The Sword, the Pen and the Brush

Australian poetry and painting in the battle with tradition, 1923-1948

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Contents

Introduction i

Chapter 1

Problems in the Relation Between Poetry and Painting 1

Chapter 2

Australian Poets and Painters: The Necessity of Collaboration 40

Chapter 3

Norman Lindsay and His Influence 71

Chapter 4

Kenneth Slessor 113

Chapter 5

Catastrophes of Bloodshed: The Battle with Tradition 154

Chapter 6

Four Poet-Painters of the 1940s 190

Chapter 7

Rosemary Dobson: Exception and Rule 233

Conclusion 277

List of Illustrations 282

Bibliography 296

Introduction

A full understanding of the ways in which poetry and painting relate to each other can be grasped only by a keen knowledge of the circumstances which contributed to, and encouraged, their association. Such an approach is preferable in any discussion of interchange between the arts. But in analysing the multitude of relationships shared by Australian poetry and painting during the three decades following the end of World War One it is essential. Between 1923 and 1948, poems were written about paintings, friendships formed between poets and painters and techniques learned from the exchange which altered the character of local art and literature. To confine discussions of the era to say, pictorialism in poetry or literary allusions in painting is to gain a patchy, unsatisfactory view of an epoch which witnessed more instances of collaboration between poets and painters than any other period in Australia's history.

When viewed in isolation, Norman Lindsay's influence over young Australian poets of the twenties and thirties seems gargantuan - a product more indicative of the artist's legendary charisma than of any shared impulses between the arts. Consider, however, the impact of T. S. Eliot on Albert Tucker, Rimbaud on Sidney Nolan, Italian quottrocento art on Rosemary Dobson and a curious cubist aesthetic sensibility in the later poetry of Kenneth Slessor and the picture of Lindsay's supposed domination of the genre looks strikingly different. Nor is the tremendous impetus to learn from other arts which poets and painters shared during this complex era easily explained by an examination of poems inspired specifically by paintings or paintings inspired specifically by poems.

While Slessor dedicated some of his most memorable early works to Norman Lindsay, it is only from the perspective of his later poetry that the full effects of his youthful fascination with art can be understood. In Slessor's maturity, art ceases to be an externalised subject or even source of inspiration, becoming instead a catalyst for creating an imagery in which time's fluid processes are revealed.

Friendships between poets and painters can be equally unilluminating. There is no doubt that Max Harris's editorship of Angry Penguins influenced Albert Tucker or that Thea Proctor's painting tuition helped the young Rosemary Dobson hone her poetic skills. Yet for obvious reasons - standards not being the least among them - Tucker's work owes a great deal more to T. S. Eliot than it does to Harris, while Dobson's enthusiasm for renaissance painting sits oddly with her former teacher's design-oriented modernism. Just as liable to produce a pie-eyed view of the period is an isolated study of the local arts and how they interacted. With the exception of Sidney Nolan's impassioned support of Ern Malley's poems, Australian painters of the '40s were more deeply influenced by Eliot than they were by local poets such as Judith Wright and Kenneth Slessor. Albert Tucker, Joy Hester and Sidney Nolan all drew conscious inspiration from the poetry of Rimbaud, Mallarmé and the work of surrealists such as Dali. Even Arthur Boyd - a painter noted for the strong Australian character of his work - responded to passages of Joycean poetics in The Mining Town, his Brueghel-inspired vision of Melbourne during the 1940s.

Other poets and painters simply found themselves sharing styles of approach in their work which were symptomatic of the age rather than of any direct influence between

the arts. While striking similarities exist between Kenneth Slessor's multi-faceted verse portraiture and cubist painting of the 1920s, the comparison probably owes as much to the poet's conscious collaboration with say, Cezanne or Picasso, as Ben Jonson's multi-layered, allegorical love poetry did to Baroque architecture of the Italian sesquicento. Legitimate comparisons can be made nevertheless - comparisons which raise the question of how a given age endows common traits in the work of talents so far-flung and diverse that they are unlikely to have admired, or even known, each other's works.

Many of the poets and painters who enjoyed friendships during this period were, not surprisingly, either practising the other's art with varying degrees of proficiency and interest or were drawn to their creative siblings by highly developed visual imaginations or strong literary and poetic leanings. It is dangerous, however, when discussing the curiously high instance of interaction between poets and painters to assume that a similar set of circumstances prevailed over every association. Like so much of the period in question, the relationships shared by Australian poets and painters between the wars were fraught with frustrating contradictions and inconsistencies. Some were founded on an admiration for specific personalities or the natural accident of acquaintanceship in a small artistic fraternity. Others were simply the product of commercial necessity. Few were the result of conscious efforts to draw riches from a complementary or closely related art - and still fewer set out to extend a tradition of interchange between the arts stretching back through English poetry to Spenser. Despite the apparent lack of coherence or even consciousness in these associations, their prevalence throughout the period is sufficient to assume that some common thread - or threads - might be traced in the making of such a

curious "pattern".

In composing a complete picture of the 25-year period which roughly spanned the publication of Slessor's Earth-Visitors in 1923 and the onset of Cold War in 1948, it is necessary to consider not only the sheer multiplicity of relationships shared by poetry and painting, but the context - and the era - in which they were formed. While Australian poets and painters have participated (for the most part, unwittingly) in a strong western tradition of inter-play between the arts, certain factors have contributed to the association to make it unique. In many cases, collaboration between local poets and painters has been less a phenomonen of natural sympathy between the arts than a product of the difficult struggle with isolation and obscurity which dominated Australian art and literature during the decades following World War One. Closely aligned with this struggle has been the conflicting impetus towards internationalism and modernism on the one hand and tradition and nationalism on the other. How poetry and painting interacted in response to these pressures makes a fascinating study of the ways in which art and literature have been shaped by geographic isolation, depression, nationalism and war during a period in which Australian culture might otherwise have expected to enjoy a trouble-free coming of age.

1 Problems in the Relation Between Poetry and Painting

The European Inheritance

Usually ignored as a distinctive epoch in the national art and literature, the dark, but magical, stretch of years between the Great and the Cold Wars produced some of Australia's finest poets and painters: R. D. FitzGerald, Kenneth Slessor, Rosemary Dobson, Judith Wright, A. D. Hope, James McAuley, Francis Webb, Margaret Preston, Frank Hinder, Roy de Maistre, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, Arthur Boyd, James Gleeson, Danila Vassilief, Donald Friend, Yosl Bergner, John Perceval, Russell Drysdale, Sali Herman, Noel Counihan and William Dobell.

Thanks largely to the work of this extraordinary group, Australian poetry and painting underwent something of a metamorphosis. In less than three decades - and with little more than a century of half-formed local traditions to support it - the national culture progressed from one which could boast only a handful of half-deified bush-poets and landscape painters, to one capable of producing the unprovincial freshness of Nolan's Ned Kelly series (fig. 1.1), the technical brilliance of Slessor's "Five Bells" and the unselfconscious grandeur of Wright's "South of My Day's Circle". For perhaps the first time, Australian poets and painters began to capture the country's unique character in a style that was not only universal in its expression, but world-class in its achievement.



Fig. 1.1. Sidney Nolan, First-Class Marksman, private collection. 1946. Page 77 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends. By Jane Clark. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

The period is remarkable not only for the range and depth of its literary and artistic talent, but for the degree of sympathy it encouraged between the arts. In keeping with the climate of collaboration which prevailed all over the world in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, poets, painters, sculptors and musicians began to inspire each other in ways which questioned traditional notions of segregation between the arts. In less than 10 years - and with very little direct knowledge of each other's work and stylistic sympathies, Sidney Nolan produced abstract stage designs for Serge Lifar's ballet, Icare (fig. 1.2), Roy de Maistre constructed abstract colour harmonies according to the principles of classical music (fig. 1.3) and painter James Gleeson joined forces with sculptor Robert Klippel to create the outrageous Madam Sosostris, a sculpture-painting inspired by T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. Even William Dobell's 1947 painting, The Dead Landlord, so fired Patrick White's imagination that the author's first play, The Ham Funeral, was woven almost entirely around the image (fig. 1.4). [1]

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[1] In his article, "The Painting that Inspired and Australian Play", published in PIX magazine (14 July 1962: 57-62), William Latimer notes that White wrote The Ham Funeral after meeting William Dobell in London in 1947. Interestingly, the inspiration for the play came not just from the painting itself, but from the story which had, in effect, inspired the painting. In the article, White is quoted as follows:

> I was the only lodger in a house in Ebury Street, London .... As I sat in my empty room I began to play with Dobell's anecdote: of how his landlord had died, how the landlady had taken down her hair, announcing there would be a ham funeral and that he must go to fetch the relatives. Out of these original facts and my own self-searchings and experience as a young man in the house in Ebury Street the play ... developed.

While the image itself provided the initial inspiration, it was the story behind the picture - and the character and/or eloquence of William Dobell - which gave the play its real fabric. Even so, as the pictures accompanying Latimer's article clearly demonstrate, close attention was paid to the details of Dobell's painting by the producers of The Ham Funeral's 1962 debut. So important was this source of inspiration to both White and the producers that the original painting was faithfully replicated in a scene from the stage production.



Fig. 1.2. Sidney Nolan, Icare. 1941. From Sidney Nolan: Such is Life. By Brian Adams. Melbourne: Century Hutchinson, 1987. N.pag.



Fig. 1.3. Roy de Maistre, The Boatsheds, in Violet Red Key, Clarice Thomas. 1919. Page 150 of Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art, 1788-1988. Ed. Daniel Thomas. Adelaide: International Cultural Corporation of Australia Limited in association with the Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1988.



Fig. 1.4. William Dobell, The Dead Landlord. Cover of Collected Plays, Volume 1. By Patrick White. Sydney: Currency Press, 1985.

It is in the inter-play between poetry and painting, however, that the period leaves one its most enduring marks. Between 1923 and 1948, the course of Australian poetry and painting overlapped in such a way that the character and shape of each was irrevocably altered. In many cases, the interaction was subtle and the overall effect diffuse. But without it, local art and literature would have lacked a certain richness and depth and, in the case of Kenneth Slessor, a modern poet.

To fully understand the special nature of the relationship enjoyed by Australian poetry and painting at this time, it is essential to understand also the complexity of the tradition from which it sprang. While few of the poets and painters who shared friendships and influences between the Great and the Cold Wars did so with any burning sense of history, there is no doubt that their inter-action forms part of a complex pattern of exchange between the 'sibling' arts which is as old as the pyramids themselves. Whether celebrating specific painters as Browning had done or exploiting the descriptive elements of verse in the manner of Spenser or Tennyson, poets as diverse in their sympathies and achievements as Kenneth Slessor and Max Harris worked within a largely unconscious tradition of interchange between poetry and painting. Painters such as Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker also drew directly on their European heritage, delving not only into the riches of Eliot and Mallarmé but into a vein of symbolist painting coursing back through the works of Salvador Dali and Odilon Redon to the medieval christian allegories of Heironymous Bosch.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this search through history for other

examples of interchange between poetry and painting is the light it sheds not only on the natural impetus of one art towards the other, but the ways in which this tendency has been shaped or encouraged by the times. For Australian poets and painters, the impulse to breach artistic boundaries has been framed by a set of factors which are not only aesthetic by nature, but historical, political and even geographical. In grasping why fragmented and often unrelated groups of Australian artists chose (unconsciously or otherwise) to cross the pen and the brush in pursuit of new forms of art and literature, it is necessary to consider not only the deep affinities in the relationship between poetry and painting but the complex links these affinities have formed with western notions of tradition and experiment through the ages.

Ut Pictura Poesis: A Brief Survey of the Tradition

Since the ancients began observing similarities in the works of poets and painters more than 25 centuries ago, a special relationship between the two arts has been assumed - one which is, perhaps, the closest shared by any of the creative 'sisters'. Simonides of Ceos was the first to identify this striking family likeness, encapsulating many of the differences as well as similarities between the siblings in his pronouncement that painting is mute poetry and poetry, painting which speaks. This famous precept was followed by Horace's much-quoted dictum, "ut pictura poesis" - "painting resembles poetry" or "in poetry as in painting". [2] As Mario Praz remarks in his book, Mnemosyne: The Parallel

[2] For a range of translations see Jean H. Hagstrum, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray (1958; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); Willard Bohn, The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914-1928 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Wendy Steiner, The Colors of Rhetoric (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Between Literature and the Visual Arts, both phrases "enjoyed an undisputed authority for centuries" - an authority which formed the basis for a tradition of interchange between the arts which is as valid today as it was in classical times: [3]

> A glance at an old tradition dating back as far as Homer's description of Achilles' shield will easily convince us that poetry and painting have constantly proceeded hand in hand, in a sisterly emulation of aims and means of expression. This is the case whether you consider the ἐκφράσεις of the Alexandrians, the *Imagines* of Philostratus the Elder or the plastic descriptions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (such as the sculptural Annunciation in the tenth canto of the *Purgatory*), of Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione*, and of the *Orlando Furiosa* (to quote only instances from the Italian tradition); even down to Foscolo's *Grazie*, in which the poet has Canova for a model, and to D'Annunzio's sensuous images, which owe a good deal to the Pre-Raphaelites, who in their turn were saturated with suggestions from the literary field. And, in the English tradition, one may trace the same trend from Chaucer's description of the monuments of the worthies of the *House of Fame* and the paintings in verse in Spenser and Shakespeare (*The Rape of Lucrece*) down to Keats's passages inspired by Titian, Poussin, the Elgin marbles, and even by John

[3] Mario Praz, Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts (The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1967; London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 4.

Martin's spectacular compositions. [4]

As Praz's brief survey of the tradition demonstrates, the question of exactly what this interchange constitutes is a broad one. While poets may be inspired to write about paintings or painters moved to celebrate poems in their work - as Browning was by Italian art and artists of the quattrocento or Claude by Ovid's poetry - such obvious examples of exchange form only the tip of an iceberg built on centuries of mutual influence and empathy.

Whether by virtue of close friendships such as those shared in Bloomsbury and Pre-Raphaelite circles or by means of firsthand knowledge of certain works of art, poets and painters have, at various times, influenced each other profoundly. Keats was inspired by the "fairyland world" of Claude's The Enchanted Castle (fig. 1.5) as was Shelley by the mystery and melancholy of da Vinci's masterpieces, Thomas Gray by Poussin's The Shepherds of Arcady (fig. 1.6) and Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" by Brueghel's paintings. [5] Painting has also drawn its share of inspiration from poetry: Bosch's Ship of Fools (fig. 1.7), Botticelli's Birth of Venus (fig. 1.8), Turner's Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus (fig. 1.9) and Redon's The Sleep of Caliban (fig. 1.10) are just a few examples of those paintings inspired by poems which have attained varying degrees of fame and critical admiration irrespective of their poetic sources. Even more fascinating is

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[4] Praz 5.

[5] Quoted from Margaret Drabble, ed., The Oxford Companion to English Literature (5th ed. 1985; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). See entries under Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin, 205 and 782. See also Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) 127.



Fig. 1.5. Claude Lorrain, Psyche in Front of the Palace of Amor (The Enchanted Castle), National Gallery, London. 1664. From the Larousse Dictionary of Painters. Ed. by Alistair Smith. 1976. London: Hamlyn, 1989. N.pag.



Fig. 1.6. Nicholas Poussin, Les Bergers d'Arcadie (The Shepherds of Arcady), Louvre, Paris. 1650-55. Page 191 of La vie et l'oeuvre de Nicolas Poussin. By Jean-Jacques Lévêque. Paris: ACR Édition Internationale, 1988.



Fig. 1.7. Hieronymous Bosch, The Ship of Fools, Louvre, Paris. 1490-1500. Plate 9 of Hieronymous Bosch. By Gregory Martin. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.

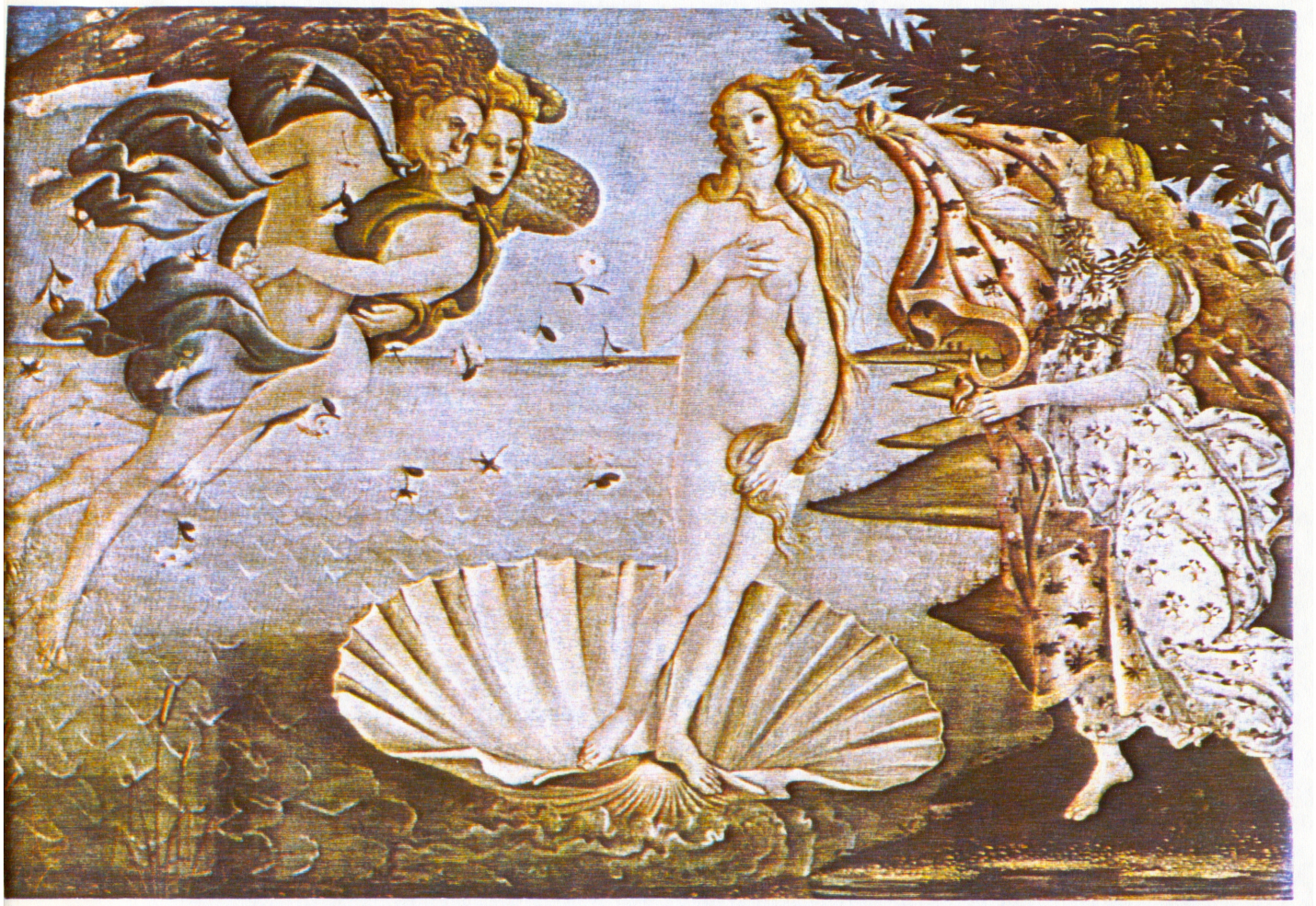

Fig. 1.8. Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. 1485. Colour Colour plate 20 of Handbook of Art. By Graham Hopwood. 1971. Melbourne: Graham Hopwood, 1974.



Fig. 1.9. William Turner, Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey, National Gallery, London. 1829. Page 97 of Turner: the Masterworks. By Eric Shanes. London: Studio Editions, 1990.

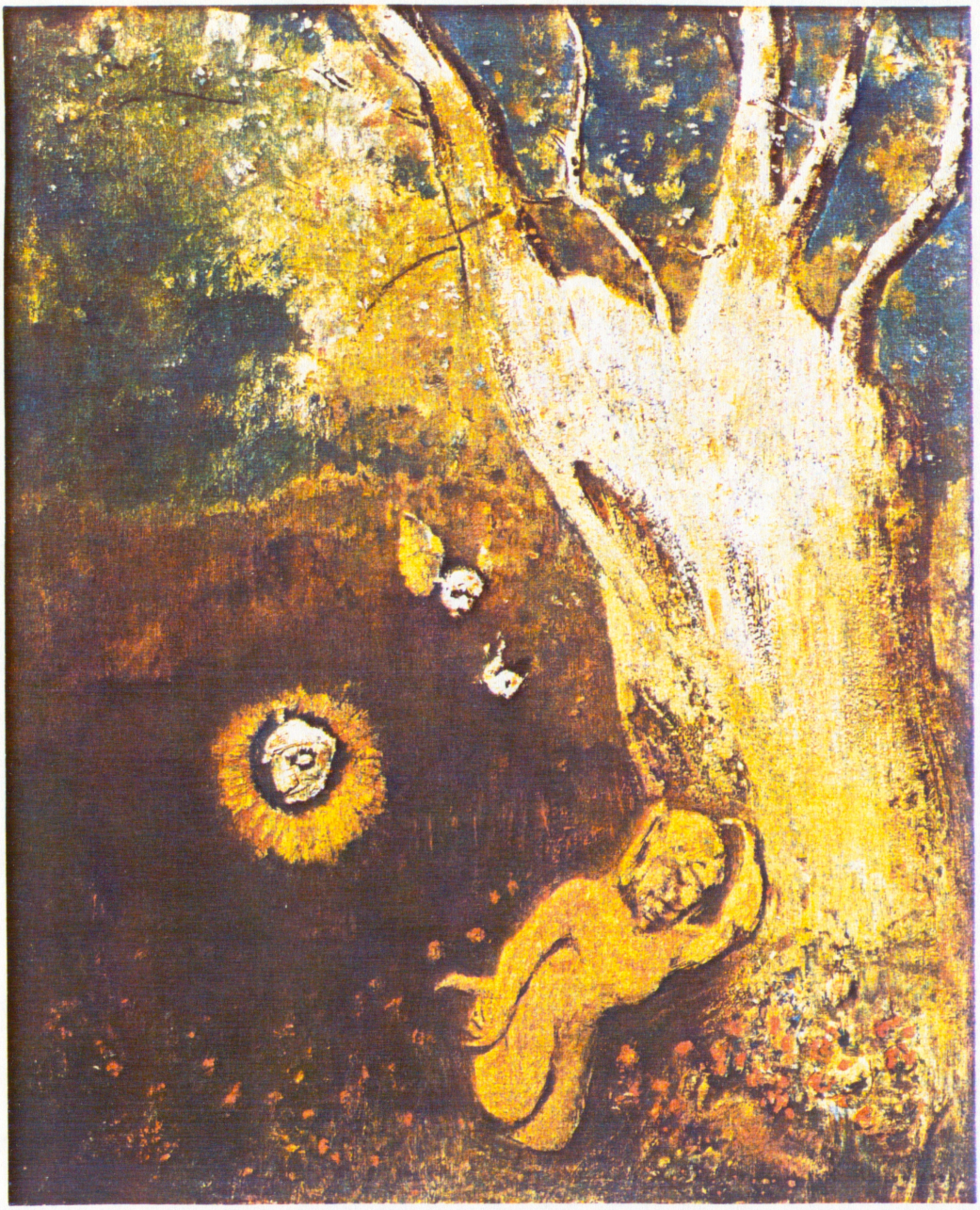

Fig. 1.10. Odilon Redon, The Sleep of Caliban, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Plate 191 of Post-Impressionists. By Guy Cogeval. 1986. Trans. Dan Simon and Carol Volk. New York: Tabard Press, 1988.

the prevalence in western tradition of poet-painters such as William Blake (fig. 1.11) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (fig. 1.12) - creative enigmas in whom the impulse to use words and paint is equally strong. The poems of both men are highly visual and their paintings poetic. While such an observation is hardly revealing, it does raise perplexing questions about notions of interchange between the arts. Should the relations between poetry and painting be viewed as a largely external phenomenon - one which is the product of outside influences - or as evidence for an inner urge to imbue images with ideas?

Regardless of the answer, there is no doubt that poetry and painting have influenced each other's evolution in western history. During periods of heightened exchange between poetry and painting, experiments are made - and borders transgressed - which forever change the shape of one art or the other. Apollinaire and Rimbaud drew their inspiration for structural, decorative and textual variations in verse from the visual arts. While their experiments with poetic form in the last decades of the nineteenth century were often superficial, the beginnings of modern free verse can be seen in their heretical disregard for the meaningless uniformity (in a visual sense) of rhyme and stanza patterns in poetry (fig. 1.13). As painting has become less and less representational, mainstream painters of the twentieth century have veered also in the direction of poetic expressionism, pushing the limits of figurative painting in Picasso's surreal narrative, Guernica (fig. 1.14) or mining the power of symbolism in Dali's Soft Alarm Clock (fig. 1.15).

With the surge of experimentation which became synonymous with modernism in



Fig. 1.11. William Blake, Milton's *Il Penseroso*: Milton and the Spirit of Plato, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1816. Plate 57 of William Blake. By Morton D. Paley. New York: Phaidon Press, 1978.



