuated rather wildly.⁴ My own inclination is to place him in the upper part of the permissible range of critical variation. His faults are too obvious to need much comment, and they are frequent, woven into the substance of most of his work as constitutional weaknesses. What sort of merit one accords him in spite of the faults will, I suspect, mainly depend on one's sensitivity to Kendall's lyrical gift. There are phrases, lines, stanzas (though he can rarely sustain his inspiration so long without blemish) in which a peculiar music, sweet and moving, sounds forth. I receive this impression as a datum, almost as immediate as a sensation, though of course it is more complex. No one can argue me out of it by explaining to me that Kendall is sentimental, lachrymose, self-pitying, facile, derivative, diffuse, Swinburnian. I am choosing terms from the very good introduction written by T. Inglis Moore for the *Selected Poems* published in 1957. Yet, after giving full weight—perhaps even excessive weight—to the undesirable aspects implied by these terms, Inglis Moore says: "On the other hand,

⁴ T. T. Reed, *op. cit.*

Kendall is a true poet. . . . He still remains one of the sweetest of our singers, with a natural rhythmic flow and a melody always graceful, often memorable."

With this fundamental claim I agree. Kendall's is a power girt about with weakness; the vein of lyrical achievement is intermittent; it is a thin and lonely flute-song; but it is not negligible. I would rather listen to it than to most of our modern concrete particularists exhibiting poise, stance, irony, ambiguity, and complexity, so as to make poetry resemble a dense low scrub, promising the reader scratches, irritations, allergic rashes, on his way into a waterless interior.

What surprises me about Inglis Moore's critical comment in his generally admirable introduction, is the following judgement which brings us directly to the question of the personal element:

Contrary to tradition, the truth about Kendall is that he wrote better when using a classical objectivity than when he is singing more subjectively as a romantic poet. In his poems on classical themes or those on biblical subjects in a neo-classical mode he can achieve the classic virtues: simplicity, clarity, detachment, and the force of economy. . . . In such poems Kendall is stronger because he has passed beyond the enervating pathos of his personal tragedy to an impersonal vigour.

I cannot help thinking that Moore has succumbed to the occupational hazard of the literary scholar. What he says may be true in a way: the poems he commends are less liable to some of Kendall's besetting weaknesses; but the fact is that they are unreadable. This fact, which is immediately and irremovably obvious to us ordinary readers, was obscured from Moore *because he had read them*. This does not disprove that the poems are, properly speaking, unreadable: it merely reminds us that the business of the literary historian is to a large extent to read the unreadable; that is what we pay him to do. If Kendall's preservation depends on "The Voyage of Telegonus" and "King Saul at Gilboa" we might as well give him up for lost. And even if we add, as Moore does, those "objective" narratives in Austalian settings such as "The Glen in Arrawatta" and "A Death in the Bush" my verdict is no different. "The Glen in Arrawatta" tells of the

killing by "fierce fantastic savages" of a squatter (who has left his wife in England, to watch "with sweet blue eyes" until he returned after making his fortune). It compares ill with Harpur's "Creek of the Four Graves". "A Death in the Bush" acquires some adventitious interest from its being one of several poems by Kendall about the death of his father, in what his editor describes as "squalid and depressing" circumstances; but the poem is a very faulty one.

I do not think it is going too far to say that what raised Kendall to the rank of a minor poet was the experience of utter failure and guilt and wretchedness that broke him down in 1871-2 at the age of thirty-two. He had struggled under many adversities and humiliations; he had manfully tried to take responsibility for a dipsomaniac mother, a delinquent brother, and sisters who ran him into debt, as well as for a wife and child. His attempt to make a living by literature in Melbourne was a failure, which reduced him to extreme poverty, aggravated by the intemperance to which despair drove him. His baby daughter fell sick and died, and he felt guilty of her death. He returned to Sydney, and after a period of homeless destitution, entered Gladesville Asylum. It was after this period, when the kindness of the Fagan family at Gosford had helped him to recovery, that most of his rare best poetry was written.

But before I come to his best lyrics I want to examine one question which interests me. The best of Kendall's lyrics, as we shall see, do not give much concrete detail about his troubles. But certain other poems attempt to deal quite directly with his worst experiences; and these are not merely unsuccessful, they are abysmally bad. One is the poem written after the death of his infant daughter: it is called by her name, "Araluen". He addresses his wife in terms such as these:

*Ah, the saddest thought in leaving baby in this bush alone
Is that we have not been able on her grave to place a stone!
We have been too poor to do it: but my darling, never
mind!*

*God is in the gracious heavens, and His sun and rain are
kind.*

*They will dress the spot with beauty, they will make the
grasses grow:
Many winds will lull our birdie—many songs will come
and go.*

And the poem ends, still addressing his wife:

*Three there are, but one has vanished. Sins of mine have
made you weep;
But forgive your baby's father now that baby is asleep.
Let us go, for night is falling—leave the darling with her
flowers:
Other hands will come and tend them—other friends, in
other hours.*

Here we enter the mystery of bad poetry, a mystery that becomes poignant when it speaks sincerely of real grief. It is a mystery because it is not easy to demonstrate what is so dreadfully and embarrassingly wrong. It is no use merely pointing out the “pathetic fallacies” committed or the euphemisms and so on, because these are not confined to bad poetry.

At least as bad, if not worse, is the poem “On a Street”, in which he has told the story of his Melbourne period with the thin disguise of a footnote imputing the experience to “poor W— of Melbourne”. It has the qualities of the worst Victorian melodrama, and would go splendidly in those modern entertainments where a supercilious but nostalgic pleasure is provided by recreating such things for fun:

*I only hear the brutal curse
Of landlord clamouring for his pay;
And yonder is the pauper's hearse
That comes to take a child away.
Apart, and with a half-grey head
Of sudden age, again I see
The father writing by the dead
To earn the undertaker's fee.

No tear at all is asked for him—
A drunkard well deserves his life;
But voice will quiver—eyes grow dim
For her, the patient, pure young wife;*

*The gentle girl of better days,
As timid as a mountain fawn,
Who used to choose untrodden ways
And place at night her rags in pawn.*

(The perversion of a reminiscence of Wordsworth's Lucy in the phrase "untrodden ways" is rather typical.) He goes on to describe his addiction to drink, and his fits of remorse. Then he tells how he repented by the grace of Christ and was restored to union with his wife. But nevertheless the memory of the past remains hateful to him:

*But—still I hate that haggard street—
Its filthy courts, its alleys wild!
In dreams of it I always meet
The phantom of a wailing child.
The name of it begets distress—
Ah, Song, be silent! Show no more
The lady in the perished dress—
The scholar on the taproom floor!*

What is cruel about this is that, as Kendall says in the poem

*I tell you this is not a tale
Conceived by me but bitter truth!*

That it is possible for a poet to write as badly as that, and nevertheless rise to become a minor poet whose best moments remain to haunt the memory is, or should be, an encouragement and consolation to us all.

What, then, are those best lyric moments? They exist, for example, in the poem "Mooni"—one of those which Kendall published with the parenthetical note under the title: "Written in the Shadow of 1872". This was selected by Quiller-Couch for the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Mooni Creek enters the Hawkesbury river near Gosford, but the poem refers to its upper reaches in the mountains. The poem is diffuse, though the diffusion establishes and prolongs the rhythm which then sustains this stanza:

*Ah, the theme—the sad gray theme!
Certain days are not above me,*

*Certain hearts have ceased to love me,
Certain fancies fail to move me
Like the affluent morning dream.
Head whereon the white is stealing,
Heart whose hurts are past all healing,
Where is now the first pure feeling?—
Ah, the theme—the sad gray theme!*

These best lyric moments exist also in momentary visions of landscape, where the scene is deeply related to personal feeling: notably in the poem "Orara"—not the long narrative of that name, but the lyric which uses one of his recurring symbolisms: the upward look towards the high mountain sources of a stream. Palgrave chose this poem for inclusion in his *Golden Treasury*, Part II. The following descriptive passage culminates in a fine stanza:

*The strong sob of the chafing stream,
That seaward fights its way
Down crags of glitter, dells of gleam,
Is in the hills today.*

*But, far and faint, a grey-winged form
Hangs where the wild lights wane:
The phantom of a bygone storm—
A ghost of wind and rain.*

*The soft white feet of Afternoon
Are on the shining meads:
The breeze is as a pleasant tune
Amongst the happy reeds.*

*The fierce, disastrous flying fire,
That made the great caves ring
And scarred the slopes and broke the spire,
Is a forgotten thing.*

*The air is full of mellow sounds;
The wet hill-heads are bright;
And, down the fall of fragrant grounds,
The deep ways flame with light.*

The scene has deep associations for him with his childhood,

and he goes on to develop the symbolic possibilities, though not in an entirely coherent and satisfactory way.