Fig. 1.12. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Blessed Damozel, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1871-7. Plate 44 of The Pre-Raphaelites. By Andrea Rose. 1977. Oxford: Phaidon, 1981.

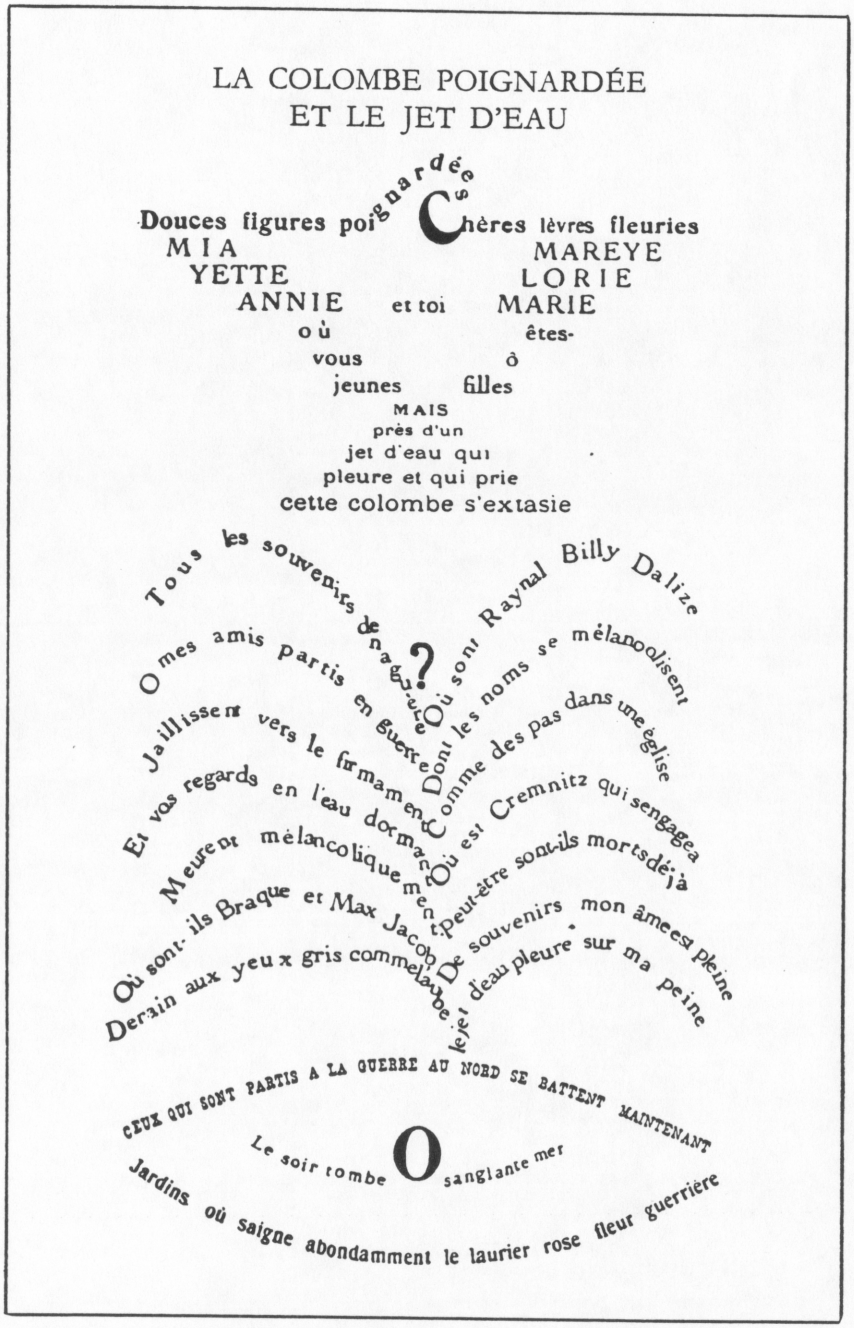

Fig. 1.13. Apollinaire, "La Colombe Poignardée et le Jet D'eau". Page 213 of Oeuvres Poétiques. By Apollinaire. N.p.: Editions Gallimard, 1959.



Fig. 1.14. Pablo Picasso, Guernica, Prado, Madrid. 1937. Plate 47 of Joy Hester. By Janine Burke. 1983. Melbourne: Greenhouse, 1989.

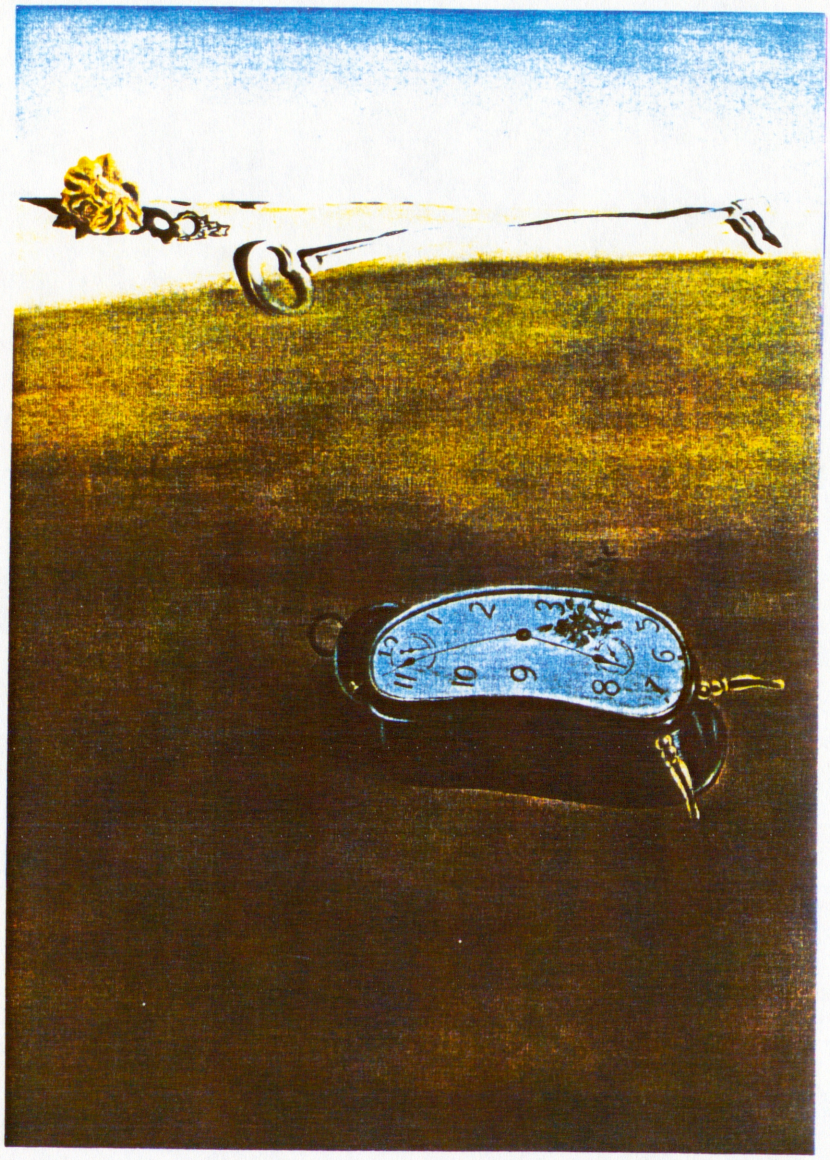

Fig. 1.15. Salvador Dali, Soft Alarm Clock (detail), Perls Gallery, New York. 1933. Plate 74 of Dali. By Max Gérard. 1968. Trans. Eleanor R. Morese. New York: Abrams, 1986.

the first half of the twentieth century and the accompanying growth of interdisciplinary theories and studies, the neat traditional lines between poetry and painting have become more blurred - as they have between all the arts. Even T. S. Eliot's stark rendering of the wasteland of modern human existence is remarkable for its "silence", for its attempt to express in verbal images the strangled dreams and fears and hopes of men living in a world in which the language of ideas seems to have lost its power. In a century dominated by the printed and cinematic image, the picture as a form of communication - as an expression of the verbally inexpressible - has preoccupied western consciousness. As Picasso remarked of his own ambition to broaden the dimensions of the painted image, "I don't want to do the nude as a nude. I want to *say* breast, say foot, *say* hand or belly .... I don't want to paint the nude from head to foot but succeed in *saying*". [6]

Oil and Water

The common threads linking the visual and the verbal arts in western tradition can be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphics in which pictures were first systemised and used to express thought. [7] While it can be said that art and literature have since gone their separate ways, branching out into the temporal and spatial zones, the impulse to invest images with ideas has not been lost. The teaching function implicit in medieval Christian

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[6] Elwyn Lynn, "Picasso in Australia" Art and Australia 22.3 (1985): 342-343.

[7] According to Praz, the tradition is traced from "the early flowering of civilization" rather than from prehistoric times because "paleologists have shown that the first signs men traced on rock surfaces were abstract" (3-4). See also Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance (Rev. ed. 1967; London: Faber and Faber, 1968) for a detailed account of the symbolic tradition in western art and literature.

art, the multi-layered allegorical themes employed by artists such as Botticelli and Bernini and even images of order and ownership in eighteenth century English landscape painting bear witness to the continuity of a tradition which is as old as the picture itself. Literature, by the same token, has retained its visualising impulse. Poets from Spenser to Eliot have used sensuous imagery to paint specific themes or moods in their verse - imagery made more cogent by its intrinsic relationship to the ideas being expressed in the work.

The complexity of the relationship shared by poetry and painting is a product of their complementary affinities with images and ideas. As Simonides recognised, each art embodies the other's virtues and weaknesses - but in differing degrees. In its aspiration to become a speaking picture, poetry encroaches on the visual dimension by appealing to the imaginative eye. Painting also speaks a special "language", drawing as it does on the shared iconology which enriches literature. Indeed, it could be argued that the two arts possess exactly the same qualities and attributes doled out in differing dilutions and quantities - but with contrasting emphases.

Attempts to compare the two arts are nonetheless fraught with difficulty. Should a distinction be drawn between the impact of specific paintings on poetry and the influence of, say, visual symbolism on the more general realm of literature? Does a school of artistic philosophy which shares its views with the poets of the day have any more bearing on the current poetic style or attitude than the particular time and place in which those ideas were conceived? What is a "literary" painting? Doesn't *all* fine art strive to tell

some kind of story or express the personal poetry of the painter in terms of the language of colour, line, form and tone? The chief drawback in drawing viable comparisons between poetry and painting is that each art is distinguished by a quality which the other supposedly lacks: painting belongs to the world of images, poetry to ideas; painting is silent, poetry "speaks"; painting is a spatial art, poetry is temporal; painting is descriptive, poetry seeks to explain.

While few critics dispute the *existence* of a tradition of interchange between the arts, there are those who express concern that it should exist at all. In Laokoön, his unfinished treatise on the relations between poetry and painting, Gotthold Lessing proclaims that poets and painters should not transgress the borders prescribed for their respective arts - or fool themselves by thinking they can emulate each other's strengths. Deploring those works of art which tread too readily on "foreign" soil, Lessing laments that:

> In poetry, a fondness for description, and in painting, a fancy for allegory, has arisen from the desire to make the one a speaking picture without really knowing what it can and ought to paint, and the other a dumb poem, without having considered in how far painting can express universal ideas without abandoning its proper sphere and degenerating into an arbitrary method of writing. [8]

[8] Quoted in W. J. T. Mitchell, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986) 104.

Lessing's attack on the cross-germination of the arts in western literature is not an isolated one. Critics from Bacon to Kant have championed the separation of poetry from painting, claiming that the two arts, like oil and water, are not easily mixed - nor should they ever be. Others have been chained in their criticism by what they perceive to be the failures and limitations of works deriving from another art. [9] In The Colors of Rhetoric, her otherwise sympathetic study of the subject, Wendy Steiner contends that ekphrastic poems

> express the idea of art's overcoming time without themselves overcoming it. They fail where the visual arts seemingly succeed; what they gain from the topos is an example of what they can merely aspire to do .... the outcome is lacking in spatial extension and in the coincidence of aesthetic experience with artifact characteristic of paintings. Thus, the literary topos of the still movement is an admission of failure, or of mere figurative success. [10]

Such assumptions skirt dangerously close to the precipice of that age-old argument, "which of the two arts is the more superior - poetry or painting?". Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone brazenly concludes (more than 500 years before Steiner) that poetry's temporal, even ephemeral, nature pales in the presence of painting's powerful actuality.

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[9] Mitchell 113.

[10] Quoted in Mitchell 99.

For da Vinci - as for a score of other painters eager to prove the unarguable supremacy of their chosen profession - the shadowy realms of the poetic imagination are poor substitutes for reality. "What a difference there is between imagining a light while the eye is in darkness and seeing it in actuality without that darkness", he exclaims. [11] What da Vinci ignores, however, is the fact that for many people, the *imagined* light - whether conjured for the first time or simply remembered - is often far more dazzling than the real version.

Ironically, the tradition of dissent which has accompanied critical discussions of relations between the arts is partly a product of the looseness of the original precepts. As Jean Hagstrum notes in his book, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray, ancient criticism

> had a tendency to provide motto and epigraph - texts that were used as pretexts for riding critical hobbyhorses. It did not, however, provide lengthy theoretical considerations of the two arts in relationship, and its contribution consists rather of pregnant suggestions than of fully formulated argument. [12]

Given the generality of comments such as "the poet is like a painter" in Plato's Republic or Aristotle's frequent, but vague, assertion in the Poetics that "it is the same in

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[11] For a detailed analysis of da Vinci's contest between the arts see Mitchell 120.

[12] Hagstrum 3.

painting", this critical preoccupation with setting specific limits on the relations between poetry and painting is not surprising. [13] In their struggle to analyse and explain the concept of the arts as an inter-relating family, however, advocates and opponents of the tradition alike have been hampered by conventional notions of segregation. Many have fallen back on defining what poetry and painting *are* rather than how they *relate* to each other, with the result that singing the praises of one art over the other has become an inevitable diversion in the endless quest for specific, easily comprehensible examples of mutual influence between the arts.

Obviously, there are dangers in taking too broad a view of the relations between poetry and painting. If a seemingly endless set of connections can be established between two of the arts, then why not between all of them? Certainly, if imaginations are stretched far enough, an intricate pattern of relationships between *all* the arts can be traced - one which is as bewildering in its complexity as it is impossible to comprehend. But by restricting their arguments to cosmetic discussions of pictorialism in poetry or iconology in art, many critics fail to recognise the internal impulse of one art toward the other - or the shaping of that impulse by a complex range of sociological and historical influences.

With the decline of pictorial realism and a corresponding increase in symbolic and abstract forms of poetic and artistic expression, the twentieth century has experienced something of a shift away from outworn critical notions of separation between the arts. In The Colors of Rhetoric, Wendy Steiner reflects that:

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[13] Hagstrum 3.

> At the beginning of this century, the *ut pictura poesis* controversy stood as a mere historical curiousity. Irving Babbit's denial of interartistic similarity in *The New Laokoon* of 1910, for example, received wide critical approbation. But if we turn half a century later to the conference programs of institutions of literary studies (the Modern Language Association or the International Comparative Literature Association, for example), we find the comparison of painting to literature a major topic of concern. A revolution in critical thinking has taken place, a revolution that seems clearly related to the spread of structuralism and semiotics during the last two decades, and the corresponding interest among recent philosophers in linguistic and aesthetic issues. [14]

What Steiner says is true. Nevertheless, old prejudices - and the traditions which inform them - die hard (as her own mixed views indicate). While many scholars are willing to accept the notion of a *debate* on the incidence and means of exchange between the arts, there is a perceptible reluctance on the part of some to engage in arguments which may draw them away from traditional concepts of segregation between the arts and beyond the invisible (though nonetheless powerful) limits imposed by "genre". Because they are more naturally attuned with the world of ideas and its cerebral or abstract application in works of poetry and fiction, literary critics are particularly susceptible to this tendency, inclining themselves to discussions of the relative success - or otherwise - of such "cross-dressing" between the arts. Rather than considering poems which have

[14] Steiner, The Colors of Rhetoric 19.

been inspired by painting - or which in some way echo the characteristics of that art - as completely new creations in themselves, some are tempted to make comparative analyses which stress the *similarities* between the two works rather than their *differences*. Inevitably, such critiques lead to unsatisfying discussions about the source of inspiration itself rather than the qualities of the work it has inspired, doing little in the process to further our knowledge of why poetry and painting seek, as Baudelaire observed, to "lend one another new powers". [15] As we shall see, attempts to constrict the terms of reference too tightly in comparisons between the arts lead less to the smooth straits of precise analysis than to a premature drowning of the argument. In examining the multifarious relationships shared by poetry and painting, it is inevitable that discussions will be drawn away from notions of superficial influence into the deeper, more difficult regions of shared impulses and common origins.

The Common Impulse

While it is true that Horace's famous remark, "ut pictura poesis", has been quoted out of context from the Ars Poetica - the poet had intended merely to draw an analogy between those poems and paintings which "please only once" - it is fascinating that the phrase has gained sufficient currency to be considered an indispensable precept in any comparative study of the arts. [16] As Mario Praz muses in Mnemosyne, "the idea of the sister arts has been so rooted in men's minds since times of remote antiquity, that there

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[15] J. D. McClatchy, Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets (California: University of California Press, 1988) xii.

[16] See Praz 4.

must be something deeper than an idle speculation, something tantalizing" in the connection between poetry and painting which is difficult to dismiss. [17] Wrestling with the riddle of this mysterious relationship somehow brings us closer to "the whole phenomenon of artistic inspiration" - a concept explored with powerful lucidity by Wallace Stevens in his famous lecture, "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting". [18] Stevens argues that the two arts share a common imaginative impulse, one which can best be described as the desire to express poetry in either words or paint. Far from losing his point in the nebulous regions of "a universal poetry that is reflected in everything", Stevens asserts that this impulse is channelled, organised and shaped by the sheer effort of composition - by that "labour of calculation" and "appetite for perfection" which distinguishes both the arts: [19]

> ... the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind. In doing so, he is in rapport with the painter, who does his job, with respect to the problems of form and colour, which confront him incessantly, not by inspiration, but by imagination or by the miraculous kind of reason that the imagination sometimes promotes. [20]

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[17] Praz 3.

[18] Praz 3.

[19] Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (2nd ed. 1960; London: Faber Paperbacks, 1984) 160, 165.

[20] Stevens 166.

It could, of course, be argued that the ability to compose a piece of art "in which all the parts are so related to one another that they imply each other" is equally the realm of musicians, sculptors and architects. [21] But Stevens neatly avoids this pitfall by replacing the notion of the *visual*, with that of the *imaginative*, faculty. In this way, he can more freely analyse how poets and painters "see" the same things, yet choose to express them in different mediums. As Stevens recognises, the relationship between idea and image is a closely bound one. However representational the art, painters invest their images with ideas through the sheer effort of composition. Poets also exercise their imaginative faculties by employing images in the illustration and organisation of their ideas. The first becomes a visual art and the second literary - but each springs from the workings of the mind, from the capacity for an organisational kind of mental vision which predominates in the work of all poets and painters.

Naturally, the expression of this commonness of purpose differs from artist to artist - not only in terms of individual creativity, but in its use of those spatial-temporal ingredients that give each art its special power and uniqueness. In this respect, it is necessary to understand not only the nature of those shared similarities which bind the arts, but the quality of those differences which distinguish them. Importantly, these differences are ones of degree rather than dichotomy - a point providing at least part of the explanation for the frequency and ease with which both arts have sought to emulate each other during certain periods of history.

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[21] Stevens 162.

Temporal or Spatial?

Despite the fact that poetry and painting appear to have moved away from their common sources, founding separate kingdoms in the spatial and temporal zones, the borders of their respective domains continue to overlap. In his book, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology, W. J. T. Mitchell disputes the accepted notion that time and space are the exclusive domains of poetry and painting (a notion which, he argues, has strong affinities with the prevailing sexual and political attitudes of those periods in which the adage has been given its greatest credence). According to Mitchell, poetry and painting possess elements of both dimensions - a theory supported by the repeated forays of each art into the other's "realm". While he acknowledges that the boundaries between the temporal and the spatial arts can be especially porous during certain epochs in history (the eighteenth and twentieth centuries in particular), Mitchell asserts

> that the tendency of artists to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts, one which is not confined to any particular genre or period. Indeed, so central is this impulse that it finds expression even in the writings of theorists like Kant and Lessing who establish the tradition of denying it. [22]

According to Mitchell, both the arts are spatial-temporal constructions. Calling to

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[22] Mitchell 98.

mind Stevens's claim that poetry and painting are united by the labour of composition, Mitchell asserts that literature is spatial not only "insofar as it is written" but in its use of "formal, architectonic design, images and symbols which provide semantic or structural totalizations" as well as in its "spatial memory systems which facilitate oral performance". [23] Painting, by the same token, "must be scanned in some temporal interval", has the ability to represent narrative scenes and events in time, and even produces sequences of images which suggest movement. [24] "Works of art", says Mitchell, "like all other objects of human experience, are structures in space-time". [25]

The abolition of space and time as differentials between poetry and painting does not, however, render the two arts indistinguishable. Mitchell is at pains to stress that the differences between text and image remain intact - as do the respective weightings of each art toward its temporal or spatial elements. What is achieved by breaking down outworn and inaccurate methods of assessing the qualities peculiar to poetry and painting is an easier understanding of their *possibilities* rather than their *limitations*:

> ... the interesting problem is to comprehend a particular spatial-temporal construction, not to label it as temporal or spatial. A poem is not literally temporal and figuratively spatial: it is literally a spatial-temporal construction. The terms "space" and

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[23] Mitchell 99-100.

[24] Mitchell 100.

[25] Mitchell 103.

> "time" only become figurative and improper when they are abstracted from one another as independent, antithetical essences that define the nature of an object. The use of the term is, strictly speaking, a concealed synecdoche, a reduction of the whole to a part. [26]

It is this recognition that the relations between poetry and painting can be fully grasped only when conventional notions of segregation between the arts have been discarded that makes Mitchell's argument so incisive. As he implies, cross-pollination between the arts in western tradition has proceeded virtually unimpeded since Simonides' time - and will continue to do so. How this impulse to breach the arbitrary borders of time and space has been shaped (or even strengthened) during specific historical periods brings us to yet another difficulty in the relation between poetry and painting - that of the time spirit.

In Pursuit of the Time Spirit

Irrespective of the case for, or against, their mutual sympathies and similarities, there is no doubt that poetry and painting have exercised a profound historical influence over one another - in some instances, to such an extent that the shape and direction of one or both has been irrevocably altered. Horace's impact on Claude Lorrain's vision of the classical picturesque, along with the painter's own contribution to Romantic English literature, is a case in point. Although Claude preceded the English romantics by more

[26] Mitchell 103.

than 100 years, poets such as Wordsworth and Keats responded to his poetic vision of Europe steeped in the atmospheric light and grandeur of its awakening romantic consciousness. Importantly, Claude's influence over a group of young poets born a century after his death is less the product of individual response or even heightened visual sensibilities than the discovery of a breathtaking arena for the imagination's epic struggle with the beautiful, but cruel, paradoxes of nature. As many critics agree, the visual arts were an influential source of inspiration for poets of the period - not merely as aesthetic works, but as pictorial representations of a late eighteenth century ethos heavy with nostalgia, a passionate appreciation of nature and a renewed interest in the classical past.

Grappling with the vagaries of history, however, can complicate the already difficult business of defining exactly how poetry and painting inter-relate. Why, for example, should the two arts converge in one historical period and not another? If, indeed, poetry and painting are so closely bound, why should their intense interaction be such a sporadic and unpredictable occurrence? Even more inexplicably, how can a close relationship between poetry and painting flourish across geographical, cultural and temporal distances?

In their struggle to dam the tides of influence and exchange which flow between the arts, critics as divergent in their outlook as Lessing and Hagstrum have gathered the sandbags of "precise analysis" to restore manageable borders between poetry and painting. [27] Displaying a disproportionate degree of *angst* with regard to the enormity of

[27] Wellek 127.

this vast sea of interchange and familiarity, they have often been more concerned with reducing its size on abstract maps of their own making than with braving its various winds and currents. Nowhere is this evasion more obvious than in discussions of the *zeitgeist*, the "time spirit" which endows all exponents of the arts in a given age with discernible similarities. In The Sister Arts, Jean Hagstrum, for example, acknowledges the truth of Mario Praz's contention that "about all the works of art in a given epoch" there is a certain "*air de famille*". [28] He is, however, inexplicably reluctant to give the comment any real credence beyond that of mere whimsy:

> One can scarcely avoid feeling that such studies serve the purposes of cultural mysticism, not of sober investigation. Since what is being sought - admittedly or not - is the "time-spirit" that lies behind all particular works of art and since individual artistic uniqueness tends to be neglected for the total uniqueness of the epoch, the terms of critical analysis pass undiscriminatingly from one work to another, even from one art to another. [29]

Hagstrum relies heavily on Rene Wellek's argument that "the task of art historians in the widest sense, including historians of literature and of music, is to develop a descriptive set of terms in each art, based on the characteristics of each art". [30] Because

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[28] Hagstrum xiv.

[29] Hagstrum xiv.

[30] Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (1949; London: Jonathan Cape, 1961) 135.

the evolution of the arts does not proceed uniformly through the ages - Wellek quotes the case of great English cathedrals existing long before the establishment of comparable monuments in English literature - correlations between the poetry and painting of a single age can be fraught with false assumptions:

> The various arts - the plastic arts, literature, and music - have each their individual evolution, with a different tempo and a different internal structure of elements. No doubt they are in constant relationship with each other, but these relationships are not influences which start from one point and determine the evolution of the other arts; they have to be conceived rather as a complex scheme of dialectical relationships which work both ways, from one art to another and vice versa, and may be completely transformed within the art they have entered. It is not a simple affair of a "time spirit" determining and permeating every art. [31]

What Wellek contends about the vagaries of influence between the arts is indisputable. His argument assumes, however, that the notion of a time spirit precludes the erratic development of various arts within a single age. Demanding that these progressions should be pursued along strictly parallel lines, Wellek ignores the possibility that the time spirit itself may be responsible for "the intricate pattern of coincidences and divergences" which describes the evolution of the arts - or determines the premature

[31] Quoted from Wellek 135.

development of one art over another. [32]

While it is true that the emergence of specific styles or movements rarely proceeds uniformly across the arts, it is also true that certain periods in history, whether deliberately or incidentally, have encouraged a special porousness between poetry and painting. In asking why this should be the case when other epochs have failed to host a significant meeting or meshing of the arts, it becomes obvious that a study of the period which provided the right conditions for interchange is both necessary and inevitable. The dismissal of all but the pictorial as a point of reference in comparisons between poetry and painting can lead to a superficial appreciation of the relationship shared by the arts in any given period - a danger especially evident in cases where critical knowledge of a particular literary or artistic movement is only sketchy. By virtue of their very need for specialist knowledge in *two* areas rather than one, interdisciplinary studies are particularly susceptible to this pitfall. In his quest for "sound scholarly method", Hagstrum, for example, rides roughshod over an era remarkable for the depth and complexity of its art and literature. [33] Quoting the case of a fellow academic who uses Dryden's poetry as an example of the late Baroque in English literature, Hagstrum contends that while

> [his] point may be valid .... it cannot be established without reference to the poet's visual imagery. Professor Sypher is not persuasive when he finds the baroque in the highly unvisual first

[32] Wellek 135.

[33] Hagstrum xv.

stanza of the first St. Cecilia's Day ode and in the abstract theological argument of the *Religio laici*. [34]

By reducing the Baroque to its pictorial starting point, Hagstrum makes a travesty of his own attempt to draw scholarly comparisons between the arts. What he fails to recognise is that the Baroque is a profoundly complex style - one which is richly symbolic, allegorical and steeped in metaphor. The visual image (or metaphysical conceit common to nearly all Baroque expressions of the arts) provides merely an *entry* point into deeper levels of significance in the work. Central to this philosophy is the notion that the principles of painting, poetry, architecture and sculpture can be blended together in the service of a single art form. In Baroque art and literature the visual is not an end in itself, but simply a beginning.

The strong correlations to be drawn between Ben Jonson's multi-layered love poetry and Italian architecture of the Sesquicento, for example, can be understood only in terms of the Baroque philosophy which informed the development of virtually all the arts during this period. Whether designing the Church of San Andrea at Quirinale or conceiving The Ecstasy of St Theresa (fig. 1.16), Bernini wrapped his art around the concept of the many-sided whole - the building or the sculpture that is painting, architecture, symbol and allegory in one. [35] Jonson also transgressed the prescribed

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[34] Hagstrum xv.

[35] In analysing Bernini's work, terms such as the *chiaroscuro* or architectonics of sculpture become inevitable, as does the application of literary analysis in unravelling the meaning of the artist's poetic conceits.



Fig. 1.16. Giovanni Bernini, The Ecstasy of St Theresa, St. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. 1646. Plate 260 of Handbook of Art.

limits set down for poetry in his use of striking plastic descriptions, strong painterly images and multi-level symbols. Importantly, Jonson was a successful court poet and Bernini, a favourite of the powerful Borgia popes. By employing metaphysical conceits in a poem or piece of sculpture, each was able to satisfy the expectations of the court or ruling family, together with a popular predilection for historical allusions, without sacrificing either their own creative expression or the underlying significance of the work. To discard the conditions under which both men laboured is to ignore not only the shared influences which shaped their respective arts, but much of the meaning and content.

Assuming that there *is* a special degree of sympathy and similarity between poetry and painting and that this close relationship has continued to produce magnificent and mediocre works of the imagination throughout the ages, it is inevitable that the question of why some epochs witness a special degree of inter-artistic fraternisation will become more pressing. Why, for example, should certain periods or schools of art and literature seem especially susceptible to instances of interchange between poetry and painting while others are hostile to, or even condemn, their very existence? Equally perplexing is the prevalence of artistic interchange during tumultuous phases of history and, even more mysteriously, the appearance of this phenomonen at the very moment in which outdated literary and artistic styles are being superseded by new forms of creative expression.

Having dealt with some of the critical prejudices and misconceptions attending discussions of the similarities and differences between the arts (and their cross-fertilisation at seminal points in western art and literature), it is vital to examine the reasons behind

these perceptions and their crucial relationship with the *zeitgeist* in which they were formed. Of particular interest is the resurgence of artistic, literary and even political conservatism during periods in which criticism of the inter-relationship between poetry and painting is especially vehement (the coincidence of German nationalism with Lessing's system of artistic differentiation, for example) and the sudden rise of experimental forms in art and literature at the precise moment in which poetry and painting seem most willing to share their attributes (*dada* made its appearance just as Joyce was finishing Ulysses). Closely aligned with both patterns is a curious tendency on the part of critics, writers and artists to assign specific gender, and even racial, qualities to poetry and painting. As we shall see, the imposition of this system of attributes is fed by factors which are political not only in their narrower critical, but broader socio-historic, contexts. The intriguing uniformity of these critical polarities through the ages - and the role they have played in defining the aesthetic relationship between tradition and experiment, order and anarchy, time and space - lends a startling new significance to notions of interchange between the arts, one that does not discard traditional notions of genre, but exposes the true nature of their origins.

The Politics of Separation

W. J. T. Mitchell's analysis of the rigid definitions assigned to poetry and painting in conservative critiques of their interaction provides an essential starting point for any understanding of the political rationale behind the development of aesthetic theories founded on the polarisation of poetic and painterly qualities. According to Mitchell, Gotthold Lessing based *his* disapproval of the inter-relations between the arts on a system

of gender differentiation in which

> Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry. Paintings are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space which they ornament, while poems are free to range over an infinite realm of potential action and expression, the domain of time, discourse and history. [36]

In his book, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology, Mitchell draws fascinating analogies between the critical distaste for inter-activities between the arts and the sexual mores and prejudices of the day. Lessing, of course, focused his outrage that the genres should be mixed on The Laocoon (fig. 1.17). [37] According to Mitchell,

> ... the image of the beautiful statue with its emblematic serpent is, in itself, already an improper conjunction of genres in Lessing's view. It combines a proper image (a beautiful statue representing a beautiful body) with an improper, arbitrary, emblematic figure.

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[36] Mitchell 110.

[37] The marble grouping known as the Laocoon (and thought to be lost before the Italian Renaissance) had already attained legendary status through the writings of Pliny when it was rediscovered in 1506. Depicting the trojan priest, Laocoon, and his two sons being crushed to death by a serpent as punishment for warning the Trojans not to accept the infamous Greek gift of the wooden horse, the sculpture was described by Pliny as a "work to be preferred to all that the arts of painting and sculpture have produced". Harold Osborne, ed., The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Art (1981; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988) 641.

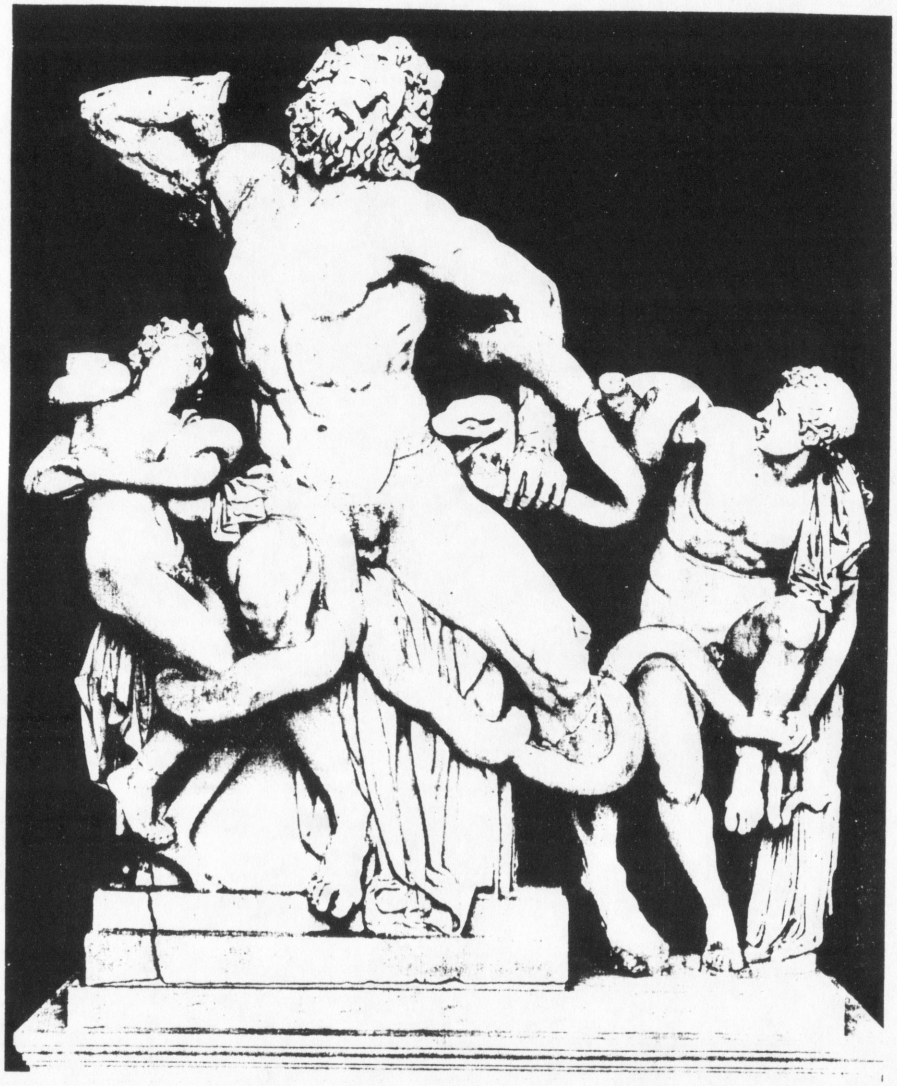

Fig. 1.17. Agesander, Polydorus and Athanadorus, Laocoön and His Sons, Vatican Museum, Rome. 40 BC. Plate 245 of Handbook of Art.

> The serpent does not represent a serpent: it is an emblem of divinity, an "expression" of that which cannot be naturally expressed by imagery. And of course just beneath the surface of this divine emblem is a profane, indecent fetish. It invites "honourable women" to "feast their eyes" in idolatrous worship during the day, and to give in to "adulterous fancy" by night. Small wonder that the pious iconoclasts sensed something obscene in these statues, and that they spared only those that were confined strictly by the natural generic laws of beauty. The adulteration of the arts, of the genres, is an incitement to the adulteration of every other domestic, political, and natural distinction, and it is an incitement peculiar to images, the "one effect" they have that must be constrained by law. [38]

This extraordinary analysis of Lessing's piece-by-piece destruction of the ancient sculpture reveals a system of definition with respect to the qualities of poetry and painting which is founded less on a recognition of the differences between the arts than on a philosophy of their strict *moral* separation. As Mitchell sees it, these qualities (or polarities) can be assigned as follows:

Painting	**Poetry**
Space	Time
Natural signs	Arbitrary (man-made signs)

[38] Mitchell 109.

Narrow sphere	Infinite range
Imitation	Expression
Body	Mind
External	Internal
Silent	Eloquent
Beauty	Sublimity
Eye	Ear
Feminine	Masculine [39]

While Lessing's system of differentiating poetry and painting (as described by Mitchell) provides a valuable insight into those mysterious properties which constitute the arts, it is in the sternness with which he forbids their inter-play that an act of arbitrary and potentially restrictive definition has been made. As Mitchell implies, Lessing has much to teach us about the close nature of the relationship between poetry and painting simply by refusing to accept any art - either morally or aesthetically - in which the "natural laws of gender and genre" have been violated. [40] But in applying a set of "evaluative terms" to the generic definitions outlined above, Mitchell clearly demonstrates Lessing's own political preferences and the curious "fear of imagery" which lies not only at the heart of his own views, but the prejudicial critiques of others "from Bacon to Wittgenstein". [41] These evaluative terms can be defined as follows:

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[39] Mitchell 110. My bold emphasis.

[40] Mitchell 110.

[41] Mitchell 113. Lessing's views are not as idiosyncratic as they may seem. As Mitchell recognises

Blurred genres	Distinct genres
Moderns	Ancients
Adultery	Honesty
Monsters	Beautiful Bodies
Mothers	Fathers
French "refinement"	English and German "manliness" [42]

Given that Lessing was writing from a highly literary, staunchly German and politically, as well as morally, conservative stance, his views with respect to the "indecency" of cross-fertilisation between the arts is not surprising. What he shows us, however, is that critical systems of differentiating between poetry and painting may gain or fade in importance according to the time, the place and the political context in which they were conceived. Lessing also makes clear that inter-play between the arts not only exists, but is a sufficient enough problem in terms of frequency and influence to demand a re-evaluation of its impact on aesthetic theories and on the development of the arts in

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> Lessing did not, of course, invent the connection between genre and gender. He had a powerful and rather explicit precedent in Burke's essay on the sublime and beautiful, which made quite unmistakable the connection between poetry, sublimity, and masculinity on the one hand, and painting, beauty and femininity on the other. But Lessing never mentions Burke, from whom he borrowed so many ideas and examples, in *Laocoon*. Nor does he mention his own father, who wrote a Latin thesis at Wittenburg entitled *de non commutando sexus habitu* - "on the impropriety, that is of women wearing men's clothes and men women's. (111)

[42] Mitchell 110. Lessing's equation of French effeminacy with a predilection for both painting and blurred genres can be traced, according to Mitchell, to a passage in which the German launches "a diatribe against Chateaubrun for tracing Philoctetes' suffering to the loss of a beautiful princess rather than to the loss of his *bow*". In this context, "effeminate French refinement ... turns a sublime, masculine tragedy into a "play of bright eyes" ". (110-11)

general. Even more importantly, this imposition of "rational laws" on the genres helps us, as Mitchell says

> to understand the work of artists who set out deliberately to violate those laws, artists like William Blake, for instance, who insist on blurring the genres in a mixed art of poetry and painting. It is no accident that Blake's mixed art prophesies a revolution in which "Sexes must vanish & cease to be," along with the "Vanities of Time and Space". Blake the great personifier of abstractions, saw very clearly what lay beneath Lessing's "first principles": "Time & Space are Real Beings Time is a Man Space is a Woman. [43]

Just as Blake prophesied, the trend to blurred genres has underpinned the development of nearly all modern movements in art and literature. The strong sibling (or is it sexual?) impulse in twentieth century expressions of poetry and painting has coincided with powerful surges in feminism, collective and collaborative action, androgynous politics (in both its asexual and homosexual forms) and the prominence of visual imagery via the popular mediums of films, television and print media. Many of the forces which triggered this wholesale revolution were already at work as Lessing wrote his famous treatise on the importance of painting's separation from poetry. It is perhaps ironic that, at the very moment in which Lessing chose to systemise his own perceptive views about the nature of the arts, the thing he dreaded most - open adultery between

[43] Mitchell 112.

them - was being widely encouraged elsewhere in Europe. Impressionism (not to mention symbolism) was already stirring in the belly of his great ideological nemesis, France. Perhaps even more shockingly, the breakdown of traditional notions of representation in painting would shortly be paralleled by a movement towards visual forms of expression in poetry that would forever alter this most manly and "sublime" of all the arts. Indeed, as J. D. McClatchy contends in Poets on Painters, it could be argued that modern poetry was "virtually invented by the painters":

> All the paraphernalia of modernism, in fact, seems largely pictorial. The convulsive energy of the high modernist poetry, its use of collage and cubist fractioning, its *vers libre* expressivity, its sense of the natural object as adequate symbol, of technique as content, of organic form, of dissociation and dislocation - these derive from the example of painters. When Pound demanded "direct treatment of the 'thing'," and William Carlos Williams urged "no ideas but in things," the *thing* they had in their mind's eye might as well have been the painter's motif. [44]

Given that movements favouring inter-artistic experiment (*Dada* and surrealism for example) came to be associated with an extreme political left verging on communism, Lessing's system of differentiation between the arts can be taken a step further than Mitchell has allowed and applied to yet another - and even broader - set of evaluative

[44] McClatchy xi.

terms:

experiment	tradition
democracy	fascism
communism	capitalism
collaboration	creative isolation
revolution	status quo
feminism	male dominance
androgyny	sexual stereotypes
racial integration	nationalism
freedom	restraint
invention	craftsmanship [45]

What is most revealing about this system of definition is that revolution, experiment and artistic interchange go hand in hand. In this sense, it is no coincidence that collective action, and even inter-action, between poets and painters became synonymous with modernism during a period in which communism and its satellite labour movements gathered strength across the western world - or that "androgynous" forms of poetry and painting have since become part of the norms of experimental freedom as men and women redefine their social, sexual and economic roles. The history of the twentieth century has largely been one of the struggle to balance the forces of tradition and experiment at all levels of human existence - a struggle made bloody by two world wars

[45] My definitions.

and a series of revolutions leaving much of the western world reeling under the divisive blows of fascism at one extreme and communism at the other.

Is it not then to be expected that art and literature would mirror these ideological battles in their own struggle to push the frontiers of creative experiment? Perhaps the most important point to be made in attempting to plot this struggle - and even make sense of its moments of anarchy - is that the collision between these two forces as expressed in the inter-play between poetry and painting has produced some extraordinary leaps of the poetic and the painterly imaginations. As for all other epochs and styles of art and literature, it is within this context that the relations between Australian poetry and painting - and the critical acceptance or otherwise of their inter-play - must be studied and understood.

Defining the Epoch

One of the most pressing problems in analysing the frequency and importance of inter-artistic liaisons in Australia between the Great and the Cold Wars is their emergence from a national tradition which was openly disdainful of fraternisation between the arts. Before 1923, Australian poetry and painting maintained a certain separateness from one another - a separateness inextricably linked with age-old notions of segregation between the arts. An essentially English tradition demanded (and received) full homage to the idea that the genres should not be mixed. As painter Tom Roberts remarked in an interview with A. G. Stephens

> A poem moves - it goes wherever the writer's fancy leads him. But a painting is fixed. You can, it is true, shade and modify your idea to a certain extent by pose, by accessories and surroundings; but once made, the modification remains - and there are narrow limits to modification .... the painting is rigid; the poem fluid. [46]

Friendships and even professional associations between Australian poets and painters were not unknown before the 1920s. It wasn't until the appearance of Vision in 1923, however, that poems dedicated specifically to, or inspired by, artists became a recognisable force in the local literature. The publication of "Earth-Visitors", Kenneth Slessor's first poetic tribute to Norman Lindsay, began an intense period of interaction between poetry and painting - one which culminated in the creation of such remarkable works as Slessor's "Five Bells", Nolan's Ned Kelly series, Tucker's Images of Modern Evil and Dobson's In a Convex Mirror.

It is true, of course, that Hugh McCrae's Satyrs and Sunlight, a work resplendent with all the commercial, as well as aesthetic, benefits of Lindsay's illustrations, was published at least 15 years before Slessor's poem; the book belongs, however, to a nineteenth century pre-war world bearing little resemblance to the one which Jack Lindsay railed against in the pages of Vision less than two decades later. McCrae's relationship with Lindsay certainly carried the seeds of future associations between

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[46] Quoted in Stephen Murray-Smith, ed, The Dictionary of Australian Quotations (1984; Richmond, Victoria: Heinemann, 1987) 228.

Australian poets and painters - elitism, commercial practicalities, a mutual attraction for the other's art and an obsessive hatred of philistinism being chief among them - but the friendship was not framed by the same peculiar pressures which beset the arts between the wars, nor by that passionate urgency for change which characterised the Vision and Angry Penguins years. In the comparatively sylvan years preceding the outbreak of World War One, poet and painter were drawn together by an indulgent love of fantasy and myth - one which, by the 1920s, had become less a delightful literary game than a foundation on which Lindsay would strive to build his new artistic order.

With the advent of Vision, however, poets and painters began to cross traditional boundaries between the arts in ways which challenged conventional attitudes to inter-artistic experiment. The question is, what happened in Australia at the end of World War One to trigger such a sudden and profound change? Clearly, the special relationship shared by Australian poetry and painting during this period was founded on more than the quirks of coincidence or even friendship: Rosemary Dobson turned to renaissance painting for her inspiration; Albert Tucker was as enthralled by T. S. Eliot's poetry as Nolan was by Rimbaud's; while Vision and Angry Penguins were stimulated (in vastly differing ways) by literary and artistic developments overseas. Such interests were, perhaps, a natural extension of the friendships enjoyed during this period - as well as an expression of the innate tendency on the part of individual poets and painters towards the visual on the one hand and the literary or lyrical on the other. But in asking the question of why there should be such a sudden surge of interaction between poets and painters during this period, it becomes obvious that an explanation of incidental association does not provide

the full answer. That there should be so many, as well as such diverse and unrelated, examples of interchange between Australian poets and painters - and between poetry and painting in general - during this period raises perplexing questions about the nature of the epoch itself.

Why should there have been any interaction *at all* between Australian poets and painters during this extraordinary period - or, even more puzzling, between poetry and painting *per se*? The natural affinity shared by poetry and painting, the strong western tradition of interchange between the arts which Australia inherited from Europe and even the role played by incident and friendship in bringing poets and painters together all provide partially satisfactory solutions. But given that Horace and the ancients were right in their suppositions about the familial closeness of the two arts, why should Australian poetry and painting have enjoyed such a sudden burst of mutual sympathy in the decades following World War One - a sympathy unprecedented by more than a century of national art and literature?

To understand the necessity of the collaboration between Australian poets and painters during the inter-war period - and their crossing of the pen and the brush to form a sword against, or in defence of, outdated values - it is essential to understand also the complexities of an era in which a new national art and literature were being born. Many, if not all, the instances of interaction between poets and painters were formed in response to a special set of circumstances which Mario Praz might dub the "time" spirit. In this case, however, the spirit was as much one of place as of time and framed by a tradition

which made any interaction between the arts seem less a surprise than a curious inevitability. In unravelling their intricacies, it is vital to remember that these associations were formed in Australia at a sensitive stage in its literary and artistic development - and at a time when the nation was redefining its relationship with the rest of the world. [47]

[47] This view has been foreshadowed by Bernard Smith in Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788 (1945; 2nd ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988). As Smith contends

> The course of Australian art lies between the Scylla of national parochialism and the Charybdis of complete exoticism that while worshipping the *Zeitgeist* spurns the *genius loci* .... a vital art can only grow out of its own time and its own place. (31)

2 Australian Poets and Painters: The Necessity of Collaboration

Scapegoats for Change

The rapid maturing of Australian literature during a period of violent upheaval and experimentation in western poetry and painting has left an indelible mark on its character and shape. While the literature as a whole, and poetry in particular, has developed an essentially romantic and expressive style, it has been bound by the long struggle between tradition and experiment which has dominated the century. True to its origins, Australian literature has, on the one hand, looked to Europe for its inspiration - but like many transplanted cultures has clung to the old ways, lagging behind changes already at work in the mother culture. This problem has been compounded in the post-1914 world by the speediness with which radical change has been absorbed in other parts of the world and by the relatively brief period - little more than a century - which Australia has had to transplant and establish its European-rooted traditions. Anxious to find a unique expression for its art and literature (but desperately afraid that such efforts are mere travesties of a superior European tradition), Australia has alternately damned and celebrated its nationalism. As a result, nationalism and modernism - and the difficulties which the literature has experienced in coming to grips with both - are inevitably central to any broad discussion of Australian writers, their influences and their work.

Virtually the same can be said for painting - with the single exception that local

movements have succeeded in bending the course of art more readily towards modernism. One of the latest maturing western nations, Australia had begun to express its budding identity in the surging nationalism which characterised the last decades of the nineteenth century. Ironically, at the very moment in which the nation began to find its own unique voice, literature and art were assailed by the external forces of change and dissolution which engulfed the world in 1914. In the dying embers of one world war and the slow fanning of the fires of another, Australian painters and poets saw the destruction of the European civilisation on which the values of their own recently acquired national art and literature had been founded.