More directly personal is the poem "After Many Years", which he placed at the end of his last published volume, *Songs from the Mountains* (1880). Certainly the plaintiveness is at times too facile in phrasing and sentiment. It can be censured as self-pitying by young graduate critics from our tougher seminaries of learning, whose experiences of being the scholar on the taproom floor have not contained the grim melodrama of Kendall's, however instructive otherwise. Still, "After Many Years" has a real theme; it is moving if we allow it to work naturally upon us; and it is true enough, except that the confession of poetic failure is a moment (as sometimes happens with poets) of poetic success:

*The song that once I dreamed about,
The tender, touching thing,
As radiant as the rose without—
The love of wind and wing—
The perfect verses to the tune
Of woodland music set,
As beautiful as afternoon,
Remain unwritten yet.*

*It is too late to write them now,
The ancient fire is cold:
No ardent lights illumine the brow
As in the days of old.*

*I cannot dream the dream again;
But, when the happy birds
Are singing in the sunny rain,
I think I hear its words.*

The poem ends:

*But, in the night, and when the rain
The troubled torrent fills,
I often think I see again
The river in the hills.*

*And when the day is very near,
And birds are on the wing,
My spirit fancies it can hear
The song I cannot sing.*

The penultimate stanza evokes in an interesting way Kendall's first love, for a girl from whom he was unnecessarily estranged by a misunderstanding. That appalling old sentimentalist Mrs A. M. Hamilton-Grey, whose books celebrating "Our God-Made Chief—a Singer of the Dawn" would be enough to turn anyone off Kendall, assures us that this first love was the abiding one. I do not know if the gossip she collected about Kendall's wife is true. She has great pleasure in recording the comment of a Mr Pile that Kendall's wife was "a big lump of a girl only fit for strumming on the piano the *Mabel Waltz*". Bishop Reed, on the other hand, takes a different view: he is sure that the great love of Kendall's life was for his wife, though he certainly retained a deep and abiding affection for Rose Bennett, his first love—as part of the past on which he loved to dwell, but not as part of the present. This is probably near enough. Who knows the vicissitudes of the heart when the individual himself can hardly assign a meaning to them? At any rate, it is of some significance that in this poem lost love and lost inspiration are coupled. The same Rose Bennett is the subject of several earlier poems, including "Rose Lorraine", which he published in *Leaves From the Australian Forests* (1869). It opens with a reference to the return of spring as signalized by the flowering waterlilies, here as in "Bell Birds" called water-moons (the mention of gold refers to the centre of the flower):

*Sweet water-moons, blown into lights
Of flying gold on pool and creek,
And many sounds, and many sights,
Of younger days are back this week.
I cannot say I sought to face,
Or greatly cared to cross again,
This subtle spirit of the place
Whose life is mixed with Rose Lorraine.*

Rose Bennett's daughter, Mrs Adrian Porter, is on record as saying that "the poem has been described as one of the three saddest love-poems in the English language". Maybe so; it is not one of the three best

The same volume begins with a dedication to his wife,

*Who faced for love's sole sake the life austere
That waits upon the man of letters here.*

He reciprocates this love in the closing lines:

*And if aught here is sweetened with a tone
Sincere, like love, it came of love alone.*

We cannot decide on the strength of each love by the quality of the poetry, which in any case, is not very considerable.

Kendall had a very intense and exalted conception of the vocation of the poet, as a being consecrated to bear the stress of inspiration. It is not only the personal sorrows of his life, but also the sense of a vocation unfulfilled in harsh circumstances that breathes in the late poem "Outre Mer", where he turns towards death:

*Across the main a vision
Of sunset coasts and skies,
And widths of gleaming water,
Enchant my human eyes.
I, who have sinned and suffered,
Have sought—with tears have sought—
To rule my life with goodness,
And shape it to my thought.
And yet there is no refuge
To shield me from distress,
Except the realm of slumber
And great forgetfulness.*

I need not insist on it, but I want to draw attention to the way in which the poems I have mentioned illustrate a point I made at the beginning, namely, that the more song-lyrical a poem, the less it carries of concrete particularity. There may be, advantageously, touches of particularity remaining; but the poem tends to give the general form of the controlling sentiment, not the detail of its occurrence in daily reality.

A blending of Kendall's virtues, a balance between particular reference and lyrical abstraction with a more sustained refinement and economy of diction than usual, is to be found in the poem "James Lionel Michael", an elegy on a scholarly lawyer and poet in Grafton who befriended Kendall. His death, in which suicide was suspected, was another of

those instances which made Kendall feel, with justice, that the Australia of that time was hard indeed upon men of sensibility and literary talent. I shall quote this poem without comment in conclusion.

*Be his rest the rest he sought:
Calm and deep.
Let no wayward word or thought
Vex his sleep.*

*Peace—the peace that no man knows—
Now remains
Where the wasted woodwind blows,
Wakes and wanes.*

*Latter leaves, in Autumn's breath,
White and sere,
Sanctify the scholar's death,
Lying here.*

*Soft surprises of the sun—
Swift, serene—
O'er the mute grave-grasses run,
Cold and green.*

*Wet and cold the hillwinds moan;
Let them rave!
Love that takes a tender tone
Lights his grave.*

*He who knew the friendless face
Sorrows shew,
Often sought this quiet place
Years ago.*

*One, too apt to faint and fail,
Loved to stray
Here where water-shallows wail
Day by day.*

*Care that lays her heavy hand
On the best,
Bound him with an iron hand;
Let him rest.*

*Life, that flieth like a tune,
Left his eyes,
As an April afternoon
Leaves the skies.*

*Peace is best! If life was hard
Peace came next.
Thus the scholar, thus the bard,
Lies unvext.*

*Safely housed at last from rack—
Far from pain;
Who would wish to have him back?
Back again?*

*Let the forms he loved so well
Hover near;
Shine of hill and shade of dell,
Year by year.*

*All the wilful waifs that make
Beauty's face,
Let them sojourn for his sake
Round this place.*

*Flying splendours, singing streams,
Lutes and lights,
May they be as happy dreams:
Sounds and sights;*

*So that Time to Love may say,
"Wherefore weep?
Sweet is sleep at close of day!
Death is sleep."*

THE MIDDLE YEARS

BRENNAN, NEILSON, GILMORE, SLESSOR

I

BRENNAN said of Verlaine's poetry that "the best criticism is the narrative of his life, with copious quotations", because, "it is his glory that into a poetry [i.e., French poetry] in which the personal note is rare he introduced an intimate confidential accent."

But it was not Verlaine's road that Brennan set himself to follow, in the years of his most intense poetic effort. He did not try to develop a poetry that would be a direct avowal of personal experience; though he knew that this was a challengingly difficult kind of art, capable of yielding valuable results at its rare best. The method he chose was the more usual one, by which personal experience is used by the poet, but only when generalized, or translated into other terms, or even transmuted by symbolist methods. The "masks" assumed by Baudelaire (to which Brennan refers in his prose criticism), the Mallarméan distillations of poetic essence, the Miltonic or Blakean or Keatsian use of mythopoeia, represented some of the options he tried—but indeed his restless search for a style and method revolved through most of the kinds of poetry admired in his day.

But Brennan was an unsuccessful alchemist. We see the alembics and retorts, the calcining fire and crucibles, we see the trituration and sublimation; but the materials used are obscure, and the work produced is not sovereign. For our generation, the laboured ambitiousness of Brennan's poetry is oppressive; the student may end by identifying Brennan with his Soliman-ben-Daoud:

*and, o'er his mitre's peak, his word of might
figured in solid fire, irradiates
its sterile secret into oblivious night.*

A few years ago, writing on Brennan, I confessed that, when forced to an evaluation, I could not make high claims for his achievement, even though he is an impressive and interesting figure. I felt then, and continue to feel, that what prevents the poetry from being completely dead amidst its attempted splendours, is the fiery burning current of personal experience and feeling. Perhaps, after all, the best exposition of Brennan would be a narrative of his life, with quotations from his poems—if only we knew enough of his more intimate experience to be able to interpret the poetry, or could understand the poetry well enough to use it to throw a light into the dark places of his life.

At any rate, I am making the experiment of searching through Brennan's work to see what role the personal element plays in it. And I am going to take a liberty of speculation and surmise because I think it necessary.

The principal subjects of Brennan's poetry are three: sexual love, politics, and religion.

So far as appears from such biographical sources as are at present available (Chisholm's introduction being the main source) Brennan remained a sexually inexperienced youth during his undergraduate days. Between his graduation and his departure for Germany there occurred two amatory episodes while he was teaching at St Patrick's College, Goulburn. The first was a brief, happy, clandestine affair which was evidently not entirely virtuous—was it perhaps a flirtation with a married woman? In his autobiographical note he says that he forsook it for "a virtuous affection" for "a well-known Catholic girl of the town", which was not reciprocated. In June 1892 he went abroad on a travelling scholarship, having fixed on Berlin University in order to pursue his classical studies. He seems to have spent more time in familiarizing himself with French symbolist poetry than in satisfying the academic requirements of the University; at any rate, he returned in 1894 without a degree, but engaged to a beautiful German girl, Anna Elisabeth Werth, the daughter of his landlady.

There followed, from August 1894 to December 1897, a long period of waiting until his fiancée joined him. This was the first period of his poetical production, and his love for

his future wife is a prominent but not exclusive theme. The other themes, on which I cannot touch here, make a troubled underpart.

The pre-nuptial poems convey a perilously overwrought expectation of a perfect ineffable fulfilment of the poet's inexperienced and suspended desire. Looking back to his courtship in Germany he sees himself and his beloved, walking

*hand in hand, as girl and boy
warming fast to youth and maid,
half-afraid
at the hint of passionate joy
hid in summer's rose unblown.*

Brennan was twenty-two or twenty-three when he experienced these delayed adolescent timidities and ardours. He seems, moreover, in the poem from which I have just quoted and in some others, to be trying, even before the consummation of their union, to fix his beloved fast into the frame of innocent girlhood, as if preferring her in that role:

*Here our days bloom fuller yet,
and our love is all our task;
still I ask
can those olden days forget?*

There is an unhealthy sickliness of sentiment, which bodes ill for the future, in the following poem, written in 1895 in a manner imitated from Coventry Patmore; a sickliness that is translated into the false tone and impure diction that pervade it. The imagery takes us through a day from dawn to sunset and night:

*And does she still perceive, her curtain drawn,
white fields, where maiden Dawn
is anguished with the untold approach of joy?
or on the wooing forenoon softly pass
where of our little friends
that knew us, girl and boy,
the delicate feather-pinks, each dainty greeting bends
before her step, amid the pale sweet grass?*

*or warmer flush
our poppies with her blush
as the long day of love grows bold for the red kiss,
and dreams of bliss
dizzy the brain and awe the youthful blood?
Surely her longing gaze hath call'd them forth
the bashful blue-eyed flower-births of the North,
forget-me-nots and violets of the wood,
those maids that slept beneath the snow . . .*

and so forth. A similar vein of sentiment appears in a poem dated 1897 in which the absent beloved is thus addressed in longing:

*Ah! wilt thou not even now arise,
low-laughing child haunting by old spring ways
and blossom freshly on my freshen'd gaze,
sororal in this hour of tenderness . . .*

It must be admitted that it is natural, in a long separation, for the poet to project himself forward in passionate expectation, and also to hark back to the time of their love's awakening and its virginal hesitations. But I still think that the cumulative effect of these poems suggests a dangerous tension between the pressure of erotic expectation and the infantilizing of the conception of the bride.

The poem numbered 27 is of considerable interest, because in it some of the themes and symbolism belonging to the Lilith sequence emerge, and because of the intense unrealism of the treatment of the union now near at hand. It is "my perfect hour" . . . blown down the world by mighty winds of God "from some forgotten window of Paradise". Let that hour, he says,

*be the sole secret world
one rose unfurl'd,
and nought disturb its blossom'd peace intense.*

He concludes in a liturgical tone, in terms of an initiatic rite:

*draw near, ye heavens, and be our chamber-bars
and thou, maternal heart of holy night,*

*close watch, what hush'd and sacramental tide
a soul goes forth wide-eyed,
to meet the archangel-sword of loneliest delight.*

One would not have thought that a delight involving two people was the loneliest kind.

Again we must admit that much of this hyperbole and rapturous symbolism is traditional. All *that* means is, that in other hands we might accept the use of this vocabulary of ecstatic fulfilment. But it is precisely the effect that Brennan creates that we are concerned with, not with someone else's practice, or with the courtly-love tradition in general; and, to my apprehension, Brennan conveys an alarming sense of a mind so auto-intoxicated that the ideal and the real have no controllable relation and are on collision course.

The poem that stands next to it is evidently a post-nuptial poem, and is dated 1898. Brennan and Anna Werth were married in December 1898. The carriage and diction of this poem are Patmorean, but there is also a distinctly Miltonic quality blended with the modern endearments. The "quiet hour of glory" or fulfilment experienced by the bridegroom and the bride, now standing hand in hand, is likened to the sunset, in an elaborate metaphor in which the sun is bridegroom, the earth is bedded bride:

*While o'er the bridal land
the westering sun dwells in untroubled gold,
a bridegroom proud of his permitted will,
whom grateful rapture suffers not be bold,
but tender now and bland
his amber locks and bended gaze are shed,
brimming, above the couch'd and happy clime:
all is content and ripe delight, full-fed.*

The tone is still not right: indeed it is embarrassingly wrong. I am not convinced by its attempted proclamation of erotic fulfilment. Something is being acted here, rather than naturally felt and expressed. The undertone of Miltonism seems to me an unhappily appropriate irony; for Brennan is indeed close to Milton on one side: the side on which the egoist-idealist poet wrecks a marriage by inappropriate expecta-

tions, and survives to bury his spouse and his own private disaster under a weight of rhetorical splendours ostensibly rehearsing a myth of human destiny.

The moment of the avowal of failure is not yet, but it is now close. The poem "Liminary" in the next section of *Poems 1913*, a poem dated 1897-8, strikes me as a document of crucial importance in Brennan's emotional history; but it is an opaque text which still resists my attempts to elucidate it. It is clearly the result of a major effort to write the sort of magian verse which will enthrall the fit reader and lure him on to a long process of intuitive exploration, while the unfit reader is excluded by the difficult syntax, the destiny of the symbolic texture, the absence of mere reportage or explanatory statement. Mallarmé is visibly present in the symbols of the icy mirror and the silence and some other details. The poem looks as if it is put together out of material produced by more than one—at least two—separate impulses. I shall make use of that part of the poem which yields a pretty clear meaning. The poet is standing, at the beginning of the poem, on the threshold of his nuptial union. Dream is about to pass over into reality: what has hitherto been a secret in his heart will now pass into actual life and divinize it. He awaits his beloved, his *vita nuova*:

my summer bride, new life from nuptial lands.

The stanzas which follow are an attempt to render the intensity of erotic anticipation:

*The hidden places of her beauty hold
the savours shed o'er wastes of island air*

(which, being interpreted, would mean that her aroused body smells like the isles of spice)

*and her crown'd body's wealth of torrid gold
burns dusky in her summer-storm of hair.
Her breasts in baffling curves, an upward hope,*

(I note the phrasing without being able to suggest why the curves should be baffling unless he is trying to work out a mathematical function for them)

strain towards the lips pain'd with too eager life

(these are her lips, not his, I think)

*and the rich noons faint on each lustrous slope
where thunder-hush in the ardent brake is rife.*

(I am not sure of the anatomical meaning here, any ideas that occur to me being rather grotesque)

*I cannot tell what god is in her gaze,
such depths of slumbrous passion drown my breath,
but where the charmed shadow clings and stays
Fate cowers before that high disdain of death.*

(There are problems in this also. She is the vehicle of a divine passion. When he says he cannot *tell* what god is in her gaze, one thinks at first this is because he does not know; but the second line says it is because his breath is “drowned” by depths of passion; though he is at least able to tell us that this is so. The next two lines of the above are unclear. Not unclear, however, is the general sense of the next two stanzas)

*Oh, take me to thy bosom's sultry beat,
steep all my sense in thy long breath of flame,
oppress me with thy summer's heavy heat,
consume all me that wears an uncrowned name;*

(that is, consume all of me that is not kingly or divine)

*burn this my flesh to a clear web of light,
send thy keen airy spirit to search each vein,
that the hard pulse may throb with strong delight,
o'ermastering life and life's divinest pain.*

And so on it goes for several more stanzas. What strikes one is that a great deal of rather stupendous sexual accomplishment is being instantly demanded of a bride who not long before was addressed as sister and low-laughing child.