Equated with decadence and evil in the eyes of the traditionalists, modernism became the scapegoat responsible for bringing the old world to its knees. For artists such as Norman Lindsay, Julian Ashton and Max Meldrum, European pre-war values were destined to rise phoenix-like from the fire in the shape of a revivified (but ultimately regressive) Australian art and literature. For others such as Margaret Preston and Roy de Maistre, modernism was the new dream forged from the flames of Europe - an exciting artistic philosophy better suited to the expression of a young country's growing sense of national identity than the outworn precepts of the academic school.

Opening Australia's floodgates to the liberating forces of change and experimentation proved difficult, however, in the years preceding the Depression. Fresh from the shock of war, still isolated and with only half-formed local traditions to fall back on, Australians were unwilling to uproot ideas to which they had barely become

accustomed. While the rest of the world searched for a post-modernist expression in art and literature - an expression of a new world in which the old had only a dying significance - Australia clung to traditions made all the more precious by war, comparative youth and isolation. While many post-war writers and artists picked up where they had left off in 1914, emulating the bush school of Paterson, Lawson and the Heidelberg painters (fig. 2.1), others such as Kenneth Slessor and Jack Lindsay fervently rejected nationalism in pursuit of what they felt to be a more international form of creative expression - albeit in a uniquely Australian setting. But unlike the small handful of Australian post-modernists who, fresh from the inspiration of Europe or intrigued by newly imported artistic reproductions, had experimented with radical forms of painting shortly before the war (less than 10 years after Picasso), poets and painters such as Slessor and Lindsay looked backward in their quest for an Australian renaissance in art and literature. Europe, they felt, could spring anew on Australian shores - providing it remained untainted by the diseased obscenities of Lawrence, Eliot and Joyce.

With internationalism and modernism already on the doorstep, local writers and painters began to look for reliable sources of tradition - and for (hopefully) non-provincial expressions of national identity in their art and literature. Conservatives such as Slessor and Lindsay were not alone in their pursuit of a new framework for old ideas during the 1920s; even painters such as Margaret Preston turned away from Europe and towards the decorative qualities of primitive aboriginal painting in search of a uniquely Australian expression for their essentially modernist art (fig. 2.2). Isolation often made their task a hard one, however. Post-modernist painting of the 1920s in particular suffered from a



Fig. 2.1. Tom Roberts, A Break Away!, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 1891. Page 121 of Creating Australia.



Fig. 2.2. Margaret Preston, Aboriginal Landscape, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Adelaide. 1941. Page 143 of Creating Australia.

lack of proximity to the centres of change in Europe and North America, becoming more an exercise in technical experimentation than a movement with an impassioned impetus of its own (fig. 2.3 and 2.4).

Without the security of long-standing local traditions - or of a national identity that could hold its own in a world of changing values - Australians, conservative and progressive, floundered in the backwash of the sea of modernity which swamped western civilisation. Cut off geographically from a world metamorphosing at a greater rate than perhaps at any time previous in history, Australia remained both out of touch and out of step with modern art and literature - and with the internationalism which overtook Europe in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Striving to re-establish some sense of national identity in an uncertain post-war world, local poetry and painting alternately rejected and embraced the dual traditions provided by its European heritage and the romantic bush and pastoral values of the nineteenth century. So great was the dichotomy between nineteenth century tradition and twentieth century experimentation in Australia - and so unrelenting was the former's hold on local cultural life - that poets and painters swung violently from the naive and somewhat precious Arcadia of Vision to the dull realism of Max Meldrum's painting school, back to the academic impressionism of Julian Ashton and forward again to the radical avant garde of the Angry Penguins. In less than 10 years, Vision's pro-European, anti-modernist cries against the twin evils of abstraction in art and the Australian bush ballad were superseded by the unashamed insularity and uncompromising nationalism of



Fig. 2.3. Margaret Preston, A Translation from Picasso. 1933. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.



Fig. 2.4. Max Meldrum, Chinoiseries, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. 1928. Page 171 of Creating Australia.

the Jindyworobaks. Angry Penguins in its turn completed the cycle of rebellion and upheaval with an impassioned quest for unprovincial, avant garde expressions in local art and literature during the 1940s. It is now a matter of literary lore that the Melbourne-bred magazine's outspoken and sometimes amateurish radicalism precipitated the Ern Malley hoax - an affair which, depending on the critical view, either altered the course of Australian literature or simply returned it to its natural evolutionary path. [1]

A study of the prevailing influences which shaped the national art and literature, therefore, is not as simplistic as it might seem. The contradictory impulses which brought artists and writers together - and tore them apart - during these tumultuous decades make it difficult to identify common currents in the literary and artistic movements that came and went after the First World War. In 1923, Jack Lindsay's Vision professed its abhorrence to nationalism, claiming a progressive and internationalist outlook for the journal - an outlook rarely supported by its chauvinistic tone or content. Condoning the inexplicable appearance of Pan at Lane Cove, Vision damned the major literary figures of the day while keenly disposing of modern art. Ironically, the journal *did* succeed in bringing a dim awareness of contemporary literary trends to Australia in its virulent attacks on the evils of modernism. Even more ironically, one of the journal's major contributors, Kenneth Slessor, went on to reverse many of the harsher judgements of his

[1] Australian painting also had its crisis: in 1943, a group of disgruntled Archibald Prize entrants filed a law suit against the New South Wales Art Gallery trustees, claiming that Dobell's winning portrait of Joshua Smith was a caricature - a charge which not only contravened the terms of Archibald's will but, as the media of the time so astutely recognised, sinned against prevailing artistic conventions. Dobell and the Trustees won the case after a gruelling trial, but the affair highlights the tension between the shifting plateaus of tradition and change in Australian art - a tension which, more than 20 years after Vision's reactionary assertions, still remained unresolved.

youth and produce Australia's first - and finest - examples of modern poetry. This unexpected twist is typical of the impact which "movements" such as Vision had on the national art and literature. Just as the journal's reactionary cries of "down with modernism" contributed to the making of Australia's first modern poet, so Angry Penguins less than two decades later found its bias for the avant garde culminating in a dispute which bent the course of Australian literature away from the experimental and back to the stricter precepts of an essentially European tradition.

This obsessive battle between the forces of tradition and change in Australia was not by any means, a new phenomenon; in many respects, such a struggle is endemic to the development of any progressive culture or civilisation. In Australia, however, the age-old conflict between the old and the new was exacerbated and confused by youth and geography, by a disturbing sense of physical displacement from - and umbilical connection with - those European motherlands of culture to which poets and painters felt they rightfully belonged.

Against this tumultuous background, Australian poetry and painting enjoyed an unprecedented period of mutual curiosity and exchange. Given the ferocity with which the figurative - and literal - battles between tradition and experiment were waged at this time, it is not surprising that poets and painters responded by crossing frontiers which had previously been forbidden to them. What is particularly interesting, however, is that they were caught in overlapping tousles between the forces of modernity and conservatism at a time when national insecurities were reaching a fever pitch. Partly in response to this

struggle - and to the dual sense of geographic and cultural isolation which has plagued them - poets and painters have turned towards each other for inspiration and for psychological protection in an environment grown increasingly hostile to their aims.

One of the most serious by-products of isolation for Australian artists and writers was the mind-numbing complacency and resistance to change which distance and a sense of comparative safety bred in the general population. How this infamous Australian indifference to cultural matters (in both its real and imagined forms) contributed to strong feelings of fraternity among poets and painters provides at least part of the answer to the perplexing question of why they chose to collaborate in ways which, though well documented in the annals of European art and literature, were unprecedented in their own.

Fighting the Philistine

Rather than fostering patronage in the arts, Australia's relative prosperity tended to deaden it. [2] "Drugged by sunlight, moderate well-being, and a sense of comfortable isolation from the turmoil of remote Europe", Australians during the first three decades of the century lived in a netherworld of blissful isolation. [3] Material complacency,

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[2] Murray-Smith 78.

[3] Quoted in Stephen Murray-Smith, ed., The Dictionary of Australian Quotations (1984; Richmond, Victoria: Heinemann, 1984) (216) from Brian Penton's book, Advance Australia - Where?, published in 1943. Philistinism among the general public was less the product of intolerance or of strong partisan opinions than a curious indifference - one which, as D. H. Lawrence found, could be almost frightening when penetrated. In a letter to an English friend, written from Thirroul on the New South Wales south coast in 1922, Lawrence reflects, "it *is* a weird place ... there seems to be no inside life of any sort: just a long lapse and drift. A rather

combined with a lack of exposure to the world's great art centres, created an atmosphere in which Australians as a whole had little sympathy for the esoteric world of the poet or painter. While the (mainly) uneducated populace lapped up bush verse of the kind propounded by Paterson and Lawson and was almost idolatory in its praise of the Heidelberg painters, non-Australian expressions of art and literature were viewed as being either grossly inferior or absurdly superior to the local product.

Philistinism, however, was less the province of the general public than the second-rate taste-makers whose responsibility it was to shape and inform popular opinion. [4] While it is true, for instance, that Australians lacked the cultural awareness of their European cousins and were generally unsupportive of local attempts to fill the yawning chasm left by geographical distance from the world's major art centres, they eagerly flocked to the few exhibitions of traditional and contemporary art which found their way to Melbourne or Sydney in the first decades of the century. The French Art Exhibition of 1914 drew record crowds to the Art Gallery of New South Wales - as did the Herald

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fascinating indifference, a *physical* indifference to what we call soul or spirit". From a letter to Catherine Carswell, from Thirroul (NSW), 22 June 1922. Quoted in Murray-Smith (151).

[4] J. F. Archibald, as well-known for his rantings against philistinism as his for his generous patronage of the arts, was seen to emerge angrily from the NSW Art Gallery in the early 1900s spluttering:

> Look at this place. It's full of rich men, and any one of them could write his name forever by bequeathing it a public monument or institution, or endowing scholarships or the arts. But they carry money-grubbing into the grave with them and rot there forgotten as they damn well deserve to be.

Quoted from Norman Lindsay, Bohemians of the Bulletin (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965) 20.

Exhibition to the Melbourne Town Hall in 1939. [5] Yet, such was the inexplicable stubbornness of the New South Wales Trustees that, when the outbreak of war prevented the exhibition's return, priceless works by Modigliani, Cezanne and Renoir languished unseen in the gallery's basement for more than five years - this, in spite of revenue-spinning public demand. [6] Nor would the National Art Gallery of Victoria contemplate housing the 1939 exhibition of modern paintings by artists such as Dali and Picasso. Whatever the apathy afflicting Australians in their attitude to contemporary art, Australian officialdom had little interest in allaying it. By sating the public curiosity for European and American painting, however, they may well have forestalled the growing sense of national "cringe" with regard to contemporary local art which was to reach its apotheosis in the 1950s.

Public indifference and the lack of patronage had the obvious effect of isolating Australian artists in the 1920s - even when they were successful or well-known. An especially vocal enemy of "wowsers" and "philistines", Norman Lindsay carried *his* sense of separateness one step further by abandoning Sydney for Springwood and establishing (however unintentionally) an Olympus-like camp for budding poets and other artistic refugees in the Blue Mountains (fig. 2.5). Nor was Lindsay alone in his brooding sense of alienation from the public which treated him so indifferently. In the first part of his autobiographical trilogy, The Roaring Twenties, Jack Lindsay recalls Dame Nellie Melba

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[5] According to Bernard Smith in Place, Taste and Tradition, the 1939 exhibition broke all attendance records for Australian exhibitions (210).

[6] See Geoffrey Dutton, The Innovators: The Sydney Alternatives in the Rise of Modern Art, Ideas and Literature (South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1986).



Fig. 2.5. Norman Lindsay, The Gods on Earth. 1924. Page 7 of The World of Norman Lindsay.

admonishing his brother Ray with the warning, "Take my advice. Get out of this country. It's no good for any artist!". [7]

Some writers and artists have begged to differ in their views of Australian culture - or the lack of it. Returning in 1970 to Australia after an absence of more than 40 years, Christina Stead expressed her abhorrence of the concept, "cultural cringe". "It's an abject and contemptible expression", she said, "when I was here before, there was culture everywhere". [8] Stead, of course, left Sydney shortly before the Depression in 1928 and, in doing so, may well have escaped the worst of the suburban asphyxiation which poets and painters complained of in the '30s and '40s. Her contempt for Australia's low cultural self-esteem (another form of cringe perhaps?) does, however, highlight the tendency among the artistic, the intellectual and the educated in Australia to blame philistinism for that lack of history and local authority in the arts from which all young countries suffer. As Stead herself implied in Seven Poor Men of Sydney (in the persona of the schoolmaster) only time and painstaking achievement can compensate for the immaturity of local traditions:

> "You have no notion of history; you began yesterday and you all think you are the first men. Doctrine, constitution, order, duty,

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[7] Quoted in Stephen Murray-Smith (197) from Jack Lindsay, The Roaring Twenties. Melba's comment is typical of the reaction by Australian artists (of all kinds) to the country's provincialism and cultural indifference. At the same time, it is worthwhile to note Ray Lindsay's surprised reaction to her comment. "This rather staggered me", he said, "after her heated statements in the press about how artistic and understanding the Australian public was".

[8] Quoted on Stead's return to Australia in 1974 in Stephen Murray-Smith 246.

> religion, you have to find them out by long and droughty explorations of the spirit." [9]

Philistinism between the wars, however, was not without its advantages. In his book, Inventing Australia, Richard White contends that the isolation suffered by Australian artists during the 1920s was as much a product of their own elitism as a condition inflicted by the dreaded philistine (fig. 2.6). According to White, this exclusiveness was a legacy of the late nineteenth century when local artists and writers, aware of their new status as professionals in a young society - and of the European trend towards an acceptance of art for art's sake - began to band together in self-consciously bohemian groups. Referring to that clique of writers and artists which gathered about The Bulletin during the 1890s, White observes that

> Their sense of community tended to be exclusive and elitist. They shared [Marcus] Clarke's scorn for Philistines, but extended it to non-professionals and 'the public'. As artists they claimed for themselves ... a higher appreciation of art. As professional artists they demanded more say in artistic matters in the established art societies, which were dominated by amateurs and laymen intent on cultural improvement. [10]

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[9] Christina Stead, Seven Poor Men of Sydney (1934; Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1987) 17.

[10] Richard White, Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1788-1980 (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981) 94.



Fig. 2.6. Norman Lindsay, The Crucified Venus. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Thanks largely to Norman Lindsay, the peak of whose extraordinary career spanned more than four decades, this elitist attitude was propagated well into the next generation of writers and artists. A proud and vocal veteran of nineteenth-century bohemia, Lindsay averred that "the stupid, blind, resentful mob" must be given direction by the all-conquering artist:

> At intervals the earth has seen certain men rise by an indomitable power of will and personality, who have been able to impose themselves on their kind as leaders and masters. These alone among all the types of human effort have been able to shape the conditions of the state which they command ... it must be one of these, some future conqueror with a great human ideal, [who will be] offered the mission of forcing mankind to become upright, courageous, strong and beautiful. [11]

Lindsay's role was particularly crucial in shaping the attitudes of young poets in the 1920s. He was already a national figure (despite the fact that he was an artist in a nation obsessed with horses, sheep and sporting heroes) and he believed passionately in the artist's semi-divine role as saviour of the human race. As John Docker suggests in Australian Cultural Elites, Lindsay

> offered Australia's creative youth an implicit political stance, an attitude towards history and a suggestion that the artist's life-style

[11] Quoted in W. M. Maidment, "Australian Literary Criticism", Southerly 24.1 (1964): 40.

> be concerned with friendships and contact only with fellow members of the elite, an elite who also could share the often concealed meanings and language proper to a group which didn't have to or want to explain itself to anyone except those predestined to understand. [12]

The Lindsayian philosophy of art was especially conducive to acceptance in post-war Australia. Isolation - of both the artist from society and the nation from the world - was a popular concept in the 1920s. With the shock of war still fresh in the minds of many and the inexplicable new horrors of modernism and wholesale social upheaval to deal with, Australians were content to shut their eyes to change. Censorship increased drastically during these years as did the zeal to protect the nation's "innocence and purity". [13] Richard White suggests that the pre-war notion of Australia as a "young, white, happy and wholesome" country beset by foreign evils was intensified in the 1920s by the virility of both the Digger legend and the Spanish influenza epidemic which swept the country in 1919. [14] Significantly, Norman Lindsay lost a sister and a much-loved

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[12] John Docker, Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne (Sydney: Angus & Robertson 1974) 30.

[13] White 140. The provincial hatred which informed public censorship during the 1920s cannot be underestimated. In "The Sex Synonym in Art: "Ulysses" and the Conquest of Disgust", published in Vision No. 1 in 1922, Norman Lindsay writes

> The book "Ulysses" .... is not a book at all, but a slovenly mass of mental matter petrified in type matter. It has neither style, form, nor spirit; its very shapelessness constitutes an element of horror, for where all is vague, formless, and disarticulate, we are in the presence of a primitive mind in its initial stage of development.

[14] White 140-141.

brother to war and influenza - surely contributing factors in his repulsion for the devils of foreign influence and change. But, as White also remarks, "the same trend towards safe, isolationist conservatism" appeared elsewhere in the world during this time: [15]

> In the United States, Warren Harding had won the 1920 election promising a 'return to normalcy', while his successor, Calvin Coolidge, declared that America needed no importations, 'industrial, intellectual or political'. In Britain, Stanley Baldwin came to power standing for 'Safety First'. They all represented a shift away from welfare, reform and idealism towards 'safe' business principles and, at times, hysterical anti-communism. Australia's Stanley Melbourne Bruce, Prime Minister from 1923 to 1929, fitted the same pattern. He claimed to be just 'a plain businessman and a plain soldier'; the *Australian Manufacturer* was thankful that he was 'a very average person, and that is the secret of his success ... There is safety in mediocrity'. [16]

Mediocrity, apparently, was a prize sought by the people of nations other than Australia - a point possibly missed by white nationals who were the victims not only of an impoverished cultural tradition, but of a physical isolation which made them as ignorant of themselves as they were of other races and nations during the 1920s. Travel was still the province of the rich at this time - a factor preventing the average Australian from

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[15] White 140.

[16] White 140.

gaining a true picture of his or her relationship with the rest of the world. Perhaps it was for this reason that cultural indifference in Australia seemed more like a national malady than a problem faced by emerging artists everywhere during the 1920s. While there is no doubt that Australia's relative prosperity, its youth and almost numbing distance from the upheavals of war bred a certain complacency in the general public's attitude to art, it is equally true that there was a virulent, semi-suburban desire all over the western world for the kind of unshattered and unending peace which Australians took for granted.

In mistaking youth for philistinism, however, many writers and artists found the creative stimulation they needed. By banding themselves against the common enemy of cultural ignorance and provincialism, they found a focus for their creative efforts - and a means of compensating for Australia's distance from the historical upheavals of Europe.

Aspects of Elitism in Post-War Australia

In their search for new standards in art and literature and for stimulation in a small and isolated cultural community, poets and painters drew together, arming themselves against the sea of change which challenged the culture from without - or the forces of resistance that threatened it from within. Not only did they turn to each other, half-starved for admiration (according to Jane Lindsay this was probably the chief reason for her father's magnetic appeal to younger poets), but sprang virulently to each other's defence when the occasion required. Slessor was a life-long defender of Norman Lindsay's reputation as was Sidney Nolan of Ern Malley's and Max Harris's. Judith Wright wrote indignantly to The Courier-Mail in 1948, deploring the disgraceful

provincialism which attended critical reviews of Nolan's Eliza Fraser exhibition in Brisbane and, in a similar vein, Slessor published a scathing article, "Dumb-bell vs Dobell", in a 1944 issue of Meanjin which savaged the instigators of the infamous court-case against that year's Archibald Prize winner. [17] Slessor's later poetry is as many worlds away from Lindsay's art as Judith Wright's is from Sidney Nolan's. Yet the obvious indignation which these poets felt on behalf of their fellow creators is an expression of the often silent bond which writers and artists shared during these years of public derision, censorship and provincialism. This sense of banding together to fight for a common cause was certainly the impetus behind Vision - as it was behind the Jindyworobak and Angry Penguins movements.

While instigated for vastly differing reasons - Vision in defence of conservative European values and Angry Penguins in search of modern experimental techniques - both magazines, by virtue of their journal format (and like The Bulletin before them), created natural opportunities for interchange between poets and painters. It is equally true, however, that each provided a timely outlet for existing groups of like-minded acquaintances and friends who were already exerting varying degrees of influence over each other's work and ideas. Interestingly, both journals sprang from camp-like bases of creativity, each reflecting the distinctive political and cultural opinions of those at the centre and the pivotal role played by older "authority" figures such as Lindsay and John and Sunday Reed in guiding and dominating younger members of the group. Not surprisingly, Lindsay, Harris and the Reeds were all, despite their own personal leanings,

[17] Kenneth Slessor, "Dumb-bell vs. Dobell." Meanjin 4.1 (1945): 51-52.

intensely interested in both poetry and painting: Harris wrote critiques of paintings produced by the Melbourne group, while Sunday Reed, an avid pursuer of all things avant garde, translated Rimbaud's poems from the French for Angry Penguins.

This widely assumed sense of community among writers and artists, however, has been the subject of some dispute. Despite general critical acceptance that these creative groups exerted considerable influence on local art and literature, poets, painters and commentators alike have tended to play down the existence of Pre-Raphaelite or Bloomsbury-type circles of inspiration during the inter-war period. Slessor was particularly quick to deny his involvement with Vision in a series of heated exchanges with Jack Lindsay published in Southerly during the early 1950s, while John Reed, a central figure in the Angry Penguins circle, has also disputed the validity of referring to "specific" groups of painters. [18] Reed has protested bitterly that

> While it is true that these artists were all working in Melbourne in the early forties and were all, with the exception of Vassilieff, very young, it is wrong and misleading to refer to them as a 'group'. This term ... is, I believe, beginning to be taken for granted, which is unfortunate as it creates quite a false impression and places the whole of that period in a false perspective. In fact it is interesting to reflect on how individual all these artists were, and how little, for the most part, they influenced each other. I can

[18] John Reed, "John Perceval" Art and Australia 5.1 (1967): 354.

even remember one of them referring to the work of Nolan as 'trivia'. [19]

Interaction between poets and painters *could* be as much the product of incident and circumstance as a deliberate pooling of resources. Douglas Stewart's marriage to watercolourist Margaret Coen, for example, introduced the poet not only to Norman Lindsay but to a world of paint and painters which had previously held little fascination for him. Poems to painters - and to his wife's talent and artistic temperament - pepper Stewart's work, although his appreciation of the visual arts, unlike Slessor's and Dobson's, does not appear to have intrinsically altered his poetic technique. Even more incidental is Slessor's friendship with the black-and-white artist, Joe Lynch, whose untimely drowning inspired "Five Bells". While the man, rather than the artist, is the subject of Slessor's poem (or, arguably, all humankind) it is somehow satisfying that this circle of shared circumstance and inspiration was completed by John Olsen in his 1972 Opera House mural, Salute to Five Bells.

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[19] John Reed 354. Albert Tucker's views tend to support Reed. In recent years, the painter has attested that relationships among the Melbourne painters were of a social, rather than professional, nature:

> There was a social interchange going on all the time, but there wasn't a direct painting interchange, more a philosophical and technical interchange. Arthur [Boyd], I could see, was a beautiful painter and that was that. That was over there and it didn't connect with what I was doing .... It was an external phenomenon that I watched and was intrigued by. It just didn't have any effect on my own work. What I am saying would be just as true for Arthur or Nolan or Vassilief or Perceval. We found each other's work interesting but it wasn't in a direct influence sense.

Quoted in James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, Albert Tucker (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982) 28.

Certainly, the associations which sprang up between poets and painters during this period were not always deliberate - and, as John Reed suggests, most of the poets and painters who flocked to these centres of stimulation retained both their unique creative styles and their strong personal opinions about each other's art. Regionalism undoubtedly played an important role in developing identifiable groups of poets and painters during these years - not only in terms of geographical distance between Australia's major capital cities but in the development of distinctive styles of art and literature. A point often forgotten in discussions of the era is that Australia's population was small and its poets and painters few. It was inevitable that artists and writers would form their own elites - if not by virtue of artistic politics then simply as a product of the fact that they all knew each other. [20]

In drawing together for cultural sustenance and strength, however, Australian poets and painters followed along paths of collaboration which were being vigorously and consciously pursued by writers and artists in other parts of the world. While there is little evidence to suggest that local poets and painters were aware of the direction in which their friendships and close associations were heading, there is no doubt that their collaborative efforts formed part of a distinctive international pattern during this period -

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[20] The Second World War also had its part to play in creating internal isolation between capital city groups of artists and writers. As Lynne Strahan notes in Just City and the Mirrors: Meanjin Quarterly and the Intellectual Front, 1940-1965 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984), travel between regional cities was severely curtailed during the war by both petrol rationing and public transport restrictions. The sudden scattering of writers and artists to other parts of Australia and, especially, the globe at large following the war's end partly vindicates the crucial role played by both regionalism and geographic isolation in creating close-knit or, at least, identifiable, groups of poets and painters during the 1940s in particular.

a pattern which was to have far-reaching consequences in the development of Australian art and literature over the decades which followed.

The Collaborative Impulse in Europe and Australia

Australian poets and painters were by no means alone in their struggle against public indifference during the 1920s. In his foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century, Abram Lerner notes that the surge of collaborative efforts among European artists in the aftermath of World War One sprang primarily from an acute sense of alienation. Collaboration, he contends, was as much the product of the need to gather with like-minded individuals against a society grown indifferent to artistic progress as a collective response to the destructions of war:

> Perhaps the reason [for these collaborative efforts] rests in the human psyche, the need to communicate - if not with the public then with other artists whose sympathies and aesthetic outlooks run parallel. In the twentieth century, collaboration among artists, poets, musicians, and others has seemed especially crucial, given the century's social upheavals and the radical aesthetic innovations that have deepened the chasm between artist and public. [21]

Importantly, many of these collaborative efforts sprang not just from a sense of

[21] Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984) 11.

personal isolation but from a passionate desire for social change and transformation. *Dada* and the Surrealist Manifesto - two far-reaching movements which hastened to fill the vacuum left by a vanished pre-war European social order - were as much the product of radical new political convictions as the collective will to create a new artistic and literary aesthetic. Lerner contends that these artists and writers drew together out of a deep sense of disappointment with the cultural and social world in which they found themselves after World War One - a feeling which also pervades Norman Lindsay's Creative Effort:

> The tendency before the First World War to view the new century as the beginning of a golden age, when mankind would be freed by science to realize a transcendent future, was especially attractive to visual artists who had begun to explore new art forms appropriate to this heady vision. When the war came it was almost welcomed by some as a means of worldwide purgation that would cleanse society of its vices. Their hopes were short lived, and as the war continued their dreams were shattered. Artists felt more isolated than ever. [22]

Inter-artistic groups were a special feature of cultural life in the aftermath of World War One. While history clearly shows that poets and painters have long drawn together in pursuit of a common creative impulse, the groups that united in defence, or defiance, of change from the 1920s onwards were passionately convinced that art had

[22] McCabe 11.

more than an aesthetic role to play in the emergence of a vital new post-war world. Spurred by the social, political and economic ruination of Europe, poets and painters - most notably in Paris and other major European centres - became eager to hasten the end of old artistic orders. Working together in such self-consciously avant garde movements as *dada* and surrealism, these young radicals began to explore the forbidden peripheral zones of painting and literature with a collective enthusiasm unprecedented in the western tradition of interchange between the arts. This sense of communion and interaction between writers and artists (fig. 2.7) sprang not only from a common impulse to rid the world of its past wrongs but from a desire shared by many post-war thinkers to bring about an exciting, vital "new order".

Not surprisingly, communist philosophies became inextricably associated with this sense of inter-artistic communion. As Cynthia Jaffee McCabe remarks in her book, Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century, such "pervasive communality" was not only a feature of *all* the arts during the decades following World War One, but a reflection of the new libertarian spirit which writers and artists believed could vanquish all repressive social, political and artistic orders in the wake of Russia's triumphant defeat of its own feudal past:

> As was the case in all facets of society, collective action was the hallmark of art in the period following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 .... "During these years there was an unprecedented interaction among artists working in different media: poets and



Fig. 2.7. Max Ernst, All Friends Together. 1922. Page 36 of Surrealists and Surrealism: 1919-1939. By Gaetan Picon. 1977. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.

> musicians painted, painters designed for the theatre, they collaborated on illustrated books, painters and sculptors designed utilitarian objects, and many proclaimed their ideas in manifestos. Men and women worked together in astonishing numbers; many artists were married to one another, or related by family." [23]

Not all instances of collaborative or "collective action" sprang from a direct association with communism in the 1920s. Divided as the world was between socialists and fascists, workers and capitalists, modernists and traditionalists, however, the avant garde became inextricably linked with the political left. For many poets and painters, the association with communism seemed natural, for others it was anathema. But in Australia, with its strong labour tradition and tireless struggle between the forces of modernism and tradition, it was only a matter of time before creative progress came to be consciously associated with communist politics. [24]

The upheavals of a period fraught with the physical violence of two world wars and the intolerable hardships of depression were, not surprisingly, reflected in the politics of nearly all artistic pursuits. For this reason, the literary or messagiac content of painting

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[23] Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984).

[24] For a full account of the stormy relationship between communism and Australian painters of the 1940s see Richard Haese, Rebels and Precursors. (1981. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988). For an account of the influence of communism on writers of the period see Lynne Strahan, Just City and the Mirrors: Meanjin Quarterly and the Intellectual Front, 1940-1965 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984) and Dorothy Hewett, WildCard: An Autobiography, 1923-1958. (Ringwood, Victoria: McPhee Gribble, 1990).

became more and more important. It was no longer enough for artists to paint what they saw - it became essential for them to *explain* it. As Bernard Smith remarks

> The generation that fought in the war and the generation that grew up immediately after the peace, were prompted by despair and disgust to jettison the whole crumbling facade of intellectual and moral values, that had helped to bring the world to a shambles. It was during this period and in this atmosphere that the destructive cult of *Dada*, the "heroic" phase of Surrealism, grew up and flourished. It was the negation of all culture, morality and art. In all of these periods Surrealism was closely associated with periods of war. [25]

Out of this restlessness and intense dissatisfaction with the world grew *Dada* - a movement responsible for formulating twentieth century concepts of conscious collaboration between the sibling arts. Discarding restrictive notions of authorship and of creative genius working in isolation, *Dada* often used collective action in its determination to free the individual from the destructive restraints of an outworn and apparently suicidal society. Challenging, mocking and caricaturing all previous artistic conventions (fig. 2.8), this revolutionary and subversive movement took as its principal target all those traditional social values which they felt "had made the war possible, if not inevitable". [26]

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[25] Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788. (1945; 2nd ed; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988) 217.

[26] Harold Osborne, ed, The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Art (1981; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988).



Fig. 2.8. Marcel Duchamp, L H O O Q (detail). 1919. Page 18 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

Recalling *Dada*'s Olympus-like inception in the mountains, on politically neutral ground, high above the bloodshed and battlefields of war, "collaborator" Jean Arp captures something of the spirit which inspired the movement:

> In Zurich, in 1915, disgusted by the butchery of World War I, we devoted ourselves to the Fine Arts. Despite the remote booming of artillery we sang, painted, pasted, and wrote poetry with all our might and main. We were seeking an elementary art to cure man of the frenzy of the times and a new order to restore the balance between heaven and hell. [27]

Lindsay, Slessor, FitzGerald and others also sought a new order for Australian art and literature at the end of World War One. Unlike its European counterparts, however, the journal which spearheaded the comparatively brief Australian movement to purify and purge the troubled world was stridently anti-modernist in outlook. Although its beginnings were as firmly rooted in isolationism as *Dada*'s had been - and as repelled by the brutality and atrocities of war - Jack Lindsay's Vision laid the blame for the decline of European civilisation squarely at the feet of modernism. Desperate to recapture and preserve those traditional values which Australian society had barely managed to transport and absorb during the previous century or so, Vision denounced those usurpers who, thousands of miles away, were struggling to rid themselves of the diseased remains which constituted their own "vision" of an ailing pre-war society. As virulently as any migrant

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[27] McCabe, "The Period Between Two Wars" in Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century 17.

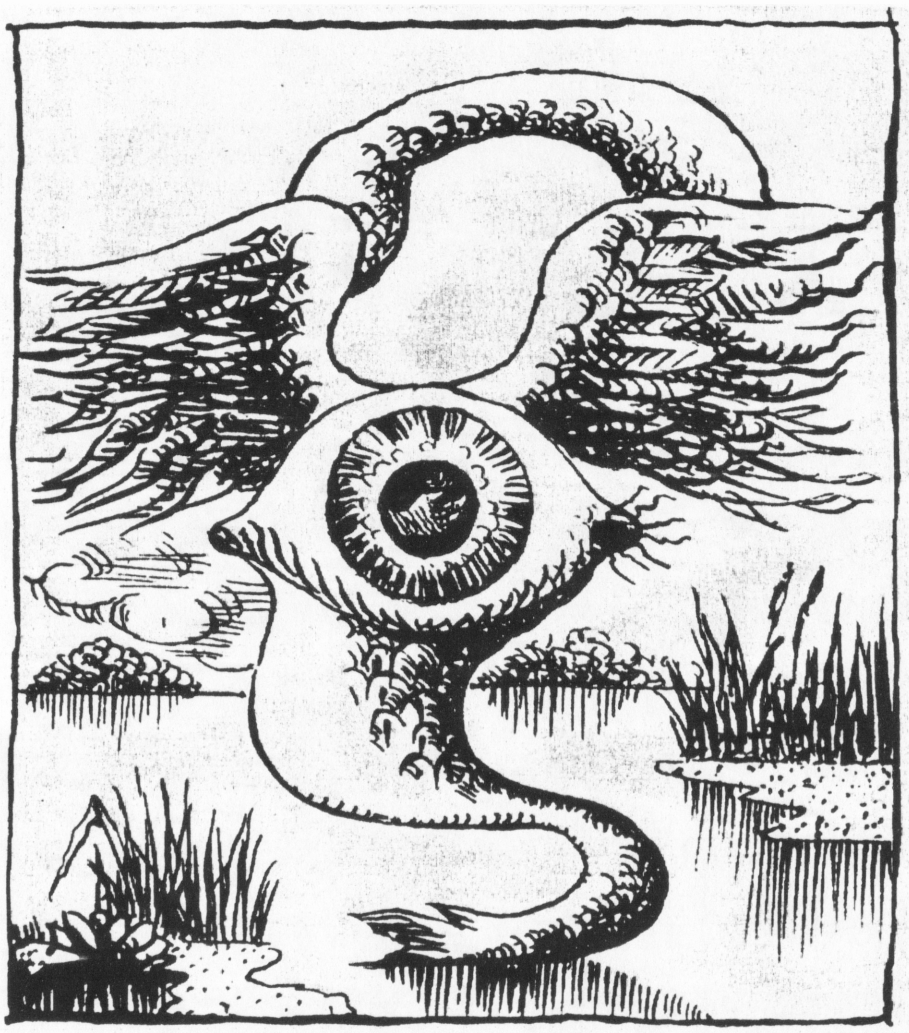
group, this fledgling artistic community became intent on preserving, rather than furthering, the existing aesthetic and literary mores.

Vision marked the first conscious attempt in Australia (although there is something of a precedent to be found in The Bulletin) to bring artists and writers together in a spirit of cultural defence or wholesale rebellion. Preaching against the degeneracies of modern art and the provincialism of the bush ballad, Vision (somewhat ironically) sought a return to the pre-war innocence which movements such as *dada* had already damned as decadent. But while avant garde circles in other parts of the world drew poets and painters together in a mood of conscious experimentation, Vision attracted exponents of the sibling arts by virtue of provincial necessity (that is, cultural starvation) and accidental acquaintanceship. Interestingly, Vision's attempt to bring writers and artists together in defence of conservative values was gradually replaced during the '30s and '40s by a tendency for poets and painters to unite under banners of modernism, internationalism and even communism. During the 1920s, however, Vision's dogma was aimed at diverting Australian art and literature *away* from the evils of modernism and, therefore, of inter-artistic experiment. In attempting to do so, this group unwittingly fostered an environment of mutual support between poets and painters, one which in many ways, echoed - and even parodied - overseas trends.

While no two movements make for a more oxymoronic comparison - *Dada* (figs. 2.9 and 2.10) was as wildly and radically progressive as Vision (fig. 2.11) was reactionary and conservative - both shared a passionate belief in the creative supremacy of



Fig. 2.9. Max Ernst, Of This Men Shall Know Nothing. 1923. Page 82 of Surrealists and Surrealism.



SIGNE

Fig. 2.10. Andre Masson, Signe - Il singe. 1925. Page 83 of Surrealists and Surrealism.



Creative Effort

O BED, where I have met my love in love—
Half-mother of the laughing babes that run
Through golden doorways to the outside sun—
Bringer of rest and promises above
Bewildered waking! For, asleep, I know
How that, in after centuries, we grow
To all we shape our actions here below.
Man is Man's God, created of one breath—
Who masters life, the same shall master death.

—*Hugh McCrae.*

Fig. 2.11. Norman Lindsay, illustration for Vision, No. 1. May 1923.

the artist which was intrinsic to their seemingly divergent philosophies. German art historian Werner Haftmann writes of *Dada* that it

> led to a new *image of the artist*. The *Dada*ist claimed Genius, as the term was understood by the Romanticists, as his natural prerogative. He saw himself as an individual outside all bounds, whose native environment was unrestricted freedom. [28]

The unrestricted freedom which Vision sought was that of Arcadia - a sensual world of the imagination where the artist not only reigned as king, but where the destructiveness of war and modernism had no place. Like the Zurich group, Norman Lindsay and his young followers painted and wrote poetry with all their "might and main" as a means of healing society's ills or confounding its hang-ups (ie philistinism). More often than not, these creative efforts were charged with the rarefied air of Springwood and its magical, intoxicating ability to remove artists from the barbarisms of modern living.

In Vision's case, however, charisma and cultural cringe were equally responsible for bringing poets and painters together as this new sense of elitism. Norman Lindsay's personal love of poetry, his unique position as guardian of the Australian cultural aesthetic and his impassioned hatred of philistinism had a great deal more to do with his influence on the group of poets associated with Vision than dreams of collective rebellion

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[28] Osborne 144.

and revolution. As father figure to the generations of young poets searching for a revitalised cultural aesthetic and for inspiration and conviction in the colourless world of Australia between the wars, Lindsay presided over Australian literary tastes with the iron rods of culture, tradition and craftsmanship. Paradoxically, Lindsay's *fin de siecle* style of art and fatherly influence *did* play a pivotal role in Slessor's ultimate acceptance of modernism. Progressing from his youthful fixation with the frozen immortality and timelessness promised by art, Slessor broke away from the rigid forms emulated by local tradition to found a style which reacted against the sympathies and shallowness of his youth. While his early work is preoccuppied with the beauties of Rubens or the creative fairyland inspired by Lindsay, it is in his preference for "concrete" imagery that his later poetry reaches its finest expression. The unmistakable influence of T. S. Eliot, combined with his own mature vision of a world beset by the ravages of time, produced a poetry of then unequalled brilliance in Australian literature. Inter-artistic experiment enabled Slessor to embrace the modernism which had eluded Australian poetry before 1930 - a progressiveness which culminated in the publication of Five Bells in 1938.

The parallels to be drawn between *Dada* and Vision are crucial in understanding the world-wide climate which prevailed over the relations between Australian poetry and painting at this time. That two movements at opposite ends of the world - and with no interaction whatsoever - could be formed in response to the upheavals created by the death of pre-war Europe is some indication of the widening pool of turbulence which change created in the wake of the Great War. In joining together to facilitate, or prevent, the birth of a new age, both movements resorted to artistic interchange - *Dada* with the

avant garde consciousness of experimentation and Vision with a young culture's instinctive need for authority. Ironically, just as Europe became anxious to shake off its tired old dotage, Australia took exception to its own budding newness.

Springing as they did from a hungry desire for the tradition embodied in another art - and the respectability afforded by an association with Lindsay - poems such as Slessor's "Earth-Visitors" and "Rubens' Innocents" are, in this context, something of an anomaly in the theory that inter-artistic experiment and the birth of progressive new movements coincide. Slessor's initial conservatism, however, was later replaced with an equally avid need to experiment and it is during this phase that his passion for the concrete image gave birth to a new form of poetry in Australia. It should be remembered also that Vision was experimental in its search for an art and literature capable of the kind of universal excellence which the culture had so far lacked. While any marriage of poetry and painting in its pages tended to be clumsy - and furiously, if unconsciously, intent on preserving the rigid boundaries of each art rather than experimenting with their differences or similarities - such a notion was still unprecedented in Australian literature. What is important is that Vision, like *Dada*, sought an antidote for the world's ills in art - an art in which poets and painters collaborated in pursuit of the creative nirvana that would deliver humanity from the consequences of its new, as well as its old, blunders (fig. 2.12).

Arcadia, however, was an ideal better suited to Australia at the end of World War One than *Dada*. Since the late eighteenth century, writers, historians and even politicians



Fig. 2.12. Norman Lindsay, Where War Ends. 1924. Colour plate 2 of The World of Norman Lindsay.

> almost coal-age pristine quality. Only it's too far for me. I can't reach so awfully far. Further than Egypt. I feel I slither on the edge of a gulf, reaching to grasp its atmosphere and spirit. It eludes me and always would. It is too far back. It seems to me that generation after generation must people it with ghosts, and catastrophes water it with blood, before it will come alive with a new day of its own. [33]

It was in such a landscape that Slessor envisaged Pan, exiled from his native Europe by the savageries of war and modernism, playing the pipes of bacchanalian art with renewed hope and vigour. While Joyce's Ulysses, Eliot's The Waste Land and the extremes of *Dada* emerged from the ruins of old Europe to challenge, and ultimately alter, the world's perceptions of art and literature, many Australian artists became more reactionary in outlook, taking up arms against the sea of trouble that was modernism and struggling to preserve a crumbling tradition which had, perhaps, never been theirs to defend. It was under this banner - or against it - that groups of poets and painters united sporadically for the next two decades in search of a crusade that would lead them out of Australia's cultural wilderness and into a glorious battle with tradition and experiment, a battle providing them with all the catastrophes of bloodshed which Lawrence deemed so necessary for inspiration.

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[33] From a letter to Katharine Susannah Prichard, 3 July 1922. Quoted in Murray-Smith 151.

3 Norman Lindsay and His Influence

"A New Life with the Pen"

Although Norman Lindsay was the sun around which Australia's best and brightest poets revolved during the 1920s, the artist was adamant in his belief that the genres should maintain their own spheres. Inter-artistic experiment of the kind propounded by *dada* was not only inconceivable to Lindsay, but a subject for his blazing scorn and derision. In the sense that traditional barriers between the arts have existed to be breached by poets and painters brave enough to defy Lessing's rules, Lindsay was no rebel: for the artist and his small galaxy of followers, *ut pictura poesis* implied shared creative power and mutual support rather than cross-collisions of the dangerous and disruptive kind pursued by modern writers and artists.

Lindsay sought the company of poets in search of a fellowship which he believed all creative men and women could share. Although he primly reminded publisher Sidney Ure Smith in a 1923 letter that he had "always held strong opinions against the effort to amalgamate art and literature under the one heading", he could be rhapsodic when describing the effect which poetry had on his own waning artistic inspiration. [1] In a letter written to close friend Hugh McCrae in 1919, Lindsay waxes lyrical about poetry's revitalising capabilities:

[1] R. G. Howarth and A. W. Barker, eds, Letters of Norman Lindsay (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979) 225.

> I was assured that I hadn't a pen stroke in my whole composition. I really had not. I could think of nothing I wanted to do. I loathed the thought of ink and paper; the thought of dragging myself to a long and weary technical problem turned my stomach ... I was in this wretched state of mind when your new poems from A. & R. turned up. Save one or two, they were all new to me, and I read them, as I read all you write, with blood as well as spirit. I gave myself over to their beauty, and they returned to me something I had lost .... A big composition arrived in my mind, without an effort, and I sat down to it with a gusto I thought had gone with youth. I called it "The Garden of Happiness", and it begins for me a new life with the pen. [2]

This impassioned belief in the affirming power of poetry underpins all Lindsay's views on the inter-play between the arts. Importantly, *association*, rather than inter-action, was the keynote of this philosophy. While Lindsay regarded the creative siblings as being capable of providing each other with a special warmth and comradeship missing in relationships with non-members of the clan, incestuous behaviour of the type encouraged by *dada* was strictly taboo. Mutual inspiration, shared sorrows suffered at the hands of the philistine and even friendly encouragement of the kind espoused within the normal limits of "mateship" defined the farthest limits of any relationship - however close - between Lindsay and his brother poets.

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[2] Howarth 157.

The strained distance which Lindsay maintained in his dealings with the genres is nowhere more evident than in portraits of poet-friends such as Douglas Stewart and Hugh McCrae. While two portraits of Stewart in particular - one in pencil (fig. 3.1) and the other in oils (fig. 3.2) - demonstrate Lindsay's remarkable draughtsmanship, they lack the psychological penetration and insight which might have distinguished them as the work of an intimate friend and champion of Australian poets. Even more disturbing is the 1914 illustration, Homage to the Poetry of Leon Gellert (fig. 3.3). With its ingratiating prettiness and Edwardian affectation, the drawing resembles many executed by Lindsay at the height of his popularity as a Bulletin artist. Obviously, Lindsay was not sufficiently affected by the unique style of Gellert's work (let alone his friend's poetic technique) to alter his own inimitable approach. Bearing only a tenuous relation to its original source of inspiration, Homage to the Poetry of Leon Gellert is typical of later illustrations which were "inspired" by the works of poets such as Slessor and McCrae.

Undoubtedly, Lindsay's years as a commercial illustrator - and his unequalled Australian fame - chained his artistic development to a considerable extent (a view shared even by the artist) (fig. 3.4). But when compared with contemporary paintings such as Giorgio de Chirico's The Poet's Dream (fig. 3.5), Lindsay's drawings betray not only his child-like absorption in the shallow world of externals, but the naivety of his regard for Australian poetry. While artistic inter-action was flourishing thousands of miles away in France and other parts of Europe, Lindsay kept vigilant watch over the limits of his own artistic kingdom, being careful neither to assimilate poetic technique in his work (beyond the story-telling function implicit in all illustration) nor to foster similar tendencies in the



Fig. 3.1. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Douglas Stewart. Margaret Coen, Sydney.

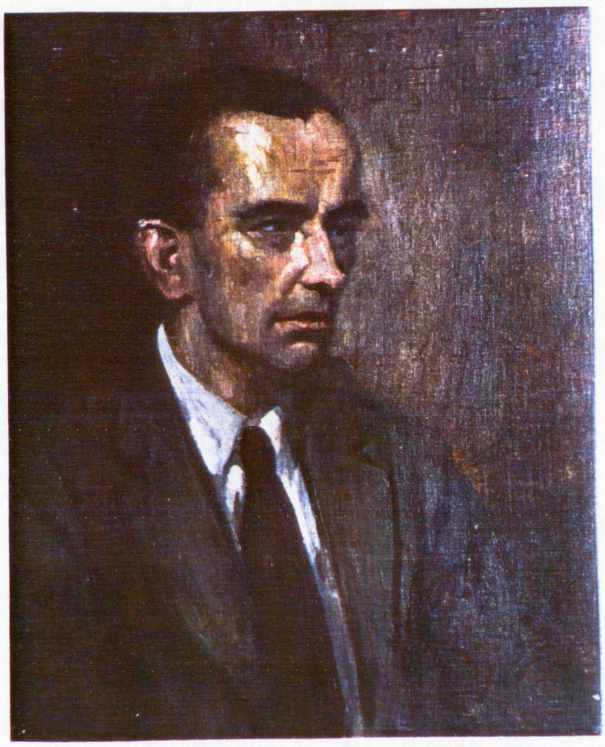

Fig. 3.2. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Douglas Stewart. Margaret Coen, Sydney.



Fig. 3.3. Norman Lindsay, In Homage to the Poetry of Leon Gellert. 1914. Page 78 of The World of Norman Lindsay. By Lin Bloomfield. 1979. South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1983.



Fig. 3.4. Norman Lindsay, Self Portrait. Plate 1 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings. Ed. Daniel Thomas. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977.

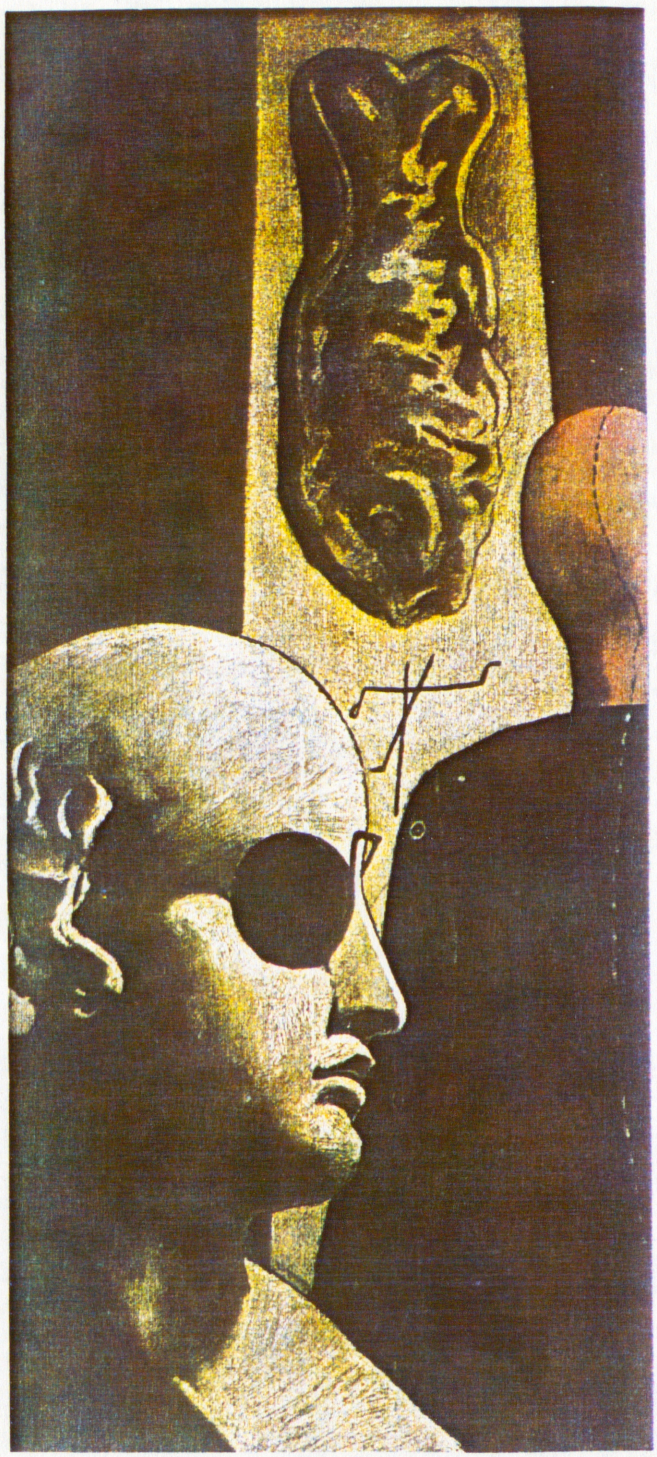

Fig. 3.5. Giorgio de Chirico, The Poet's Dream. 1914. Page 13 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

poetry of his cronies.