In the next section of the sequence, “The Twilight of Disquietude”, there is a short poem, originally published in 1898 under the title “Joy's Disappointment”, which seems to say that the dream did not successfully pass into reality. But it says it in an interesting way. For it asks, where is the ful-

filment of the old romantic dreams I had of heroism? Where the splendid sorrows that I longed for? It seems, says the poet, that I have settled for a kind of happiness I would once have scorned:

*—And is it then the end of dream?
O heart, that long'd for splendid woe,
our shame to endure this dire extreme
of joy we scorned so long ago!*

This is not a clear dismissal of unreal hopes and dreams, nor is it a clear unambiguous affirmation of the value of what has been attained. The joy is said to be extreme, but it has certainly not fulfilled his earlier demand that it be a transforming initiatic experience. The hankering after something beyond it has already been expressed in a poem placed earlier, though it may be a later gloss. This is No. 30, in which the poet says he ought to want to go home to his wife but is still drawn to

*follow the roads and follow still
the dream that holds my heart in trance
and lures it to the fabled chance
to find, beyond these evening ways,
the morning and the woodland days
and meadows clear with gold, and you—
as once, ere I might dare to woo.*

This is a singular avowal. He tells his wife that he does not want to come home because he is searching for what she once was before he had wooed her, preferring this to what she now is. The transfiguration of his existence expected from the arrival of the summer bride, "new life from nuptial lands", has obviously not taken place. He is shut out of his own heart, *not* "because my love is far from me" as he wrote in 1897, but because she has become too close and real, and he would like to restore her to her former condition.

The Lilith poems were conceived and written in 1898-9—according to Brennan's dating. This means that they followed very closely upon his marriage, on which they comment overtly, if cryptically. The poem "Lilith" is preceded by a poem which says that he is now going to use his wife as a

means of evoking the ideal perfection which she has failed to embody. At least this seems to be his meaning when he says:

*Eve's wifely guise, her dower that Eden lent,
now limbeck where the enamour'd alchemist
invokes the rarer rose, phantom descent.*

He is the alchemist, and he is enamoured, but not of his earthly wife nor of any earthly woman. This is developed further in "Lilith", who represents the ultimate but unattainable Bride of man's desire.

Lilith haunted nineteenth-century romanticism as one of those seductive-destructive female lures to which poets were susceptible in the days before they became safely insulated by Foundation Fellowships, academic appointments, the Commonwealth Literary Fund, or the comforting circularity of flying blind on the left wing. Here, for example, is Kendall introducing Lilith, in his very worst manner. It seems that the poet has a vision of this Lady of Night, and he asks one of the elders who she is. Then he is told in alarm:

*Look to thy Saviour and down on thy knee, man,
Lean on the Lord as the Zebedee leaned!
Daughter of hell is the neighbour of thee, man—
Lilith, of Adam the luminous leman!
Turn to the Christ to be succoured and screened—
Saved from the eyes of a marvellous fiend!*

*Serpent she is in the shape of a woman—
Brighter than woman—ineffably fair!
Shelter thyself from the splendour and woe, man
Light that was never a loveliness human
Lives in the face of this sinister snare
Longing to strangle thy soul with her hair!*

*Lilith who came to the father and bound him
Fast with her eyes in the first of the springs—
Lilith she is; but remember she drowned him,
Shedding her flood of gold tresses around him—
Lulled him to sleep with the lyric she sings:
Melody strange with unspeakable things!*

In Kendall's poem the young man takes good advice and clears out in time, overcoming the temptation by healthy hiking:

*Back on the hills are the blossom and feather,
Glory of noon is on valley and spire!
Here is the grace of magnificent weather—
Where is the woman from gulfs of the nether?
Where is the Fiend with the face of desire?
Gone, with a cry, in miraculous fire!*

In the person of Adam, Brennan addresses Lilith in verses I will abbreviate:

*Nightly thy tempting comes. . . .
but I am born into dividual life
and I have ta'en the woman for my wife. . . .*

Let us be clear about what is being said, so far as clarity is possible: the poet's notion of perfect love is oneness, that is, the absence of any object which is *other*, as a second person is *other*. He complains that he has taken as wife someone who is a person in her own right, not a cosmic essence with which he can merge himself. In terms which imply that his wife is a *pis aller* if not a *cul de sac* he commends her tedious, if pleasant, limitations; she is

*a flowery pasture fenced and soft with streams,
fill'd with slow ease and fresh with eastern beams
of coolest silver on the sliding wave:
such refuge as derisive morning gave,
shaped featly in thy similitude, to attract
earthward the gusty soul thy temptings rack'd.*

In the symbolic language of this poem, night is the realm of ultimate good, day is a distracting limitation, whose temporary bounded actuality is positively bad when compared with the total transcendent reality of night. To say that his wife is something that derisive morning gave as a similitude of Lilith is to say that she is a poor unsatisfying imitation of the real thing. One notes also the lack of warmth implied in the imagery of "coolest silver". So he goes on:

*I sicken with the long unsatisfied
waiting . . .*

The next long speech in the poem is uttered by Lilith, who says a number of things, and then refers to Adam's wife. Lilith claims that Adam's anterior love for herself interferes with his love for his wife:

*my spectral face shall come between his eyes
and the soft face of her, my name shall rise
unutter'd, in each thought that goes to her.*

Then she adds, obscurely, something which I have long felt was Brennan's near-avowal of what really went wrong, at the level of erotic experience. But I remain unable to do more than hazard a guess at what is being said:

*He shall not know her or her gentle ways
nor rest, content, by her sufficing source,
but, under stress of the veil'd stars, shall force
her simple bloom to perilous delight
adulterate with pain, some nameless night
stain'd with miasm of flesh become a tomb:
then baffled hope, some torch o' the blood to illume
and flush the jewel hid beyond all height,
and sombre rage that burst the holy bourne
of garden-joy, murdering innocence,
and the distraught desire to bring a kiss
unto the fleeting centre of the abyss,
discovering the eternal lack, shall spurn
even that sun-god's garden of pure sense,
not wisely wasted with insensate will.*

Words ought to mean something. Where it is improbable that further light can be thrown from other sources, we have to do what we can with the text which was offered to us, presumably to be interpreted. With no special reluctance, therefore, I give my considered paraphrase of this dense, convoluted, and abominable passage. I think Brennan is saying: "My wife was virginal and unready. The marriage was a disaster of Miltonic proportions. The act of love became a bloody obscenity of force and pain, her flesh becoming a

tomb of love. The total disappointment of my superheated ardour of sensual expectation, when no answering ardour was generated, became a sombre rage to violate her baulking purity and innocence; but all it could achieve was the realization of an irremediable lack; so that the marital paradise I had hoped for became a ravaged wasteland."

There is no point in saying that Brennan has taken up a submerged tradition of gnostic doctrine and has made a poem on a gnostic theme. The poem would be incoherently stillborn if it was an impersonal gnostic epic. The shudder and burn of anguished feeling, agonizing under clotted evasion and pretentiousness, is the poem's only life.

Brennan has added to the poem a superstructure which is, in a broad sense, political. This need not surprise us if we remember he had the example of Blake who also, around the pain and irritation of his own disappointment in marriage, developed layer upon layer of meaning, reaching out from the psychological level to the social and political and finally the cosmic level. Brennan enlarged the erotic disappointment he had suffered, and the urge to be distracted from it by substitute activity, into a theory that civilization—war, kingship, the arts, and so on—are really substitute gratifications evoked by man's unattainable need to find the true paradise, the ultimate fulfilment he named Lilith. This theory can be phrased in many ways, some more plausible than others: Brennan's development of the theme is quite extensive in "Lilith", though it has not been much noted.

Whatever the weaknesses of Brennan's attempt to state a theory of politics and civilization in this poem, it is infinitely to be preferred, poetically, to Brennan's attempts to pronounce judgment on the Boer War in *The Burden of Tyre* and World War I in *The Chant of Doom*. This is all I want to say about Brennan's politics.