Despite his apparent indifference to inter-artistic experimentation, Lindsay was keenly aware of the tremendous influence which artistic brotherhood could have in the shaping of Australian culture. In a 1922 letter to Hugh McCrae, Lindsay complained that

> It is one of the most curious evidences of shortsightedness in any group of people engaged in the arts that each unit is convinced that the success of one must rob the others. If each unit could see that any effort devoted to stabilizing the work of another was so much stability added to its own effort, we would have no difficulty in widening ... mental stimulus in art, and so lifting a great deal of the ignoble struggle to exist from the act of creation. [3]

Hinting as they do at some of the struggles precipitating inter-artistic collaboration in other parts of the world during the 1920s, the opinions expressed in this letter are vital in understanding Lindsay's relationship with the *zeitgeist* in which they were formed. What is especially crucial, however, is his unswerving belief in the collective power of creative elites and their unique ability to make something more of life than the brutal scrabble for existence from which his artistic sensibilities recoiled. By standing together against the common enemy of philistinism in defence of the creativity which Lindsay perceived as their divine right, poets and painters could share in the mystery of the arts

[3] Howarth 204.

free from the intrusion of those who lacked great gifts from the gods. This elitist attitude was to help Australian culture make the quantum leap from the nineteenth century bush schools of art and literature which still predominated in the 1920s to inter-artistic experimentation of the kind embraced by Angry Penguins just two decades later.

While Lindsay's implicit rejection of blurred genres seems out of keeping with the times, his intense and mainly joyous friendships with Australian poets helped bridge the gap between nineteenth century attitudes of the type espoused by painter Tom Roberts and the atmosphere of inter-artistic experimentation which began to creep into the culture after 1923. Although he did not intend to bring poetry and painting together in a deliberate sense, he certainly contributed to a climate in which such an outcome was possible, if not inevitable. By gathering young poets about him in pursuit of more international expressions in art and literature - and in defiance of the philistine world of Australia during the 1920s - Lindsay not only strengthened the bohemian tradition of cultural rebellion inherited from The Bulletin, but opened it to important new influences from abroad. While drawing together in defence of conservative, and even reactionary, ideals (though in a spirit of comraderie rather than conscious political collaboration) the artist and his poetic proteges inadvertently exposed Australian art and literature to currents that were altering the course of European poetry and painting.

Through the medium of Vision, a dogmatic journal designed primarily to divert Australian art and literature away from the evils of modernism (and, therefore, the dangers of inter-artistic experiment) this group inadvertently fostered an environment of

mutual support between poets and painters. Even more ironically, these professional friendships reacted under the pressures of national youth and isolation to create an atmosphere in which inter-artistic experimentation became a natural by-product of the association. The unexpected influence which Vision and Lindsay exerted over the direction taken by Australian poetry at this time can be seen as part of the inevitable, though belated, workings of a universal *zeitgeist*. Just as plausible, however, is the possibility that Australian literature was looking for exactly this kind of stimulation at a sensitive stage in its development.

Significantly, the poet who chose the path of inter-artistic experiment (initially in pursuit of the traditions espoused by Lindsay) was to embrace modernism with a style of poetry that was not only richly imagistic, but inspired by art as the work of no other Australian poet had been. Lindsay's own art, in accordance with his personal beliefs, may have remained unaffected by the poetry of his followers, but there is no doubt that Kenneth Slessor found more than the muse of inspiration in the older man's work and theories. What is perhaps most interesting about the association is that Lindsay and Slessor unwittingly turned Lessing's rules on their head. Their relationship was founded on a mutual passion for tradition - and for that English-Germanic line of art and literature which favours a discreet, though strictly observed, segregation between the arts. [4] In another age - or perhaps another nation - the friendship might not have produced such a

[4] Lindsay's conservatism goes much deeper than Slessor's. His fascist leanings are well-documented as is his embarassing anti-semitism. He was a passionate advocate of representational art and despised modernism so completely that not even the advent of the motor car could gain his approval. Interestingly, Jews were widely viewed in Europe and in Australia as either heralds or peddlars of modern art.

startling outcome in the shape of Slessor's pheonix-like modernism. But in Australia between the wars, associations of the kind encouraged by Lindsay, whether in spirited defence of conservative values or not, strengthened the sense of tradition and culture on which an experiment of lasting value could be made. The accident of Lindsay's artistic bent, combined with the Australian tendency to visualise rather than verbalise, encouraged these same tendencies in Slessor's poetry at a time when inter-artistic experimentation was pointing the way forward for all modern art.

Guardian of the Cultural Aesthetic

Lindsay attracted poets to the bright flame of his enthusiasm and encouragement as few artists (Australian or otherwise) had before him. "It is a paradox", wrote Kenneth Slessor, "but none the less a fact that Norman Lindsay has exercised more influence and produced more effect on numbers of this country's poets than any other single individual in Australia's history". [5] The question of Lindsay's impact on the development of Australian poetry, neverthless, is a remarkably thorny one. Perhaps because he was eventually paid such lavish homage by the Australian public - and by those adoring streams of artists and writers who made the famous pilgrimage to Springwood - that something of a critical cooling has taken place with regard to the artistic and intellectual merit of his work and the true extent of his influence on poets such as Slessor, FitzGerald and McCrae. At the heart of this re-assessment lies the realisation (long suspected) that Lindsay's genius was not a creative one and that his idiosyncratic philosophies, however

[5] Kenneth Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Norman Lindsay" Southerly 16.2 (1955): 62.

influential at the time of their publication, have made little in the way of a lasting contribution to human thought. While there is no disputing the fact that he was a magnificent craftsman and a man of enormous energies, it is also true that his artistic achievements broke no new ground - nor have his impassioned theories on life, art and literature succeeded in surviving the period in which they were conceived. Despite his technical wizardry, his wide-ranging abilities as an artist and writer, and the tremendous commercial success which his work enjoyed, Lindsay's claim to a prominent place in the mainstream of Australian art history grows slighter and slighter as the years progress.

The real difficulty for critics, however, has been in coming to grips with the fact that Norman Lindsay exercised a profound influence over some of Australia's best and most memorable poets at a time when the national literature was attaining a critical degree of maturity. That an artist who lacked the creative talent and intellectual discipline to back up his own eccentric claims about life, art and sex should have had such a serious and lasting effect on poets such as Kenneth Slessor seems incomprehensible. [6] There is an acute kind of embarrassment involved in contemplating Lindsay the pro-fascist, Lindsay the failed intellectual, Lindsay the dreamer of adolescent soft-porn fantasies (fig. 3.6) - all the more so because he was a national figure whose influence on Australian ideas about art and culture was once immense. Vincent Buckley expresses the distaste which many critics felt for Lindsay's strident views in his article, "Utopianism and

[6] Recent monographs on Kenneth Slessor still express this view - see Geoffrey Dutton Kenneth Slessor: A Biography (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking Penguin, 1991).



Fig. 3.6. Norman Lindsay, Decoy. 1924. Plate 42 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Vitalism in Australian Literature", published in Quadrant in 1956:

> ... the line of influence which we would tend naturally to think of when the word 'vitalism' is mentioned is that pseudo-Dionysian strain whose prophet is Norman Lindsay, and whose devotees in the literature of the past forty years have been legion. It is, of course, an anti-intellectual piece of nervous excitement which has very little claim to be discussed in terms of its ideas. If Norman Lindsay hadn't succeeded in both impressing a group of talented disciples with the force of his personality and shocking the wowsers into counter-measures, it mightn't have lasted more than ten minutes or ten days in the history of Australian literature. [7]

A similar sense of revulsion for Lindsay's brand of "vitalist aestheticism" is vented by Robert Hughes in The Art of Australia:

> Never was more fuss attached to a sprint up a blind alley. Lindsay's philosophy was a reworking of Nietzschean vitalism, to which bits of Rabelais, Boccaccio and Petronius had stuck like fluff on a comb. He believed, basically, in an elite of vision: the great artist was a superman, subject to no external compulsions, spurned by the society around him but, by sheer dynamism, bending its hostile will to his own .... As one might expect in a

[7] Vincent Buckley, "Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature" Quadrant 3.2 (1959): 48.

> man capable of living by such a naive theory, Lindsay was a figure of violent commitments and antipathies. He detested Sigmund Freud (for wallowing in the unclean depth of the subconscious; Lindsay's demons were always healthy), Samuel Butler (for his political views, and for criticising Shakespeare), and every kind of modern art. He also hated Christianity, which restricted eruption of the Life-Force. [8]

Nor was Lindsay without other vocal opponents during his long and controversial career as artist and author. Middle-class moralists professed horror at the erotic content of his drawings, the contemporary art world ignored him, the press pronounced him decadent and debauched and his complicated theories on life were soon discarded by the intelligentsia. Yet, despite the critical contempt with which he was held - and the repressive rejection of modernism which his views espoused - Lindsay retained his unique guardianship of the Australian cultural aesthetic virtually up to his death in 1969. As the grand old man of an artistic tradition which not only spanned the legend of The Bulletin but combined a respect for old-world craftsmanship with the brilliance and rebelliousness of an inspired Australian larrikin, the artist held court during the 1920s over a group of admirers who were thirsty for culture and eager for artistic direction. At a time when writers and poets were struggling to shake off the yoke of bush balladry and nationalism that was the legacy of the "golden nineties", Lindsay offered them the perfect alternative - an Australian renaissance embodying all the pre-war values of an Arcadian Europe nestled

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[8] Robert Hughes, The Art of Australia (1966; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988) 83.

happily in a bush setting.

Lindsay's return to Hyperborea was, nevertheless, intensely contradictory. [9] While it embodied an essentially European tradition, his dogma declaimed modern European civilisation as decadent - a decadence deeply associated with the horrors of the First World War, the rise of abstractionist art and literature and the advent of the dreaded machine age. Although he stridently rejected colonialism and nationalism, he was almost provincial in his firm belief that Australia would one day be a great centre of art and culture to which the rest of the world would turn for its inspiration. And although he promoted sex in art and literature while denouncing all wowsers and religious fanatics, he was a wowser himself when it came to the works of Picasso, Van Gogh and T. S. Eliot.

What Lindsay *did* represent for his young followers was a passion for proven, long-established values and ideals. As Vivian Smith observes, although Lindsay "did not understand or else rejected so much that was creative or valuable in his own epoch, he was", ultimately, "in search of a tradition". [10] Even Robert Hughes has admitted that Lindsay has "some claim to be the most forceful personality the arts in Australia has ever

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[9] Creative Effort is fraught with contradictions. Lindsay even goes so far as to scorn those

> ... feminine half-minds that find in creeds, political or religious, a direction for life. No genuine intellect has ever yet accepted a creed, for the acceptance of such a thing diminishes a claim to intellect. (4)

Given that Creative Effort is itself an aesthetic creed, this admission seems to undermine much of what Lindsay says.

[10] Vivian Smith, The Oxford History of Australian Literature Ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981) 349.

seen". [11] And Vincent Buckley, however reluctantly, has acknowledged that "mixed up with all the prophetic nonsense" was the positive "emphasis on individual vision as the informing power of any art". [12] At times, Hyperborea represented little more than an escape into the past from the uncertainties and dreariness of the post-war world. But this fantasyland also provided a way in which the poets of a young nation with as yet few artistic or cultural traditions could drink from the well-springs of a civilisation that seemed to be vanishing before the terrible onslaughts of war and modernism. Importantly, this long draught of culture was intended to revivify, rather than replace, the Australian arts. While it was primarily Lindsay's search for an Australian kind of credibility in the shape of transplanted European traditions that drew young writers to him, the Vision school of poets sought something more than the apeing of outworn conventions. As A. D. Hope says, Lindsay and his followers "wanted Australian writing to re-enter the European tradition of letters, but to re-enter it with a character of its own and not merely as a provincial imitation of contemporary artistic fashions". [13]

Poets - not Painters

Norman Lindsay's vitality and energy - and his stubborn refusal to sink under the weight of critical pressure - drew poets and writers to him like moths to the flame in the cultural "dark ages" of Australia during the 1920s. Preaching that "creative effort" is the

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[11] Hughes 83.

[12] Buckley 50.

[13] A. D. Hope, Native Companions: Essays and Comments on Australian Literature 1936-1966 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974) 92.

"one enduring element in man's life", Lindsay believed in the supreme power of art as no other prominent Australian did - or ever had. [14] With a credo that affirmed such values as beauty, youth, sexuality and courage, he could not fail to attract those young poets who hungered for a return to the ideals and standards which war and modernism had conspired to destroy.

Given his enthusiasm for beauty, art and high ideals in what appeared to be a decaying and drearily modern world, Norman Lindsay's close involvement with such youthful exponents of an Australian "renaissance" is not surprising. What is unusual about the association is that Lindsay was principally a visual artist and his disciples were principally poets. The guru of Springwood was not a poet nor was he, as Slessor remarks, a man who had ever "written a line of poetry in poetic form". [15] Even Douglas Stewart, a staunch Lindsayian ally, finds it "an astonishing thing when you pause to consider it ... that the writers of this country should have accepted a painter as leader of their cultural life". [16]

Numerous solutions have been offered to the puzzle, not the least being Lindsay's personal love of poetry and his unequalled enthusiasm for encouraging young poets in the creation of "great" Australian works of the imagination. As the plethora of his published

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[14] Quoted from William H. Wilde et al., The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature (1985; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986) 421.

[15] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 62.

[16] Douglas Stewart, "The Flesh and the Spirit". Quoted in Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 63.

works attest, Lindsay had a remarkable facility for the written word and was eager and generous in his criticism at a time when recognition in Australia was hard to come by. According to Douglas Stewart, it was principally for these reasons that the majority of Australian poets accepted Lindsay "not only as an artist but as the fountainhead of Australian culture" in their time: [17]

> Writers undoubtedly come to him, not only because of the understanding he can bring to their work, but because of the tremendous enthusiasm with which he receives it - if it is good. Bring him but twenty lines - but eight lines - of good poetry and he receives it as lesser men would receive first prize in the lottery ... When he talks about poetry to a poet, it is with the assurance of a critic who has written on the subject in The Bulletin, in Vision, and the Lone Hand, and who is an expert on the men he most admires, Shakespeare, Burns, Byron and Browning.[18]

Lindsay's charisma and unstinting support of young poets played a considerable role in attracting crowds of worshippers to Springwood. There is no doubt, however, that his influence was at least partly the product of opportunities created by his sons. In 1923, Jack Lindsay renewed what had been only a passing acquaintance with his father and, overnight, became his most fervent disciple. Together with his brothers, Ray and Phil,

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[17] Quoted in Slessor 63.

[18] Quoted in Slessor 63.

Jack threw himself wholeheartedly into the Sydney Bohemia which had become something of an Athens to Lindsay's Mount Olympus. As John Hetherington contends, this born-again relationship between father and sons played a vital role in introducing young poets of the period to Springwood and establishing Lindsay, for the first time, as a well-known benefactor of Australian poetry:

> Although he had earlier helped McCrae, Gellert and a few other writers, it was in the mid-1920s that he reached his full stature as a literary pathfinder. His sons had a big part in making it possible; without them he would hardly have met so many of the young Australians who began struggling to express themselves in words between the two world wars ... [19]

Lindsay not only gave these poets the praise and encouragement they needed, but assistance of a more practical kind - a generous supply of commercially viable illustrations to accompany their published poetry. In keeping with the artist's disapproval of technical interaction between the arts (and the commercial nature of his gift), these sketches often bore little relationship with the text (fig. 3.7). Nevertheless, Slessor, FitzGerald, McCrae and others were among the grateful beneficiaries of this "treasure" - one which proved priceless not only in terms of ensuring the credibility and commercial potential of their works, but the existence of the publications themselves. "Drawings by Norman Lindsay", wrote Slessor with some seriousness, "could often mean the difference

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[19] John Hetherington, Norman Lindsay: The Embattled Olympian (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1973) 163.

FIVE BELLS

XX POEMS

By KENNETH SLESSOR



With six decorations by Norman Lindsay.

1939 :

FRANK C. JOHNSON, SYDNEY

Fig. 3.7. Norman Lindsay, Frontispiece for Five Bells by Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Frank C. Johnson, 1939.

between publication and oblivion". [20]

But while all these factors provide some explanation for Lindsay's remarkable hold over young poets of the 1920s, they do not provide the full answer. The fact still remains that Norman Lindsay, whose realm was principally that of artist and painter, failed to draw worshipping crowds of young painters to Springwood in the way that he attracted young poets - nor was he even a minor influence on them. Kenneth Slessor attempts to explain the paradox by pointing out that "the cataract of mental energy which finds its outlet in Lindsay's work represents a moral and not an aesthetic rebellion". [21] For this reason, contends Slessor, his theories and etchings hold more attraction for writers interested in "the manipulation of ideas" than for artists seeking new forms of visual expression: [22]

> The artist who is concerned by technical artistic or aesthetic problems finds no rebellion at all in Norman Lindsay's approach to his craft as an artist. He [Lindsay] surmounts his technical problems with great brilliance, but he crosses no new frontiers. Indeed, regarded purely as expressions of graphic art, his many hundreds of paintings, etchings, woodcuts, drawings and black-and -white sketches are essentially academic and even conservative. It

[20] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 64.

[21] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 63.

[22] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 63.

is only in the territory of ideas that he is a rebel. [23]

Slessor is right in alluding to the artist's lack of inventiveness. While Lindsay's drawings and etchings were considered the work of a superb technician - an opinion held by many even of his most strident critics - their subject matter and style was regarded as unoriginal, repetitive, and schoolboyish. It was the erotic content of his numerous drawings, etchings and oil paintings which gave Lindsay such notoriety in the popular press and damned him in the eyes of the public - at least for the early part of the century - as a propogator of pornography.

Slessor, however, is somewhat more circumspect with regard to the issue of just what artists were doing in the 1920s which might lead them to ignore one of their most famous contemporaries. Norman Lindsay was grossly out of touch with the rest of the world when he launched his great assault on Australian cultural values in the 1920s: while he waited, supremely confident, for the renaissance to arrive, modernism was already being smuggled into Australia in reproductions of the work of masters from Van Gogh to Picasso and in new paintings by local artists such as Grace Cossington-Smith, Roland Wakelin, Roy de Maistre, Margaret Preston and Frank Hinder. The influence of these artists in the 1920s was not great and their work, on the whole, did not sell well in Australia for many years - but they represented the first movements of the local school towards a modernist and essentially international style of painting. Not surprisingly, the difference between their works and Lindsay's spanned a gulf of centuries. While other

[23] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 63.

artists were breaking down, or expanding, the limits of the picture plane, experimenting with sophisticated light effects or developing colour theories based on musical compositions, Lindsay indulged in a set format of adolescent fantasies whose shape and style had been glimpsed before in the work of better artists such as Rubens.

Lindsay was desperate for a renaissance which Australia, by virtue of being a young nation, had missed out on; the modernists, on the other hand, were eager to exploit the country's youth and, therefore, its potential freedom from the restraints of tradition. These two strains - the search for tradition and the eagerness for new forms of expression - were to trigger many of the critical squabbles which plagued Australian art and literature in the decades which followed. Lindsay, however, shared an important, if anomalous, ambition with contemporary Australian artists: both camps were eager to denounce the limiting artistic mores left over from the Golden Nineties. Well into the third and even fourth decades of the century, Streeton, Lambert and Roberts were still Australia's most revered artists, the legacy of which was a popular predilection for impressionistic bush scenes no less avid than the national passion for Lawson and Paterson. As repulsed by this flagrant nationalism as the modernists, Lindsay set out to foster an Australia culture which would be transportable anywhere in the world.

What is most fascinating about the comparison, however, is that Lindsay chose excerpts of the great western tradition in art and literature as his weapons in the fight against nationalism and provincialism: while modern artists moved forward in their eagerness to get away from Australia's cultural cringe, Lindsay moved backward.

Curiously, this path was pursued with equal enthusiasm by a substantial number of Australian writers. Perhaps the question is not so much "why did Lindsay influence so many Australian poets?", as "why were Australian poets so responsive to his influence?".

Part of the explanation, at least, lies in Lindsay's own response to the artistic dilemma - a response which was essentially literary and therefore removed in many ways from the realms of the visual artist. Robert Hughes claims that Lindsay did not influence other artists because the secret of his commercial success was his "inimitability". It is also true, however, that he expressed few ideas in ink or paint with the same seriousness of purpose that marked his forays into philosophical literature. [24] For this reason, his appeal was bound to be stronger for poets who already knew and admired his work than for artists in search of new forms of visual expression.

Perhaps it is because Australian literature has been so closely tied to the English tradition - arguably the greatest in the world - that there has been such an overall historical reluctance on the part of mainstream poets to experiment with new styles and techniques. On the other hand, Australian painters have not had to contend with a great English tradition in the visual arts - surely a liberating influence for a colonial country which, in the 1920s, still looked avidly to its imperial parent for economic and cultural succour. While there are obvious dangers in making haphazard generalisations about tradition and experiment as belonging to two distinct camps in Australia - the former to literature and the latter to art - it is true that, with the exception of one or two forays into

[24] Hughes 84.

enemy lines, the two arts have tended toward these respective positions since the early part of the century.

In this sense, Lindsay occupies a unique and contradictory position in the history of the relations between Australian poetry and painting. On the one hand, his eagerness to face the ugly spectre of philistinism with courage and defiance helped create an atmosphere of inter-artistic support, if not outright collaboration, which would prepare the ground for future groups of poets and painters. On the other hand, his conservative stance and vocal rejection of modernism in art and literature was itself a form of philistinism - one which undoubtedly strengthened the resolve of poets and painters of the 1940s to band together in defiance of the very ideals which Lindsay had espoused in first encouraging friendships between artists and writers.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all, however, is that Lindsay, in dancing prematurely on the grave of modernism, helped raise ghosts which were to haunt Australian literature for decades to come. As Humphrey McQueen points out in his book, The Black Swan of Trespass, Lindsay's continued opposition to modernism in the decades following World War One laid important groundwork for the Ern Malley and William Dobell disasters of 1944. [25] While his contempt for modernism undoubtedly contributed to a dulling of local interest in the radical nuances of abstraction, surrealism and expressionism, this same reactionary conservatism was to act like a pressure cooker in exciting the curiousity - and

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[25] Humphrey McQueen, "The Lindsays and 'Vision' - a Marxist Reading." Westerly December (1975): 56.

creative furore - of future generations of writers and artists. It is strange that an artist who stood so far to the right of Lessing's neatly divided arts community (but who pleaded for friendship, if not adultery, between its members) should have helped create an atmosphere in which poets and painters drew naturally together during the inter-war period. Combined with his unwitting fosterhood of Australia's first truly modern poet, it is this which marks his most powerful and far-reaching contribution to the history of inter-relations between the arts.

Creative Effort

Despite his arrogance, Lindsay was not without a sense of humour - nor an awareness of his own shortcomings as a would-be philosopher. As Slessor notes with good-humoured relish in his article, "Australian Poetry and Norman Lindsay", the character of Partridge in Lindsay's novel, A Curate in Bohemia, is nothing less than a satirical self-portrait. With disarming insight and accuracy, Lindsay paints himself as

> an amiable creature with a disconcerting habit of occasionally muddling himself up with ethical questions of extreme profundity, sandwiched in between technicalities of Art and the ordinary affairs of life, a process which was inclined to be a trifle confusing to the lay mind. His particular brand of Art, it appeared, was the Decorative Symbolical or Grandly Moral, a singularly fitting conjunction with his manner of earning a living, which was the illustrating of a pornographic sporting paper ... Partridge's mind,

> in fact, appeared to be in a state of eruption, in which all sorts of half-baked ideas were constantly coming to the surface and disappearing again before he, or anybody else, had time to grasp their significance. [26]

Though adamant in his beliefs and dogged in his tireless devotion to the aesthetic principles on which he hoped to found an Australian Renaissance, Lindsay could be notoriously obtuse and perverse. The publication of Creative Effort in 1920 marked the artist's first published foray into the world of serious philosophy - and provided many of his critics with proof positive that Lindsay's was neither an educated nor a disciplined intellect. The work's principal tenet is clear enough: art is the highest purpose that human beings can aspire to. Without creative effort, material achievements are worthless and man is little more than "a body with the soul of a mudfish": [27]

> One thing alone in existence is manifest, permanent, indestructible, and that is the individual effort to create thought and beauty. This passion to create something finer than the creator himself is the one permanent and enduring element in man, and since creative effort is the rarest, most difficult achievement, it remains the greatest stimulus to high development - and this development is Life. [28]

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[26] Quoted in Slessor 66.