Much more would be worth saying about the third of Brennan's principal themes, religion. But I do not intend to venture far into this field. One cannot but speculate inconclusively on certain aspects of the early formation of his mind and feeling as he describes them in the *Curriculum Vitae* he wrote at the urging of Innes Kay. There was something of the spoiled priest which clung about Brennan. As a boy he was

an acolyte, singled out for service in the Convent of the Good Samaritan, an environment likely to intensify his sense of being specially devoted and apart. At the last moment, at the end of his schooling, he decided against going to Rome to study for the priesthood, as had been intended for him. At Sydney University he became philosophically an agnostic, busying his mind with big ideas, in regard to which our contemporary philosophy can only express a bland astonishment: the ideas of Herbert Spencer, Green, Balfour. From this mental junk he progressed to latter-day gnosticism of an eclectic kind: he was improvising, filling his mind with the bric-à-brac of literary symbolism and its underlying currents of occultist irrationalism. When, in the final period of his life, he returned to the practice of his Catholic religion, all of these philosophical and esoteric impedimenta seemed to slip away with ease. Chisholm quotes from priests who knew him, who took the view that he never lost his faith but only his practice: that there was an *obnubilatio* or clouding-over of his faith but no extinction. At first one might resist this, because he overtly took up positions contrary to Catholic belief; but I am inclined to think that the diagnosis is really correct. His religious impulse was deflected into a lot of incoherent speculative substitutes which never took deep root in him, and his return to Christian allegiance was like the throwing off of a heavy disguise he had worn against self-scrutiny. I mention this here only because such a judgement reinforces my view that one thing that was wrong with Brennan's poetry was the accumulation of an apparatus of undigested ideas and symbolism which was not real enough to his inmost mind and feeling. I do not think that this obliges one to imply that, if he had remained overtly a Catholic, his poetry would have been more successful. It *could* have been, perhaps: but there was all that Patmore and Thompson to digest, which did enough harm to him anyway. Could he have purged all this away? One has to doubt it. He was not enough of a poet.

I would rather come back for another look at the erotic theme. Whatever went wrong in the first stage of his marriage—and something obviously did, or he would not have started writing "Lilith" immediately afterwards—was not likely to

be righted by the arrival two and a half years later of his mother-in-law, accompanied by another daughter whom Chisholm avers to have been "mentally deranged by over-study of music", a piece of psychoanalysis I take leave to treat with incredulity. Brennan was now enclosed in a German-speaking household of three women with whom he seems to have had little in common. We are not the judges of the rights and wrongs of the ensuing unhappy years. Estrangement from his wife became complete when he took up with the lady called "Vie" in 1922, at the age of 52. He wrote a number of poems for her. Then she was accidentally killed, and Brennan was, as he said, a "stricken man". In the same year his wife sued for a divorce and the University Senate dismissed him.

In the small group of these late love-poems one notices first that there is an effort to drop the magian poetic technology. In lyrics like "It is so long ago" and "Because she would ask me why I loved her" he reaches towards a new direct simplicity, not perfectly achieved, but poignant to a sympathetic reader. The two poems that are emotionally the most charged and impressive are, however, not altogether easy ones. One is "Midnight", which uses a refrain translated from an old French poem. I think we can accept Chisholm's view that two of the long stanzas were written while Vie was alive, but the third was added after her death. I do not feel able to comment usefully on this poem, which has some residual difficulties for me. The other poem is the sonnet, written after Vie's death, which I find remarkable. For once, the difficult elaboration of syntax, which Brennan had cultivated to the reader's disadvantage in his earlier poetry, has become functional in serving the expression. The poem has to be patiently construed, but it comes clear. A reading aloud cannot perform very fully this work of construing, yet I think the main intention and force of the poem can be felt, and the expressive value of the syntax appreciated:

*You, the one woman that could have me all
because you would, because it multiplied,
all that I was and did, your joy and pride
to have and hold me; you, Love's gladsome thrall*

*and hence exactress, that you must forestall
nor yet remit to all the world beside
love of that lover whom your love defied
to rate himself less than itself should call:
Death, that is dire to all, most dreadful here
to you the smitten, and this stricken man
you made and call'd your own, let him have done
the thing he can, the one, no more to fear,
since late or soon himself undoes, nor can
that thing you made, the only, be undone.*

I paraphrase clumsily that last part to read as follows: referring to himself as this "stricken man", he says, let him do the one thing left for him to do, namely, not to fear death or any disaster; for late or soon his doom will come, yet what you, the beloved, made him to be, that (which was all that counted) stands as a true fact for ever.

The conclusion I have edged towards is that Brennan might have done better if he had been content with a less formidable poetic technology, and a more direct use of his personal experience. But there is not much point in saying this: a poet does what seems needful to him, and abides the consequent judgement.

II

The work of John Shaw Neilson, a poet only about fifteen months younger than Brennan, stands in most striking contrast. All the advantages seemed to lie with Brennan. For poetry *is* in some respects a learned art; with whatever exceptions, it normally flowers best in one who has access to the tradition and possesses a highly developed intellectual culture. (This has been true even within an oral tradition, when that has been the prevailing mode of poetry in certain cultures.) In regard to the pair of poets we are considering, Brennan had exceptionally complete access to the whole of the tradition, but could not digest it into an authentic style. Neilson had a most imperfect and limited initiation, but he had a true natural gift which enabled him intuitively to perform magical tasks—to converse with birds, utter the true names of things, spin the straw of life into gold thread.

His lyrical gift was finer than that of Kendall. Of course, his successes were intermittent, his critical control uncertain. Though we may each make a somewhat different selection of his best poems, such a selection is necessary if we are to free his achievement from the inferior matter that surrounds it. Some of his poems are certain to appear on any list.

Neilson is personal only as the lyrical poet is often personal. There is a sense of intimacy, the cry of the heart, there may be traces of a particular situation or setting, a local coloration. Yet how impersonal, how nearly abstract at times the lyrics are. They have taken up only so much matter as will give the lyrical impulse a sensible existence.

*Let your song be delicate
The flowers can hear:
Too well they know the tremble
Of the hollow year.*

*Let your voice be delicate.
The bees are home:
All their day's love is sunken
Safe in the comb.*

*Let your song be delicate.
Sing no loud hymn:
Death is abroad. . . . Oh, the black season!
The deep—the dim!*

The poem bears the unique psychophysical impress of this poet; it is peculiarly a Neilson poem, but it is not an informative one. Neither is that extraordinarily perfect poem, "The Hour of Parting". Perhaps it was based on a real moment that happened to him. The suggestion of the departure of a ship localizes the poem, if vaguely. Yet the poem is general rather than particular:

*Shall we assault the pain?
It is the time to part:
Let us of Love again
Eat the impatient heart.*

*There is a gulf behind
Dull voice and fallen lip,
The blue smoke of the mind,
The gray light on the ship.*

*Parting is of the cold
That stills the loving breath,
Dimly we taste the old
The pitiless meal of Death.*

Somewhat more nearly tied to Neilson's individual experience are some poems in which he looks back to childhood. In "The Poor, Poor Country" the delicacy of song-lyric has broadened out into rhythmical speech which can take up, and needs to take up, a thicker load of detail. Yet, while the detail serves the mood of the poem, it is mainly exterior to the poet; all he says of himself is that in the "poor, poor country" of his youth he was not poor:

*Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
The only green was the cutting-grass and the sheep found
little there.
Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two
foot high,
But down in the poor country no pauper was I.*

.

*My riches all went into dreams that never yet came
home,
They touched upon the wild cherries and the slabs of
honeycomb,
They were not of the desolate brood that men can sell
or buy,
Down in that poor country no pauper was I.*

The most autobiographical of his poems is "The Gentle Water Bird", which he dedicated to Mary Gilmore, perhaps because conversation with her when he visited Sydney in 1926 elicited from him certain particular reminiscences which then went into the poem. For this poem is not about everyone's typical experience; it is quite singularly about his own. He says that his early religious formation clouded his

childhood with the thought of a terrible frowning God, so that even

*The rainbow with its treasury of dream
Trembled because of God's ungracious scheme.*

And:

Fear was upon me even in my play.