[27] Norman Lindsay, Creative Effort (1920; London: Cecil Palmer, 1924) 24.

[28] Lindsay 16.

In Creative Effort, Lindsay argues for a moral order based on art - one which confidently divides humanity between the lower and the higher orders of existence. While Lindsay professes not to endorse a tyranny of artists, claiming that the true aristocrats in his structure will seek "dominion only over self", it is more than evident that the remaining "half-minds" in his system are without a valid reason for continuing their own existence - unless it is to support the artist materially in his eternal search for a higher truth. [29] As Humphrey McQueen recognises in his predominantly marxist reading of the text, Lindsay offers the reader "a social set in which the artist (Lindsay) required that the organiser (capitalist) keep the mob (working class) hard at work". [30]

Lindsay argues forcefully, if unconvincingly, for the case in favour of an artist-based aristocracy. The central difficulty in Creative Effort, however, is Lindsay's emotive and illogical line of reasoning and his insistence on equating art with morality. He also attempts, somewhat ambitiously, to bring a diverse range of artistic and philosophical creeds together under one canon - a mission which clearly fails. As a result, Nietszche and Shakespeare are forced to rub shoulders with Beethoven, Praxiteles and Rubens, while Shelley, Michelangelo, Botticelli and Milton are inexplicably banished for their sins of gloom against "the joyous universe". [31]

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[29] Lindsay 3-4.

[30] Humphrey McQueen, The Black Swan of Trespass (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-operative, 1979) 57.

[31] Lindsay 57.

Difficult as it may be to swallow the generalities, assumptions and naive assertions which mar Creative Effort, the work is not without its own peculiar merit. As Humphrey McQueen admits, its "premises were as logically handled, as forcefully written and as well-structured as most Australian academic treatises at that time". [32] W. M. Maidment agrees, insisting that the work must have had some relevance to the age in which it was written - and some validity for the poets who found it so attractive in the 1920s. Referring to Vincent Buckley's disparaging comments about Lindsay in his article, "Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature", Maidment contends that

> Creative Effort has faults enough. But if it were really only the "melange of the incoherent half-truth and the adolescent fantasy" that this article represents it as being, one would wonder how it "could ... have influenced such poets as Slessor, FitzGerald and Douglas Stewart". [33]

As John Docker asserts in his article, "Norman Lindsay's Creative Effort: Manifesto for an Urban Intelligentsia", the work's unabashed elitism also reflected many of the uncertainties and conflicts experienced by artists and writers in post-World War One Australia. The attempt to give voice to and resolve these tensions is, according to Docker, Creative Effort's most valuable achievement:

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[32] McQueen The Black Swan of Trespass 58.

[33] W. M. Maidment, "Australian Literary Criticism" Southerly 24.1 (1964): 40.

> the essay expressed a difficult attempt to formulate a new consciousness and a new cultural programme for Sydney's intelligentsia, an intelligentsia which felt self-sufficient, but not self-confident in influencing either the Sydney society around it, or, because of this experience, any society or country. Lindsay's social theory and aesthetic offered a solution to this cultural dilemma in the form of an elite pluralism: the literary intellectuals were superior to society in their pursuit of the values of art, but were to try to remain detached from any moralistic desire to influence society to their own concerns. The artists were to go one way, society another. [34]

What Lindsay also attempted in Creative Effort was a reaffirmation - and a reinterpretation - of the European traditions on which Australian culture was loosely based. By pulling together those elements of the Italian Renaissance, classical mythology and the golden age of English literature to which he was most attracted, Lindsay sought to satisfy the local penchant for tradition. This return to an age which seemed not to progress beyond the eighteenth century closely parallels the Australian preoccupation with Europe's halcyon pre-revolutionary past (and, indeed, with a past the country had not itself experienced). [35] As Robert Hughes says, this "desire to call back the image of a world that had passed forever" was probably the secret of Lindsay's great commercial

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[34] John Docker, "Norman Lindsay's Creative Effort: Manifesto for an Urban Intelligentsia" Australian Literary Studies 6 (1973): 33-34.

[35] Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition 168.

success: [36]

> His art was very popular; and for good reasons. First it was an efficient and genteel mode of libido-release for the middle-aged. Second, its technical excellence was much admired. He handled oils badly, but no Australian surpassed his technique as an etcher; he manipulated watercolour with dash, and his pen drawings were spectacular, if sometimes congested with detail. He had no eye for form and little capacity for expressive design, but neither of these deficiencies affected the third reason, which was the most important of all, though often ignored. Lindsay's art was a tradition-substitute. [37]

Interestingly, Hughes asserts that it was the Australian terror of provincialism which triggered this passion for the past - as well as a curious sense of national loss that such traditions had never been experienced in the making of such a young country. But while Lindsay to some extent fulfilled this provincial need, he was himself plagued by the same feelings. Having found an eclectic tradition on which to base his art, Lindsay was vehement in his determination to adhere to the aesthetic philosophy which he had so carefully developed - a trait endearing him to many of his young followers. As Slessor remarked with characteristic loyalty long after he had chosen his own path as a poet, "You may agree with this dogma or you may disagree but it would be mere shameful

[36] Quoted from Smith 168.

[37] Hughes 85-86.

prejudice or ignorance or both not to acknowledge that Norman Lindsay has never wavered, in anything he has drawn or said or written, from the integrity of his belief in it". [38] It was this immovable respect for standards and values - and the sense he created of an Australian cultural tradition in the making - which helped make Lindsay such a magnetic figure for young writers and poets in the 1920s.

Vision

Given that Australia had barely hatched its own folkloric traditions in poetry, literature and painting, the speed with which Lindsay and his followers sought to establish a local renaissance seems nothing short of remarkable. This urgency, however, can be partly attributed to the proverbial impatience of youth - to the restlessness of a young country with a transplanted population possessing all the talent, energy and enthusiasm to create great art but few of the necessary tools. Without traditions, without a deep sense of national and cultural identity, the artist's task was hampered immeasurably. Lindsay sought to close this yawning gap in Australian cultural history with, strangely enough, an old-time renaissance in art and literature at the very moment in which modernism was beginning to take hold of the rest of the world.

The focus for this renaissance was the Sydney-based journal, Vision (fig. 3.8). Edited by Kenneth Slessor, Frank C. Johnson and Lindsay's eldest son, Jack, Vision was published only four times between 1923 and 1924. In its short and colourful life,

[38] Slessor 69-70.

VISION

A LITERARY QUARTERLY



No. 4 February, 1924

Fig. 3.8. Norman Lindsay, cover of Vision No.4. February, 1924.

however, the magazine not only broke new ground as a literary journal but set high standards in poetry with the publication of fine works by Hugh McCrae, Dorothea Mackellar and the promising young poets, Slessor, R. D. FitzGerald and Jack Lindsay. With characteristic generosity, Norman Lindsay also contributed much of Vision's pictorial content, together with a number of essays and short stories written under his own name and the pseudonyms, Charles Partridge and James Flack.

Despite the wealth of its contributing talent, Vision was essentially Norman's magazine. While Slessor edited the poetry selections and Johnson acted as financier, it was Jack who assumed the mantle of editor-in-chief - and Jack who wrote the journal's reactionary dogma on youth, beauty, sexuality and art. Having only recently fallen under the spell of his father's persuasive discourses on life and art, the young man fresh from childhood exile in Queensland embraced the Lindsayian realm of fauns and nymphs with all the vitality and enthusiasm suitable to a born-again advocate of Creative Effort. According to the elder Lindsay, this eagerness almost outstripped his own. Claiming that he had been "morally bludgeoned" into supporting the magazine, Norman avowed that "... it was represented to me by Jack that he and his group were adherents of my aesthetic of life and art and that for me to stand apart from any effort to define that aesthetic would be an act of desertion ..." [39] Despite his occasional assertions to the contrary, it was, however, Norman who gave the magazine its name, inspiration and philosophy. Jack Lindsay was certainly the driving force behind Vision - and its most passionate supporter - but without Norman Lindsay's illustrations and artistic credo and

[39] Norman Lindsay, "Reflections on Vision" Southerly 14.4 (1953): 268.

Slessor's polished, invigorating poetry, the magazine would have seemed little more than a puzzling escapade into fantasyland to the critics who greeted it so warmly in 1923.

There has been some dispute, however, as to just what, and how much, these three contributed. In his article, "Vision of the Twenties", published in Southerly in 1952, Jack Lindsay claimed that Slessor was not only an ardent fellow-doctrinist, but the repository for all of Vision's vices and failings. [40] Enraged at Jack's inferences, Slessor wrote a scathing reply (later supported by Norman Lindsay) which exonerated himself as a cohort in the production of the journal's doctrine. Referring to Jack's continual use of the plural possessive in statements such as "we believed fiercely in an Australian Renascence" and "we denounced nationalist art", Slessor remarks

> It must be understood that in this generous allotment of responsibility Mr Lindsay is making use of the prerogative generally reserved for crowned heads, editors, and people suffering from tapeworm. The "wes" and "ours" refer entirely to Jack Lindsay and not at all to myself or to any other writer except possibly Norman Lindsay. [41]

Slessor's vitriol notwithstanding, the poet has a valid point to make. But he also goes on, quite inexplicably, to deny any impact which the Vision years had on his own

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[40] Jack Lindsay, "Vision of the Twenties" Southerly 13.2 (1952): 62-71.

[41] Kenneth Slessor, "Spectacles for the Fifties: A Rejoinder to "Vision of the Twenties" " Southerly 13.4 (1952) 217.

work, concluding that "it would have been better, perhaps, if Vision had been allowed to slip into oblivion with the silverfish that now consumes its pages". [42] Slessor's protestations as to the exact extent of his early involvement in Vision have been interpreted by many critics as the reluctance of an older man to admit the follies of his youth - and this may be partly true given the acute critical sensitivity in the 1950s to what Vincent Buckley has called the "prophetic clap-trap" of Lindsay's "pseudo-Dionysian" philosophy. [43] There is no doubt, however, that both Slessor and Lindsay were far more enthusiastic in their support of Vision than either was willing to admit. Lindsay's illustrations of libidinous satyrs and half-dressed wenches and Slessor's pro-vitalist poems are proof enough of their active sympathy. While Slessor and others contributed work that, by the poet's admission, they "would have contributed to any other periodical of discrimination which was prepared to publish them", it is also true that they chose to publish in Vision. [44] A glance at the journal, Art in Australia, for the years 1922 to 1924 is a case in point. Both before and after the demise of Vision, Slessor and McCrae contributed heavily to the magazine, then a popular outlet for the publication of Australian poetry along with The Bulletin. Whether out of friendship for the Lindsays or in sympathy with their views, the two poets published very little beyond the excellent pieces they contributed to Vision during the course of 1923 and 1924.

The half-bemused, half scornful tone which both men adopted in dismissing the

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[42] Slessor, "Spectacles" 219.

[43] Buckley 50.

[44] Slessor, "Spectacles" 216.

younger Lindsay's claims that they were equal participants in the venture was partly due to their desire to set the record straight - and to counter Jack's ill-judged remarks that Slessor's poetry had declined considerably in quality since the arcadian days of his involvement in Vision. There was some embarrassment also in looking back at what had been essentially a young man's venture - a venture filled with impassioned prophecies of a world which had failed to transpire. To have seriously forecast fauns when abstract art was the imminent artistic weather, must have seemed an horrific blunder 50 years down the track of history and hindsight.

Despite the controversy, there is no doubt that Vision was the child of Norman Lindsay's influence. In a 1922 letter to Sidney Ure Smith (publisher of Art in Australia), Lindsay wrote of his burning resolve to publish his philosophies in a format capable of influencing public opinion:

> ... I thought that our project of *Vision* would be the best means to that end, for that would invite the efforts of others moving in my direction to join issue with me. Such a production, therefore, would have had a definitely stated object, a sort of political moral platform, and it would have been quite ruthless in attacking and destroying the stupidities of the present muddle that passes for thought on earth. [45]

[45] Howarth 192.

Given the frankness of Lindsay's intentions, it is not surprising that Jack's unquestioning belief in his father's aesthetic doctrines is evident in every word of prose and poetry which he contributed to the journal. The foreword to the very first issue of Vision sets the tone for all the following editions by repeating almost parrot-fashion the Lindsayian attitude to avant-garde artists and Australia's vital role in countering the attack of modernism on aesthetic ideals and standards. In keeping with Vision's naive and exuberant style - and the average age of its contributors - youth is equated with artistic enlightenment:

> Youth is any condition of mind which is vital, which ascends. We would seek to be as young as Aristophanes, not as mentally frozen and impotent - ie - **old** as Bernard Shaw. When Picasso hung a geometrical pattern in gold paint in the last Autumn Salon, or Satie put typewriters in the orchestra of "Parade", they were both as old as any other form of Egyptianism. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is still as young as the dawn. If then we are to vindicate the possession of Youth, we must do so by responding to all other expressions of Youth, and by rejecting all that is hieroglyphic, or weary or depressed. If Australia alone in the world is doing this - and we see no evidence for any other conclusion - then the Renaissance must begin from here, and both the onslaught of expression and the analytic attack must begin from here also. [46]

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[46] "Foreword", Vision 1 (1923): 2. Jack Lindsay is generally considered to be the author of this piece.

The emphasis on youth is significant. With the exception of McCrae and McKellar, Vision's contributors were all very young. As a result, they were not only enthusiastic in their response to the Lindsayian vitality but vastly inexperienced in terms of both life and literature. These young writers were looking for something to write about - just as surely as Norman Lindsay was searching for a reaffirmation of the Australian youth, beauty and genius which had been so cruelly depleted by war. Offering, as Vivian Smith says, "a new beginning to a new generation of poets" Vision made an enduring contribution to Australian literature in its role as a rejuvenator of talent in the aftermath of World War One. [47]

The vitalism which Lindsay and Vision espoused goes to the heart of this new faith in talented, passionate, idealistic Australian youth. Whether by use of exotic phrases, sensual imagery, reverential references to Queen Venus or the good-humoured skulduggery of "roaring pistol-boys" ("Thieves' Kitchen" 1.1), Slessor's poems from the period are stamped with Lindsay's puppy-like exuberance. Just as prevalent, however, is the tendency to a baroque kind of wordiness and an occasional lapse into mere descriptiveness. While nearly all young poets can be charged with these faults, it is undoubtedly the self-same tendencies in Lindsay's work which made him doubly sympathetic to the younger poets - and they to him. Certainly, many critics have considered Lindsay to be adolescent both in his approach to art and in his ideas - an attitude paraphrased by Adrian Mitchell in The Oxford History of Australian Literature:

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[47] Vivian Smith 349.

> As the real world steadily leaves behind the whimsical world of Norman Lindsay, concepts like wowserism have settled into history; his attacks on cheerless moral constraints and hypocrisy now appear less urgent, and more a pleasant but moderate naughtiness with which youth chooses to offend middle age. It may be seen as a comic larrikinism .... An indication of the nature of Lindsay's artistic temperament is that one work which has proved to be enduringly appealing is a children's classic, The Magic Pudding ... [48]

Whatever such comments may infer about Lindsay's more serious literary attempts, there is no doubt that he retained a youthful energy and outlook well into his forties - an energy which younger men not only identified with, but envied and admired. Slessor has described "somewhat guiltily" Lindsay's prodigious daily output as an artist, letter-writer, sculptor, novelist and model ship enthusiast - an output which someone half his age would have found taxing. [49] And John Hetherington reports that even Phil Lindsay felt "quite awkward and old" in the presence of his father who "smoked incessantly at cigarettes" and who "rolled like a child in his chair, bellowing with laughter, kicking his legs up, and bouncing like an excited dog round his studio". [50]

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[48] Adrian Mitchell, The Oxford History of Australian Literature 105-106.

[49] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 65.

[50] John Hetherington, Norman Lindsay: The Embattled Olympian 164.

Something of this youthful rambunctious quality is to be found in Lindsay's drawings of plump, sensual bodies gambolling through scenes of wild revelry and mirth in the sylvan glades or eighteenth century settings which Slessor himself describes in "Pan at Lane Cove" and "Thieves' Kitchen", both published in Vision in 1923 (fig. 3.9). In these poems, Slessor captures the energy and vitality which characterised Lindsay's lush and ever-restless worlds:

> Yet, blow your stone-lipped flute and blow
> Those red-and-silver pipes of Pan.
> Cold stars are bubbling round the moon,
> Which, like some golden Indiaman
> Disgorged by waterspouts and blown
> Through heaven's archipelago,
> Drives orange bows by cloud of stone...
> Blow, blow your flute, you stone boy, blow! ("Pan at Lane Cove" 3.1-9)

and

> Leap, leap, fair vagabonds, your lives are short ...
> Dance firelit in your cauldron-fumes, O thieves,
> Ram full your bellies with spiced food, gulp deep
> Those goblets of thick ale - yea, feast and sport,
> Ye cyprian maids - lie with great, drunken rogues,
> Jump by the fire - soon, soon your flesh must crawl
> And Tyburn flap with birds, long-necked and swart! ("Thieves Kitchen" 3.1-7)



Fig. 3.9. Norman Lindsay, Pegasus. Plate 74 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Both poems are celebrations of the youth and Lindsayian vitality which distinguishes Vision's influence on Australian poetry - an influence that would have far-reaching consequences in the development of poets such as Kenneth Slessor. Importantly, however, the coincidence of Lindsay's youthful outlook with the age and enthusiasm of his impressionable proteges was seen by the artist as the handiwork of some all-powerful providence. The accidents of acquaintanceship that collided Lindsay's bright star with this sudden meteor shower of young poets during the 1920s were nothing less than part of a divine plan to rid the country of its cultural mistakes. As Lindsay wrote in a letter to Sidney Ure Smith

> The reason that younger minds, such as Leon, Jack, Gruner, and a few others, do react to my thought is because the tissue of their minds is strong, fluid, and vital, and their own powers of thought are in active movement, seeking and analysing the problem of life for themselves. For this reason I realize that they and I are elements of one generation, which is going to define the forward movement in thought for the generations to follow. [51]

Lindsay was not only acutely conscious of the impact which his father figure role was likely to have in the development of Australian literature, but passionately convinced of its pre-ordination. Time would, of course, prove Lindsay right in his belief that he was acting as something of a midwife in the birth of a new direction for Australian poetry.

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[51] Howarth 192.

What he could not have predicted, however, were the unexpected forms his influence would take.

Vision's Impact on Australian Poetry

While Vision was greeted with much critical rejoicing in 1923, more recent evaluations of the journal and its influence on Australian poetry have been far less favourable. According to Robert Hughes, Lindsay's influence through Vision had a "disastrous effect on Australian poets of the twenties, reducing talents as diverse as McCrae's, O'Dowd's, Gellert's and Slessor's to vitalist bumbling about nymphs and shepherds". [52] Charles Higham, in a well-known piece of criticism, identified tendencies in Slessor's poetry with those of the Vision school in which "the resemblance to the London literature of the eighteen-nineties is clear: the emotions foppish and desiccated, the physicality puerile and diffused, the discipline imposed rather than operating from within". [53] In her book, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry, Judith Wright concurs with Higham's view, adding that the journal's powerful and, ultimately, negative influence could be felt almost 50 years after its first appearance:

> Though much was altered from the first brash exaggerated statement of the aims of the Vision group, the current of Australian poetry that is coloured by its influence is still detectable. An emphasis on action rather than intellect, on the

[52] Hughes 84.

[53] Charles Higham, "The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor" Quadrant 4.1 (1959): 67.

> physical rather than the emotional, a rejection of subtleties either of thought or feeling, a tendency towards statement rather than suggestion, a certain lushness of imagery and perception, are the traces left on certain writers by the Australian Renaissance that never happened. [54]

There is no disputing the fact that Vision embodies little in the way of great scholarship - nor can it be held up as a marvellous example of informed and unbiased literary opinion. But for all its faults, the magazine did mark Australia's first published foray into the world of the fanciful and the fantastic. Even more importantly, it was the artist-hero who led the vanguard of this assault. In the pages of Vision the artist reigned supreme over Lindsay's mud-flats of the world. He was a demi-god, the only creature of any real value in the terrible scheme of things - and dedicated utterly to the creation of beauty in works of art. It was this artistic self-assurance which, as Vivian Smith notes, Australian poets found so encouraging in the 1920s:

> Vision and Norman Lindsay were a liberating influence on the young writers associated with them, and though Lindsay's weaknesses are now apparent, especially his opiniated arrogance, in the Australia of his time he offered these young writers a high conception of art and showed that it could be a vocation to follow

[54] Judith Wright, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965) 139.

for its own sake". [55]

Although Vision was, as Julian Croft says, anti-nationalist and anti-modernist, it is also true that "like Wesley's devil it had some of the best tunes in the form of the most promising young poets". [56] It was, of course, these young men - Slessor and FitzGerald, together with McCrae - who exercised such an influence on the development of Australian poetry in the crucial decades following Vision's demise. Even more importantly, the journal helped introduce modernism to Australian poetry. Almost purely by virtue of its determination to be international in outlook, the journal exposed (however disparagingly) a range of modern literary and artistic styles to a curious and culture-starved young audience. As Humphrey McQueen recognises

> Vision's importance resides in its well thought-out view of the world as much as in its grab-bag of responses to everything intellectual. While it rejected modernism it was up-to-date in a way no other Australian publication has managed. Its contributors scoured the cultural presses of the world in search of decadence to attack. [57]

The ramifications of this search for examples of modernism to ridicule could not,

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[55] Vivian Smith 349.

[56] Julian Croft, "Responses to Modernism" The Penguin New Literary History of Australia Ed. Laurie Hergenhan (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988) 410.

[57] Humphrey McQueen, "The Lindsays and 'Vision'" 51-52.

of course, have been foreseen by Vision's editors. It is ironic that in damning such writers as Edith Sitwell, e. e. cummings, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, the Lindsay-inspired magazine should succeed in bringing them to the attention of at least some sections of the Australian public. The journal which, as Douglas Stewart says, "spoke to and spoke for the youth of its time" was also responsible for sowing the seeds of modernism in the work of Australian poets such as Kenneth Slessor. [58] Importantly, the Vision period marked a significant breaking away of young poets from the accepted norms of Australian poetry and a willingness - at least on Slessor's part - to explore new avenues of artistic expression. It is this sea-change in the Australian attitude to literature which A. D. Hope rightly identifies as being one of the most important outcomes of the Vision experiment:

> It was all very exciting and virile, emancipated and assertive, but it smelt of theatrical effects and fancy-dress balls rather than any serious concern with man and his world; there was a forced raffishness about its doctrine of the Life Force that made it both absurd and tawdry; it was amorous, clamorous, sleazy, rumbustious and touched with the essential vulgarity of intellectual pretensions that fail to make their claims good. And yet it represented something important, the first conscious movement of immaturity towards a mature literature, the first movement of

[58] Douglas Stewart, "Slessor and "Vision" " Quadrant 19.4 (1975): 71.

provincialism toward autonomy. [59]

Many of the young poets associated with Vision went on to produce highly imaginative and accomplished works. It is in the poetry of Kenneth Slessor, however, that the first traces of this maturity and universality are to be found. The younger poet's obsession with the traditions, cultures and heroes of the past evolved in his later work into a fascination with time and a love for the ordinary men and women who live, love and die in the ever-transient present. So was the older Slessor able to master his early tendencies toward decorativeness and become the poet whose keen awareness of sensual beauty enabled him to paint verse portraits and word pictures with unfailing grace and insight.

Slessor learned to build on his love of the past and his profound respect for tradition - and to embrace modernism as a master craftsman in his chosen profession. Although he and other poets such as FitzGerald eventually discarded Lindsay's more provocative and essentially regressive theories on life and art, they continued in many ways to pursue the path on which they had been set as younger poets. Slessor ceased to write about fauns and nymphs and story-book, rather than "real", heroes in the late 1920s - and he embraced modernism shortly thereafter to create some of the finest works of poetry that Australia has seen. But on the whole, he never abandoned his love of tradition and culture or his much-touted preference for the "concrete image" in both art and

[59] Hope 92-93.

literature. [60] The same can be said of those poets who came after Slessor - those who felt the irresistible pull of Lindsay's "doctrine of poetic values ... in one way or another, or [who] have been quickened, even if unconsciously, by his example, criticism or correspondence". [61] In a country more concerned with the securities and the traditions of the past - or the comforts of the present - than with the uncertainties of a vague and precarious future, Norman Lindsay offered young poets a way forward by showing them the way back to the traditions on which their own culture had been built.

[60] Kenneth Slessor, "Poetry in Australia" (interview with John Thompson) Southerly 26.3 (1966): 191.

[61] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 62.