He goes on to say that it was in communing with the herons, the blue cranes, that he came to have an intimation of a divinity which was loving and gentle. The bird seemed to him to be an "intermediary" between heaven and man—to use the word chosen by Chisholm, whose commentary on this poem I cannot attempt to better. Yet, appealing as this poem is, it has weaknesses and cannot stand among Neilson's rare best: the interest in the rare self-revelation of the poem comes in aid of the poem. It remains true that the supreme lyrical moments are those that conform to the special personal-impersonal mode of the pure lyric poet: as in a late poem, "The Old Man in Autumn", in which the "old man"—himself or anyone—confronts the Unseen, the unwelcome stranger, Death:

*The calm is unceasing,
The soul would delay;
He the Unseen in Autumn
Steps not far away.*

*As Love half defeated
The flowers seek the dim;
Oh, the Unseen—I like not
The long talk with him.*

*He offered wisdom; already
I am too wise,
With all my years counted up
At the back of my eyes.*

*Too cold is the beauty,
The love burns dim;
That old man I like not,
Nor the long talk with him.*

III

Mary Gilmore was five years older than Brennan and long outlasted the writers of her generation and many of the next. Her long life and varied experience have woven her into almost a century of our history, so that her biography, when it is produced, and any reasonably full collection of her writings when it is produced, will be important. I knew her slightly only in her last years, and thought that she was then a repulsive example of a formidable will, cannily sucking homage indiscriminately out of the environment. It seems to me that Dobell's portrait of her, in which others have seen admiring homage, is a horribly accurate vision of senile egotism. With regard to what she was in earlier life I have no clear view, and I do not assume that one can read the end back into the beginning. Nor does my failure of sympathy with her last stage affect my view of her poetry.

What strikes me about her poetry is, how free it was, for so much of the time, from the period vices of diction and sentiment which so many other poets could not reject or control. One can point to some lapses into period diction and into feeble poeticality. Nevertheless, her instinct was for a plain straight language, which could move from the colloquial to a more formal and elevated style, from the lyrical mode to that of meditation or talk.

The norm of her language is pure and natural, and her approach to her subject-matter is direct and simple. It will doubtless become clearer when a full biography is written, but it is evident that much of her work springs from her own personal experience. At least this is the assumption borne in upon us by a poem like "Penelope" (the title being a perfunctory symbol of the wife whose husband has returned after long absence). The poem exhibits her natural strength:

*Twice I waked in the night,
Feeling if you were there—
Softly touched your cheek,
Softly kissed your hair;
Then turned to sleep again,
Lying against your arm,
Just as a child might do,
Fearing nor hurt, nor harm.*

*No fastened windows, now,
No bolting down the door,
Shaking at every sound
Of creaking chair and floor;
No watchful, wistful sleep,
Anxious, ever on guard,
Waked if only a dog
Moved in a neighbour's yard!*

*No start at a rattling blind,
No holding back the breath,
Fearful of some menace
Crueller far than death!
All of it gone! And why?
Somebody's home at last!
... Strange how real the fear;
Stranger still that it passed.*

That looks simple enough. But why could practically no one else of that generation touch on such domestic things without some kind of niminy-piminy saccharine self-conscious falsity that makes one want to puke?

The true ring of plain words is found also in certain gnomic poems, in which feeling clothes itself in homely wisdom. One such is "Nurse No Long Grief":

*Oh, could we weep,
And weeping bring relief!
But life asks more than tears
And falling leaf.*

*Though year by year
Tears fall and leaves are shed,
Spring bids new sap arise,
And blood run red.*

*Nurse no long grief,
Lest the heart flower no more;
Grief builds no barns; its plough
Rusts at the door.*

Another more purely gnostic poem, very effectively phrased without excess of rhetoric or bloating of the expression, is called "Nationality":

*I have grown past hate and bitterness,
I see the world as one;
But though I can no longer hate,
My son is still my son.*

*All men at God's round table sit,
And all men must be fed;
But this loaf in my hand,
This loaf is my son's bread.*

One can only reflect that Brennan, who never managed to say anything as sensible as this, had to adopt a vamped-up Biblico-Kiplingese rant for his political observations. One of Brennan's which I treasure is his way of opposing Archbishop Mannix and other Irish-Australians who opposed involvement in World War I:

*This scum that blights our fame,
This mildew on our land—
The murrain on their name;
My spittle on their hand.*

*The gates of Hell assail:
Look on you stricken French—
There dies the loyal Gael:
Let not your talkers blench.*

Though there is nothing quite so perfect in its kind as the chanted end-pieces to the poems in *The Chant of Doom*, such as:

*Ring the victory, ring the rout,
Ring the night of evil out—
Ring deliverance, ring the doom
(Cannon, cannon, cannon, boom)!*

In all respects one finds Mary Gilmore occupying a middle ground in her poetry. She uses the poetic means that lie to hand, but at her best uses them well, shedding modish fripperies and sophistications. She moves within common experi-

ence, drawing often from her own, but not in any startling confessional way—rather with the kind of reticence in regard to private detail that has been customary, at least until quite recent years.

IV

I conclude this second lecture with a brief consideration of the work of Kenneth Slessor, whose work was done in the twenties and thirties. The consideration will be brief, only because Slessor is not generally a self-revealing poet—though he is one whose personal impress can be felt as a markedly individual thing in everything he wrote. One dimension of his work is that he knows that poetry can be a natural paradise, a garden of delight, a playground. The games played in it may nevertheless be serious games; and even solemn ones, for solemnities are among man's enjoyments. I am not prescribing for poetry any one condition of being. My sole definition of poetry is that it is composition in verse (taking "verse" to mean any patterned or specially ordered speech). All I am saying is that in some poets the element of verbal play and of sensuous pleasure-making is conspicuous, and ought not to earn such glum frowns from serious critics in plate-glass universities. In Slessor's early poetry there is an exuberance of young-man's delight in verbal sensuousness, as there was with Marlowe's or Shakespeare's Ovidian exercises or Keats's first warm fancies. And all of that playful experience remained as a skill when deeper feelings had to be expressed.

One of Slessor's best poems, and one in which an intimate personal grief seems to speak, is "Cock-Crow", which has not been as much noticed as it should be. The movement is lyrical, and the feeling comes over easily, with a desolating clarity, even though one has to look twice or more before the analogy on which the poem works is exactly clear. The basic "image" (which is in sound more than sight) is of a distant cock-crow late at night, which arouses that eerie and futile disordered noise in response from other birds. So in the poet's sleep the voice of one dead distantly calls, and there is within him a futile and confused response, like the clamour of

fowls entering the sleep of one dreaming:

*The cock's far cry
From lonely yards
Burdens the night
With boastful birds
That mop their wings
To make response—
A mess of songs
And broken sense.*

*So when I slept,
I heard your call
(If lips long dead
Could answer still)
And snapped-off thoughts
Broke into clamour,
Like the night's throats
Heard by a dreamer.*

The second stanza remains rather elliptical. The third and fourth lines threaten to throw one out by saying "If lips long dead/ Could *answer* still" when in terms of the analogy these lips are making the initial "far cry" that evokes a response. One has to conclude that behind the poem is the poet's anterior wish that the dead one could speak, to which the "far cry" in the dream is an illusory answer. The snapped-off thoughts are those of the poet: the thoughts and wishes which had been broken off by the death of the loved one now springing to futile life.

The poem is not, I imagine, connected in experience with "Five Bells", but in its basic thought-structure it is similar. "Five Bells" is a relatively long poem, an elegy for a drowned friend. It has some strong and moving and finely-worked passages—though they only just manage to cohere into a whole, and there are weaker sections. I have drifted away by repeated re-readings from the estimate of most critics that it is Slessor's best poem. But it remains an interesting and important one. In it our inability to receive any intimation from the dead is a major theme. One is reminded of the theme of Harpur's monodies, only to be made aware of the vast difference in artistry which enables Slessor to operate

more immediately upon our mind and feeling. Slessor's answer to the great question of life's goal and final meaning is a baffled and hopeless one. Having indicated the dark nothingness he brings us back in the last paragraph of the poem to a fugal section in which the light and sound and activity we perceive in our sensuous existence has now, in all its brilliance, a cold and heartbreaking quality. The setting is Sydney Harbour, on which the poet is gazing, thinking of the friend who drowned in it:

*I looked out of my window in the dark
At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand
In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze,
And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,
And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.*

Five Bells.

CONTEMPORARY POETS

HOPE, WRIGHT, DOBSON, BUCKLEY, JONES, SMITH

COME now to the consideration of some poets writing to-day. A personal element is embodied in their work in various ways: in the first place that impress of a psycho-physical constitution, peculiar to each poet, which the poem in its organization receives, even below the level of the author's will. This is not something one can convey convincingly in brief examples—it is rather a cumulative organic impression in the reader who has absorbed the poetry over a period of attentive reading. I suggest, for instance, that there is in the work of A. D. Hope a certain kinesthetic effect of controlled muscularity and a range of tactile sensations which is characteristic. I am not sure how far one can separate the physical behaviour of the words from their meanings and syntax or other logico-rhetorical behaviour in making these descriptions. I think it unlikely that speech-sounds convey very much except when wedded to meaning, though I suppose one could run texts through a computer and work out the poet's addiction to certain phonemes or clusters of phonemes, even perhaps certain rhythmic characteristics (though this depends partly on the varied interpretations by readers).

One interesting question is whether the characteristic feel of a poet's work can change from earlier to later periods. I think this does happen. I do not find it so in Hope's work: the deepening and maturing seems to be on an unchanging base of organic sensibility. But it does seem to me to have happened in the work of Judith Wright to some extent: at least one might say that while her earlier work has certain emphases within a range of characteristic effects, her later work has different emphases and has even shifted the range.

I am aware that this is an intuitive judgement which cannot easily be validated by objective analysis, and I offer it only because it enables me to stress again the importance of trying to experience poetry as a vibrant thing whose expressive resources are deeply connected with the organic life, first of the poet and secondly of the reader.

I

At a certain point Hope began in his work to confront the need to find a kind of poetry which would enable painful conflicts or tensions, of a deeply personal kind, to be expressed and explored and at least provisionally resolved—so that at least the poem might enact a tolerable attitude towards the material. The early poem, “Pygmalion”, is amongst the first of these attempts to find a method and language capable of the task. The method first attempted was fairly direct, with all the problems of tone and management of detail thus involved. The subject-matter is to some extent like that of Brennan which we have discussed. At least, the poem, is in three movements, the first of which records a pre-nuptial expectation—or even demand—that union shall be a transfiguring, a divinizing, experience; the second records failure and loss in erotic union; and the third takes us into a resentful rejection of the compromises involved in daily cohabitation:

*or would you dare to build
A garden suburb of kindness where we piled
Our terrible sexual landscape, heap on heap
Of raging mountains?*

One might say that married life as a “garden suburb of kindness” represents the same mediocrity of everyday making-do-with-things as Brennan’s Adam rejected when he spoke of Eve as “a flowery pasture fenced and soft with streams” and aspired to Lilith instead.

In a number of Hope’s earlier poems there is a reiteration of despair, or a frustration close to despair, which may take comic or satirical as well as more overtly serious forms. The title poem of his first book, *The Wandering Islands*, has as its

theme the aloneness of the heart: at least the aloneness of certain people who are wandering islands, not fixed on the chart, nor annexed by any social institution. These islands may meet and touch for a moment, but they part. The poet imagines a castaway on each, so that

*The shipwrecked sailor senses
His own despair in a retreating face.
Around him he hears in the huge monotonous voices
Of wave and wind: "The Rescue will not take place."*

There is a mixed kind of elaborate ironic melodrama in the treatment of the Arnoldian metaphor here. The feeling has been projected and caged within a conceit at a safe distance, so that the poet can poke at it between the bars without getting his head bitten off. The problem is, how much is lost and how much is gained by these projections, into ingeniously diverse forms, of an inner theme of lived passion and anguish. The forms may be those of myth and legend, or a parallel situation may be expressed in a former literary mode recreated with Hope's uncommon fluency and skill, or satirical fantasies may be presented. I am not disposed to judge the varying usefulness of these manoeuvres or the relative value of their products in the case of Hope's work. If I forced myself to evaluate as a responsible critic should, I would have no confidence in my present judgement or in its stability. It is true that I take it less for granted than I used to that these uses of symbol, analogy and mask are the best way of dealing with this kind of personal material. That these methods of projection constitute one way is clear, and they can yield poetry of a high order. But I am more interested at present in the possibility of dealing rather more directly with personal experience

I do not think I can say that Hope has moved decisively towards a more direct method, though certain of his later poems do represent a minimizing of external displacement of the material, and a corresponding increase in the poet's speaking as if in personal avowal. (I say "as if", because the presented ego of the poet is still not necessarily identical with the private ego and the private experience of the poet.) Among such later poems the very eloquent "Ode on the

Death of Pius the Twelfth" is noteworthy, and also the earlier "A Bidding Grace",¹ which I quote. Here the framework of Judgment Day is adopted as a dramatic device rather than as a dogmatically defined reality, but there is a sense of direct speech, not altogether unworthy of comparison with Donne's "Hymn to God the Father":

*For what we are about to hear, Lord, Lord,
The dreadful judgement, the unguessed reprieve,
The brief, the battering, the jubilant chord
Of trumpets quickening this guilty dust,
Which still would hide from what it shall receive,
Lord, make us thankful to be what we must.*

*For what we are now about to lose, reprove,
Assuage or comfort, Lord, this greedy flesh,
Still grieving, still rebellious, still in love,
Still prodigal of treasure still unspent.
Teach the blood weaving through its intricate mesh
The sigh, the solace, the silence of consent.*

*For what we are about to learn too late, too late
To save, though we repent with tears of blood:
The innocent ruined, the gentle taught to hate,
The love we made a means to its despair—
For all we have done or did not when we could,
Redouble on us the evil these must bear.*

*For what we are about to say, urge, plead,
The specious argument, the lame excuse,
Prompt our contempt. When these archangels read
Our trivial balance, lest the shabby bill
Tempt to that abjectness which begs or sues,
Leave us one noble impulse: to be still.*

*For what we are about to act, the lust, the lie
That works unbidden, even now restrain
This reckless heart. Though doomed indeed to die,
Grant that we may, still trembling at the bar
Of Justice in the thud of fiery rain,
Acknowledge at last the truth of what we are.*

¹ From A. D. Hope, *Collected Poems 1930-1965*. Sydney, 1966.

*In all we are about to receive, last, last,
Lord, help us bear our part with all men born
And, after judgement given and sentence passed,
Even at this uttermost, measured in thy gaze,
Though in thy mercy, for the rest to mourn,
Though in thy wrath we stand, to stand and praise.*

II

One cannot speak of the personal element in Judith Wright's work without at least referring to certain early poems which made her eminent among us, poems that express parts of a woman's experience of love and motherhood, most notably of all the poem, "Woman to Man". But one must not go on stressing these early successes and ignoring later work of value. Here, for example, is a later comment on a woman's experience, from her most recent book. It is called "Portrait":²

*It was a heartfelt game, when it began—
polish and cook and sew and mend, contrive,
move between sink and stove, keep flower-beds weeded—
all her love needed was that it was needed,
and merely living kept the blood alive.*

*Now an old habit leads from sink to stove,
mends and keeps clean the house that looks like home,
and waits in hunger dressed to look like love
for the calm return of those who, when they come,
remind her: this was a game, when it began.*

A later poem which I think admirable is called "Sports Field".³ It draws on the common experience of many parents watching their children winning and losing at the school sports. The sports are seen as a natural symbol of the race of life. The ache and helplessness of parental love are well rendered. The analogy has an extended development and control that is not typical of Judith Wright's earlier work. The language has dried slightly, and accords well with the theme:

² From Judith Wright, *The Other Half*. Sydney, 1966.

³ From Judith Wright, *Five Senses*. Sydney, 1963.

*Naked all night the field
breathed its dew until
the great gold ball of day
sprang up from the dark hill.*

*Now as the children come
the field and they are met.
Their day is measured and marked,
its lanes and tapes are set;*

*and the children gilt by the sun
shoulder one another;
crouch at the marks to run,
and spring, and run together—*

*the children pledged and matched,
and built to win or lose,
who grow, while no one watches,
the selves in their sidelong eyes.*

*The watchers love them in vain.
What's real here is the field,
the starter's gun, the lane,
the ball dropped or held;*

*and set towards the future
they run like running water,
for only the pride of winning,
the pain the losers suffer,*

*till the day's great golden ball
that no one ever catches,
drops; and at its fall
runners and watchers*

*pick up their pride and pain
won out of the measured field
and turn away again
while the star-dewed night comes cold.*

*So pride and pain are fastened
into the heart's future,
while naked and perilous
the night and the field glitter.*

III

I am one of the numerous miscellany of people who think Rosemary Dobson's work has been underrated. One reason may be that it does not lend itself to extensive critical interpretations and has not attracted to itself the technology of modern literary scholarship. Some of Rosemary Dobson's work is a rendering of experiences of love and motherhood, and some comparison might be made with poems on these themes by Judith Wright. But I shall read only two poems on the birth of a child. The first uses a delicate imagery which gives a legendary quality to the process of gestation, the journey in time towards birth-giving. It is entitled "The Birth":⁴

*A wreath of flowers as cold as snow
Breaks out in bloom upon the night:
That tree is rooted in the dark,
It draws from dew its breath of life,
It feeds on frost, it hangs in air
And like a glittering branch of stars
Receives, gives forth, its breathing light.*

*Eight times it flowered in the dark,
Eight times my hand reached out to break
That icy wreath to bear away
Its pointed flowers beneath my heart.
Sharp are the pains and long the way
Down, down into the depths of night
Where one goes for another's sake.*

*Once more it flowers, once more I go
In dream at midnight to that tree,
I stretch my hand and break the branch
And hold it to my human heart,
Now, as the petals of a rose
Those flowers unfold and grow to me—
I speak as of a mystery.*

The second poem, "Birth (2)",⁵ is about the loss almost immediately of the child at birth; it speaks of the loving grief that is restorative and wisdom-bearing:

⁴ From Rosemary Dobson, *Selected Poems*. Sydney, 1963.

⁵ *Op. cit.*

*Unknown, never to be known, lost
Beyond darkness, beyond the reach of time,
Brought forth from darkness as a wave
That breaks upon the edge of day
And knows but for a moment shore,
Landfall, the earth. So there was light
And human hands, before the tide
Returned you to the oblivious night.*

*Trembling to life in dark profound
Where time is measured by the beat
Of human heart, while love awaits,
A tree of unimagined light
To break in blossom at your birth,
As dream, as dew, as shadow, frost
That fade beneath our waking hands
Unknown, never to be known, lost.*

*I hold you to my mortal heart
Since what is lost is always held.
Unknown, yet always to be known,
Lost, and so always to be loved.
Brief life that for a moment lodged
Between our need and our distress,
I turn, return, stretch forth my hands—
Who gave you life, them you will bless.*

*Enrich us with your need of life,
Draw from us now the power of love,
Strengthen, restore, since you return
Our love, in needing us to love.
Oh wisdom beyond mortal thought
That who gives most has most to give.
Like dew, like frost, like snow renew
Our life, and, dying, so you live.*

IV

With some of the recent work of Vincent Buckley we come to an attempt, in a fully modern idiom, to render personal experience in its concrete particularity of actual occurrence. His poem, "Stroke",⁶ is a sequence dealing with the death of

⁶ From Vincent Buckley, *Arcady and Other Places*. Melbourne, 1966.

his father. To take away part of it out of the whole is to diminish it. This is perhaps less true of the first section of the sequence, though it too gains by retrospection from the later part. The details are given either to enforce our mental and physical co-participation in the scene, or to suggest a possible symbolic meaning. Any metaphor not arising from the concrete situation itself (such as the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire) is quickly absorbed into the actuality of the experience. The relief of distancing or analogical projection or generalization is something the poet denies himself and us; we must remain immediately present:

In the faint blue light

*We are both strangers; so I'm forced to note
His stare that comes moulded from deep bone,
The full mouth pinched in too far, one hand
Climbing an aluminium bar.
Put, as though for the first time,
In a cot from which only a hand escapes,
He grasps at opposites, knowing
This room's caricature of childhood,
"I'm done for."*

"They're treating you all right?"

*We talk from the corners of our mouths
Like old lags, while his body strains
To notice me, before he goes on watching
At the bed's foot
His flickering familiars,
Skehan, Wilson, Ellis, dead men, faces,
Bodies, paused in the aluminium light,
Submits his answer to his memories,
"Yes, I'm all right. But still it's terrible."*

*Words like a fever bring
The pillar of cloud, pillar of fire
Travelling the desert of the mind and face,
The deep-set, momentarily cunning eyes
Keep trying for a way to come
Through the bed's bars to his first home.
And almost find it. Going out I hear
Voices calling requiem, where the cars*

*Search out the fog and gritty snow,
Hushing its breathing under steady wheels.
Night shakes the seasonable ground.*

V

In a number of his poems Evan Jones, a poet of different gifts from those of Buckley, has taken up a similar task of constructing a poem which gives us the sense of immediate experience—not by random notation but by the controlled use of particular detail. The poems I am thinking of are those in his recent volume, *Understandings*,⁷ which deal with the breakdown of a marriage, and the relation to a son whom the father visits at arranged times. First is "At the Airport":

*Waving good-bye to mum,
Sometimes we go for walks,
More often, though, we come
Out here: planes are the thing
That sets him chattering—
Just three, he scarcely talks.
Gambolling on the lawn,
He watches for my grin
And grins and answers back.
The great planes, finely drawn,
Come shrieking down the track;
People walk out and in.
Nowadays I can tell
Kinds of air liner apart—
Wing-structure, fuselage:
It is details that compel—
Hardly my heritage,
An odd thing to learn by heart.*

A connected poem from the same volume, with a very effective tense control of phrase and rhythm is "Generations":

*I go to see my parents
we chew the rag a bit;
I turn the telly on
and sit and look at it.*

⁷ Melbourne, 1967.

*Not much gets said:
there doesn't seem much point.
But still they like to have
me hanging round the joint.
I go to see my son,
I'm like a Santa Claus:
he couldn't like me more;
mad about him, of course.
Still years before he learns
to judge, condemn, dismiss.
I stand against the light
and bleed for both of us.*

VI

In another poet whose work interests me, Vivian Smith, the tendency so far has not been to build the poetry into a clearly defined situation such as in the poems I have quoted from Vincent Buckley and Evan Jones. But many of the poems are renderings of personal experience. Much of that experience—however linked with outer occasions or settings—is an inner experience of spiritual change, growth, doubt, discomfort, illumination. This has to find its own language. Rilke has obviously contributed much to the language of interior meditation which Vivian Smith has been developing, and which marks “One Season”:⁸

*This is one season of the heart's dismay
when life is like a strident conversation;
words pretend there's something left to say
when silence simply covers consternation.*

*Discordant season: moments of despair:
we glimpse the cracks that run through all our lives;
the heart we lightly thought rich and austere;
the mind's disordered drawer of borrowed knives.*

*Don't run with words. Don't seek them. Words aren't
wise.*

*The mind's eclipses move to prove its suns.
And nudity of all is best disguise:
stay bare in stillness. . . . Vanity runs.*

⁸ From Vivian Smith, *An Island South*. Sydney, 1967.

EPILOGUE

HARPUR and Kendall sought a way to deal directly and in detail with personal experience, but did not succeed in finding one. Vincent Buckley and Evan Jones have obviously been more successful, and part of that success has been due to a realization that a poem of this kind must move colloquially, with a carefully tempered informal manner, so that daily particularities can enter without disturbing the economy of the poem. This is not to say that formality and tension are not present in other ways at the same time. In the traditional language of critical analysis, what is happening is that the "base" or "familiar" style is being put to new uses.

Why has modern poetry made this effort to digest particular personal experience? In one aspect it is surely a product of that unfolding realization of the unique value and significance of each individual human person, and his life-history, which characterizes the Western and Christian tradition. A man is not merely a fleeting instance of humanity-in-general; existent things are not a degradation of pure essence; if life has a meaning, then meaning invades the psychophysical organism of man as he makes his choices minutely in his concrete situation. On the other hand, it is also possible that some of this poetry is a retreat from meaning and an abandonment of rational control. When no structures of belief and rational interpretation or moral principle remain, the poet can fall back upon a record of his random sensitivities: the private world does not then complement the public one; it proclaims the ruin of the public world as well as its own disorder. Similarly, in those poems which are nowadays called "confessional", one of two things may be happening, or a mixture of both. There may be the effort to bring painful or shameful experience under rational scrutiny and control. Or there may be the will to desecrate the last sanctuaries, to destroy the very notion of privacy—the poet as a self-hating, self-exhibiting nihilist nit recedes from us in a series of "break-throughs"—from literary new deal, to new frontier, to alienation, to . . . being a performing clown in *The New York Review of Books*?

To illustrate the latter phenomenon it would indeed be necessary to turn to some recent American writing. True to the conservatism which has been noted as hitherto characteristic of Australian writing, our poets show no sign of taking that left-hand path. Those who are trying to deal with personal experience are clearly trying to achieve rational moral control, not abandon it. Yet it is an easy prophecy that our conservatism will not much longer prevent the emergence of black poetry, with its verbal violence, its formlessness, its antinomian and antilogical frenzy, its pretence that all that is needed, to attain the realm of freedom and love "out there", is to violate all decencies and tear down all conventions, and its secret winking inner light of wicked knowledge that "out there" is neither freedom nor love but only one shelf of the vast hell of the egotists—the Poets' Shelf, no doubt, though there may be room for some critics as well.

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Professor McAuley was invited to deliver the 1968 series of lectures for the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies at the University College of Townsville and chose the topic which gives its name to this book.