4 Kenneth Slessor

The Lindsay Legacy: Culture, Tradition, Craftsmanship

No relationship between an Australian poet and painter has attracted more debate or been subject to more scrutiny than that of Kenneth Slessor and Norman Lindsay. While critical opinion differs as to the lasting importance of the friendship and its impact on Slessor's work, there is no doubt that Lindsay's influence on the younger man was at one time profound and that this influence, however short-lived, helped determine the course which the poet's more mature work would take. [1]

Slessor's debt to "Norman Lindsay's perpetual powerhouse of stimulation and suggestion" is, as the poet writes, "obvious". [2] Like those other young poets and writers who gathered about Lindsay in the 1920s, Slessor discovered he had found a willing and gracious mentor in the older man - one who believed unquestioningly in the talent of a handful of largely undeveloped poets and their ability to transform the future of Australian poetry. Lindsay, however, gave Slessor a great deal more than simply the praise and encouragement he needed as a young poet. Drawing from his eclectic

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[1] For contrasting opinions on Lindsay and his influence see: John Docker, "Norman Lindsay's Creative Effort: Manifesto for an Urban Intelligentsia", Australian Literary Studies 6 (1973): 24-35; Judith Wright, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965); T. L. Sturm, "Kenneth Slessor's Poetry and Norman Lindsay", Southerly 31.4 (1971): 281-306, A. D. Hope, Native Companions (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974) and W. M. Maidment "Australian Literary Criticism" Southerly 24.1 (1964): 20-41.

[2] Kenneth Slessor, "Australian Poetry and Norman Lindsay" 62.

treasure-house of ideas about civilisation and culture, Lindsay created a world of myth and tradition away from the post-war desolation of Europe - a world which traced its magic circle around a handful of antipodean "geniuses" and their poetic attempts to revivify western civilisation's glorious past.

Initially, Slessor's response to Lindsay's dream of an Australian Renaissance differed little from those other young disciples who were drawn to "Hyperborea". [3] Just as Hugh McCrae had been inspired to write Satyrs and Sunlight, a celebration of the Lindsayian realm of fauns and nymphs, so Slessor devoted some of his finest early works to the artist and his etchings. [4] But unlike those who came before him (McCrae) and those who worked with him in the '20s (FitzGerald, Jack Lindsay and Stewart), Slessor built on the foundations of Lindsay's influence to create something wholly new in his poetry. Ironically, it was Slessor's recognition that the "experiments of the past" are the "traditions of the present" which led him to become Australia's first truly modern poet. [5]

With the demise of Vision and the maturing of the poet's work, the gulf separating Lindsay's philosophy from Slessor's poetry during the 1930s became increasingly apparent. While the artist continued to shun modernism, the poet began to embrace it in works which warned of a significant new sea-change in Australian literature. Slessor's

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[3] "Hyperborea", Lindsay's second philosophical essay, was published in 1928.

[4] Satyrs and Sunlight, Hugh McCrae's first collection of poetry, was published in 1909 with illustrations by Norman Lindsay.

[5] Kenneth Slessor, "Modern English Poetry" Southerly 31.4 (1971): 272.

growing fascination with the movements of time and his interest in the lives of those ordinary people milling about him in the streets of Darlinghurst gradually replaced the obsessive love of myth and history that had driven him as a young man. It is ironic, however, that Lindsay, through his association with Vision, gave Slessor access to the contemporary changes which were rapidly reshaping the world's art and literature. Although the artist greeted these changes with nothing short of horror, Slessor found himself laid open not only to the influences of the past but to those of poetry's possible future. It was many years before Slessor was to able to demonstrate the movement towards modernism which Vision ironically had alerted him to. But when the poet finally did, it was with the assurance that he was building on an established tradition - one which had been long consolidated through his association with Lindsay.

Poet and Mentor

Although Slessor carefully denied that he had any hand either in supporting or writing the dogma which was published in Vision, he expressed only the deepest respect for Norman Lindsay's talent and energy, his doctrine of "poetic values" and his "genius" - nor was this merely praise from an old and grateful friend. [6] Lindsay's seriousness of purpose, his high standards of workmanship and unequalled artistic energy were a subject for wonder and admiration in the grey world that passed for Australian culture between the wars. As Slessor wrote in 1955,

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[6] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 64.

> I do not use the word "genius" lightly. If I were asked to define it, I would say that genius is marked by an overflowing and inexhaustable spring of mental energy and that this quality, combined with the attributes of creative fury and almost universal craftsmanship, puts Norman Lindsay closer to the real implication of the misused word than any other artist or writer Australia has produced". [7]

Lindsay provided illustrations for Thief of the Moon (fig. 4.1), Slessor's first published volume of poetry, for Earth-Visitors, his second volume, and for Five Bells (fig. 4.2), published by Frank Johnson, a former Vision crony, in 1939. Reminiscent of the child-like illustrations which grace the pages of Vision, Lindsay's drawings of buxom wenches, satyrs, nymphs and mermaids make no attempt whatsoever to bring Slessor's poems to life or even, in some cases, to illustrate the subject matter. [8] The function of these drawings is purely decorative and, perhaps in keeping with their original commercial intention, expressive only of Lindsay's arcadian imagination. [9]

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[7] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 64-65.

[8] Referring to Vision, Douglas Stewart notes in his article, "Slessor and "Vision"", published in Quadrant 19.4 (1975): 74, that Lindsay's pen drawings were designed "not so much to illustrate any particular story or poem as simply to make the whole thing look decorative".

[9] Lindsay's insensitivity to the material seems even more astonishing given his close friendship with the poet: Slessor's relationship with Lindsay was not just that of protege and mentor, but of fellow-artists fighting for recognition and understanding in a country that treated its artists coldly and unsympathetically. In a letter to Douglas Stewart, Lindsay wrote:

> I've made one rule which I have never broken, in respect to all the writings that have been submitted to me, prose or poetry, and that is to write in return a carefully considered estimate of its qualities. With Ken, I know that an exchange in poems and opinions on them meant a great deal. When he visited me here alone, he did not mind letting me see the

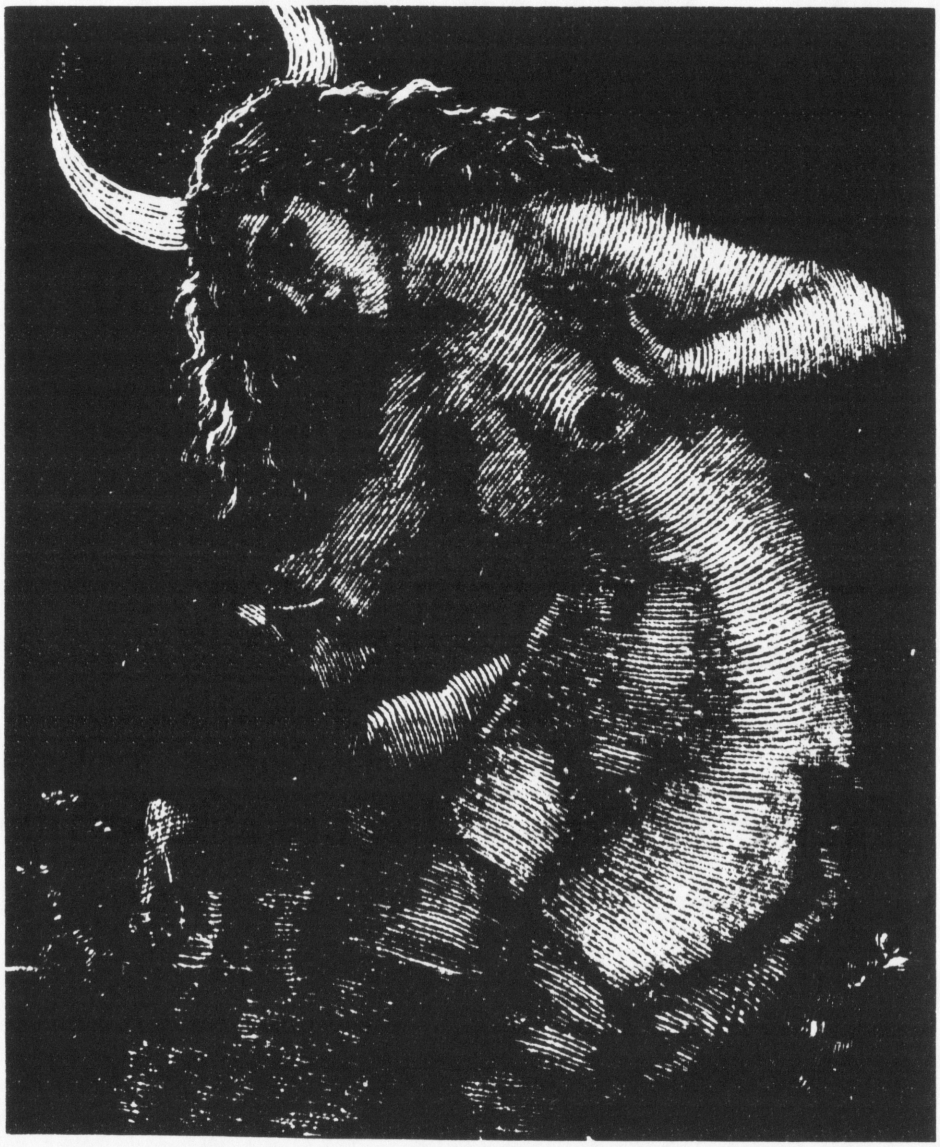

Fig. 4.1. Norman Lindsay, Illustration for Thief of the Moon. From Thief of the Moon. By Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Privately printed, 1924.

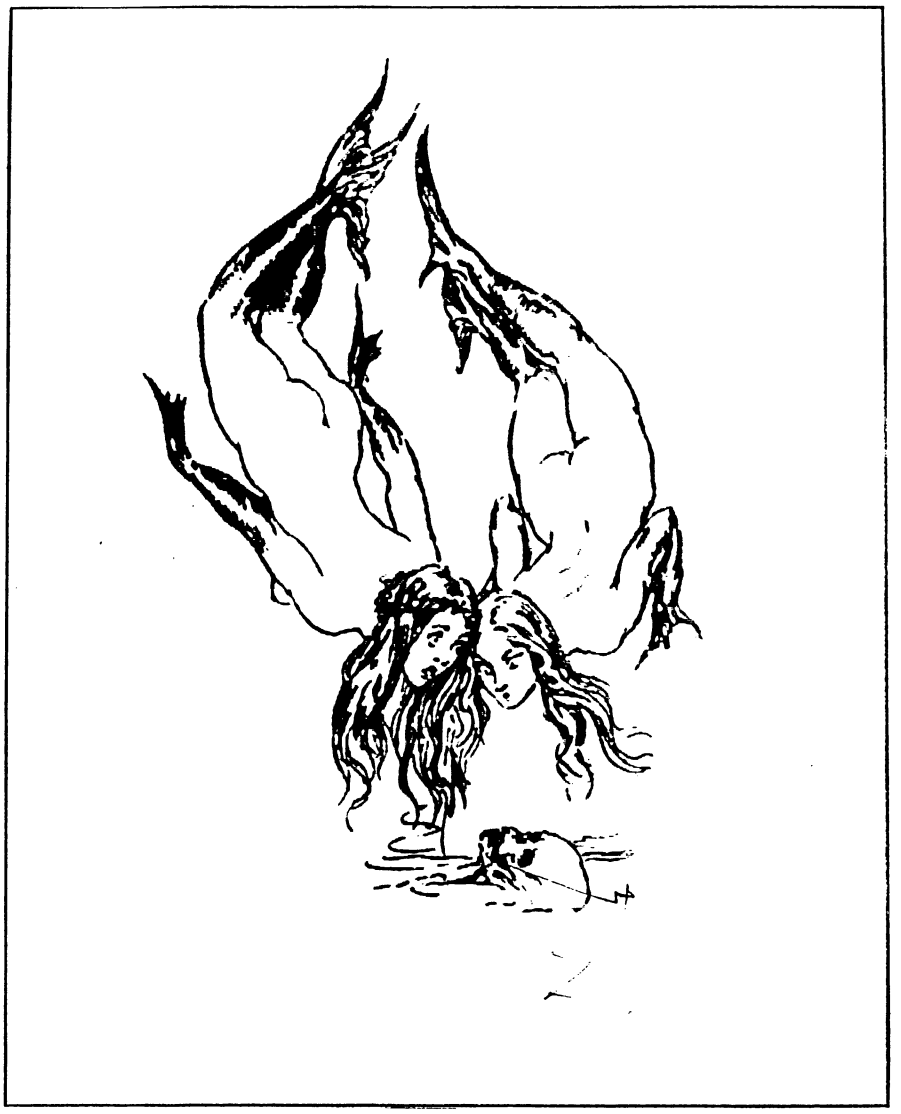

Fig. 4.2. Norman Lindsay, illustration for Five Bells. From Five Bells. By Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Frank C. Johnson, 1939.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that the decorative effect is not just a function of Lindsay's style - nor even of his infamous artistic arrogance - but part of a deliberate attempt on the part of the artist to refrain from intruding too heavily on the poems themselves. "Most poets", says Slessor in defence of his mentor, "eventually come to feel that illustration and poetry do not go well together". [10] The chief reason for this reluctance to marry the two arts is the limitations which the illustration places on the poem:

> It is a contradiction that a poem in which time is fluid should be fixed to an instant by the illustration of a few of its lines. Nor should the imagination, which may be given infinity when released by a poem, be limited by the finite dimensions of a drawing. The Forest of Arden of the mind's eye is obviously far superior to the Forest of Arden supplied by the most talented scene-painter. With these opinions, Norman Lindsay has always freely and most earnestly agreed. But he has continually been willing to sacrifice the principle if he can get poetry published. [11]

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black side of his struggle, the futility of writing poetry that nobody read. Nobody but me, he used to say.

That Lindsay could be capable of celebrating the drama and tragic intensity of "Five Bells" with whimsical pictures of mermaids sweetly contemplating Joe Lynch's drowned skull seems, in this light, almost incomprehensible. [Quoted in Stewart 174.]

[10] Slessor, "Australian Poetry" 64.

[11] Slessor 64.

According to Jane Lindsay, the artist also grew wary of wedding his illustrations too closely to the text after Hugh McCrae complained bitterly that Lindsay's illustrations were responsible for the popular success of Satyrs and Sunlight and not the poems themselves (a theory supported by the enormous gulf in energy and concentration between this particular set of drawings and Lindsay's later decorations for books of poetry). Lindsay, apparently, was deeply hurt by McCrae's "allegation" and the friendship between the two men never completely recovered. [12] As Slessor also intimates, however, Lindsay accepted Lessing's dictum that painting is an inferior medium to poetry - and that the genres should not be mixed. Despite the ironies inherent in the contradiction (Lindsay unwittingly aided and abetted the birth of a modern poet, much of whose brilliance resides in his dexterous exploitation of blurred genres), the artist's flagrantly germanic outlook gives some credence to the argument. Interestingly, Lindsay himself was something of a fascist, a one-time admirer of Hitler, an anti-semitic and staunch opposer of abstraction in art or literature. Personal charisma rather than art itself (at least Lindsay's kind) was, in fact, the secret of his ability to attract poets of the calibre of Slessor and McCrae to Vision.

In works such as "Pan at Lane Cove" and "Kublai Khan", Slessor *does* seem to mirror the bucolic and slightly artificial world of Lindsay's illustrations - a sure sign of the one-way influence which typified their friendship - but the connection is somehow contrived and the poems almost certainly written before the drawings were even conceived. Not surprisingly, the illustrations are virtually identical to many others

[12] From a personal interview with Jane Lindsay.

"whipped up" by the artist for his numerous poet-friends. Lindsay, of course, was openly antithetical to any marriage of poetic technique with his own inimitable style, believing that poetry should serve only as an *inspiration* for art. But while his illustrations for a vast range of poetic texts (including Slessor's) represent little in the way of a challenge to Lessing's dictum that the arts should not be mixed, Lindsay was not immune to a *zeitgeist* which encouraged inter-artistic unions, drawing creative sustenance not only from poetry, but from the music of composers such as Beethoven (fig. 4.3).

Although the most visible example of his collaboration with Slessor, Lindsay's drawings (except in the commercial sense) are the least important aspect of his relationship with the poet. In comparison with the profound and complex *ideas* about art which he fostered in the younger man, Lindsay's illustrations barely scratch the surface of the creative partnership which contributed so much to Australian poetry. Perhaps no two men, however, make for a more unlikely pairing than Slessor and Lindsay. Given that the former came to represent all that could be modern and progressive in Australian poetry and the latter all that was provincial and regressive in Australian art, their association seems especially surprising. What drew the two together was a shared respect for culture, a natural understanding of, and attraction for, the other's art and a deep love of the European myths and legends which Australia lacked and longed for. [13] As Slessor has

[13] This mutual regard for civilisation in all its highest forms cemented the friendship between poet and artist. By the mid-1920s, Lindsay's national stature was such that he was practically a guardian of the Australian cultural aesthetic - and Slessor, as Douglas Stewart notes, was a man with a great passion for culture. In A Man of Sydney Stewart writes with affection of the poet's "lordly and hedonistic character", his love of fine wine and fine food and his appreciation of classical music:

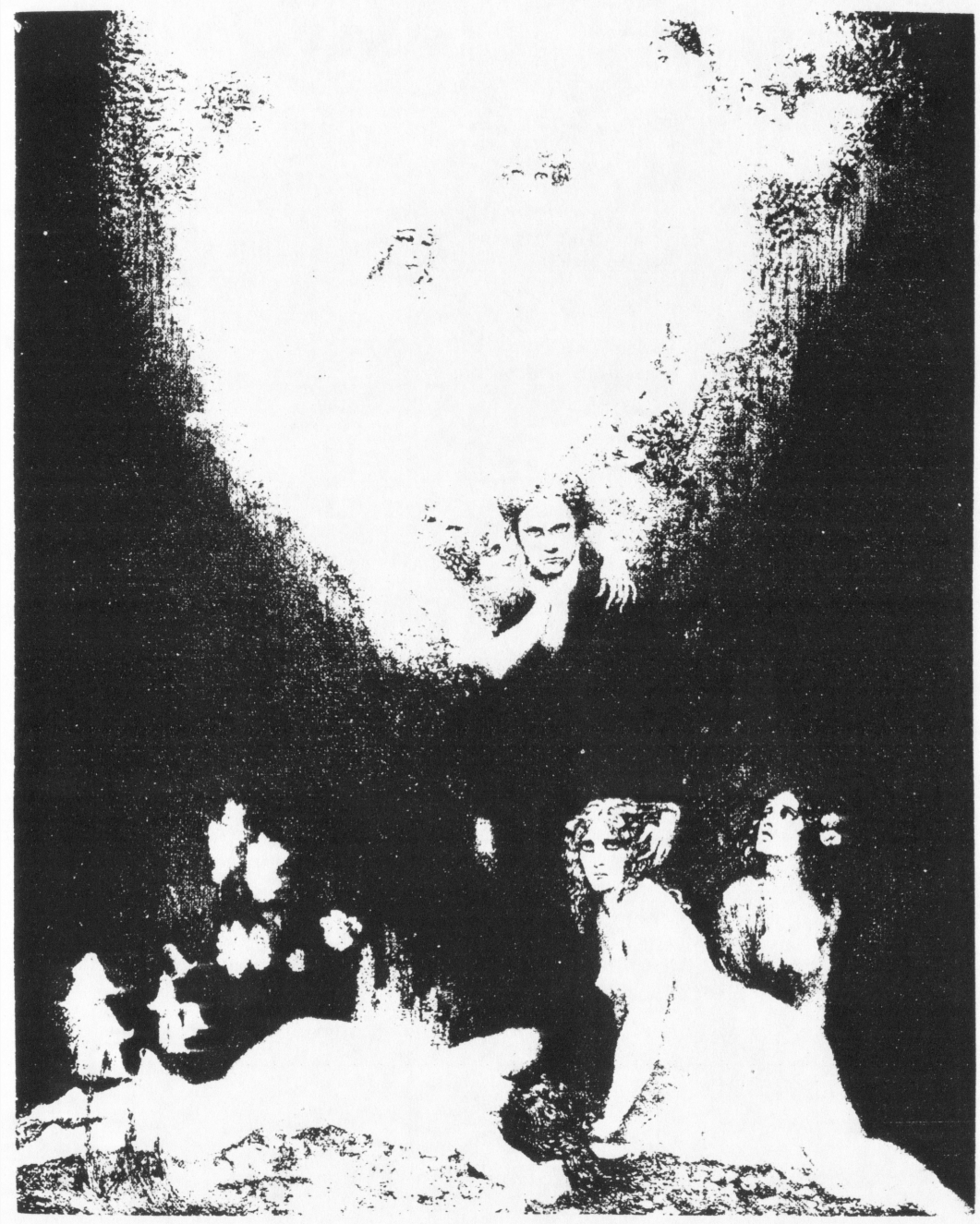

Fig. 4.3. Norman Lindsay, C Sharp Minor Quartette. 1927. Page 19 of The World of Norman Lindsay. By Lin Bloomfield. 1979. South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1983.

noted many times, both men were passionate exponents of the concrete image, whether in poetry or in art, and were vehement in their attacks on the tendency to abstraction in the works of contemporary avant-garde poets and painters. [14] With their mutual preference for the sensual, the joyous, the tangible and the exotic, poet and artist (at least during the Vision years) displayed little enthusiasm for the alienating detachment from life and sense of dissolution which permeated the works of such "modern" poets as Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot. [15] Tradition in its most heroic and romantic forms was their binding obsession.

In poems such as "Marco Polo", "Nuremberg" and "Pan at Lane Cove", the nostalgia for lost "splendours" and the longing for a perfect world which can exist only in myths and legends and in poetic dreams of the past is as expressive of Lindsay's ideals as it is of Slessor's - indeed, the last four lines of "Marco Polo" could have been written by Lindsay himself:

> ... it is chiefly as a polished man of the world that one sees him: not wholly, as has been suggested, as a gentleman of the eighteenth century; not quite as an Elizabethan, as has also been suggested, because manners and therefore character always differ a little from country to country and period to period; but, specifically, as an Australian man of the world ...

Douglas Stewart, A Man of Sydney (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977) 59-60.

[14] See John Thompson's interview with Kenneth Slessor, "Poetry in Australia", in Southerly 26.3 (1966): 191. Slessor also refers to Lindsay's - and his own - preference for representational art in "Australian Poetry" (63-64).

[15] Slessor later became a great admirer of T. S. Eliot. In "Modern English Poetry", Slessor refers to Eliot's "Waste Land" as a masterpiece, claiming that it is "filled with the most splendid and haunting rhythms of anything written in our century". Clement Semmler in "Slessor and Eliot: Some Personal Musings" also notes that while Slessor, in a letter to Herbert Jaffa, said that he "was never consciously influenced by Eliot" the poet did "appreciate his break from the traditional poetry of the 20s" just as he "appreciated the break made by Harold Munro, the Sitwells, Robert Graves, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Conrad Aitken and others ... " Southerly 31.4 (1971): 268.

He's gone; and with him, flowers and birds,

And old Venetians too, have died;

Yet burnt in Marco Polo's words,

Those unforgotten splendours hide ...

And, tired of life's new-fashioned plan,

I long to be barbarian.

I'm sick of modern men, I wish

You were still living, Kublai-Khan! (6.1-8)

Lindsay, of course, looked back constantly in his work and was almost legendary in his hatred of modernism - whether it intruded on the sacred worlds of art and literature or impinged on the more mundane aspects of daily living. Slessor was also obsessed with the past. But while the young poet grappled with the mysteries of time and death, returning from his romantic journeys into the past transformed with shining knowledge of "splendours" long gone, Lindsay wanted to bring the old world forward to a new setting - Australia.

Responding as much to Lindsay's energy and enthusiasm as to his opinionated views on art and literature, Slessor captured the artist's "Australian Vie de Boheme" in poems such as "Thieves' Kitchen", "Rubens' Innocents" and "Earth-Visitors". [16] In each of these poems, the artist is himself a god - a magician who is capable of conjuring the sensual, the beautiful and the fantastic despite the jeers of philistine cynicism. Something

[16] Hope 93.

of this sense of the exclusivity and magic of creativity can be found in Lindsay's philosophy which not only champions the cause of the artist but sets him above all other creatures on earth. For Lindsay, the only true morality is art and it is on this basis that he proclaims creative effort as the highest, and perhaps even holiest, of man's expressions. True Creative Power, however, is embodied in "the individual development of a few exceptional men" such as Rubens. [17] Thus, in "Rubens' Innocents", Slessor not only glorifies the transforming power of the artist's work, but vents his derisive attitude toward wowsers and religious fanatics in true Lindsayian fashion:

> Then for a trice, their skies might sparkle,
>
> And some gold ichor splash amid
>
> Those most respectable, patriarchal
>
> Purveyors of stale pardons, hid
>
> Behind their old cathedral closes
>
> From this unguessed, unguessable God,
>
> Shining before their learned noses
>
> Down roads that Peter Rubens trod. (3.1-8)

In this poem, Slessor not only captures the vibrancy of Rubens' paintings (fig. 4.4), but the overwhelming energy and vitality of the Lindsayian creative "torrent" which sweeps away all "feeble efforts" and false ideals. [18] The "babes of heaven" (1.1) tumble

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[17] Lindsay, Creative Effort 23.

[18] Lindsay 82.

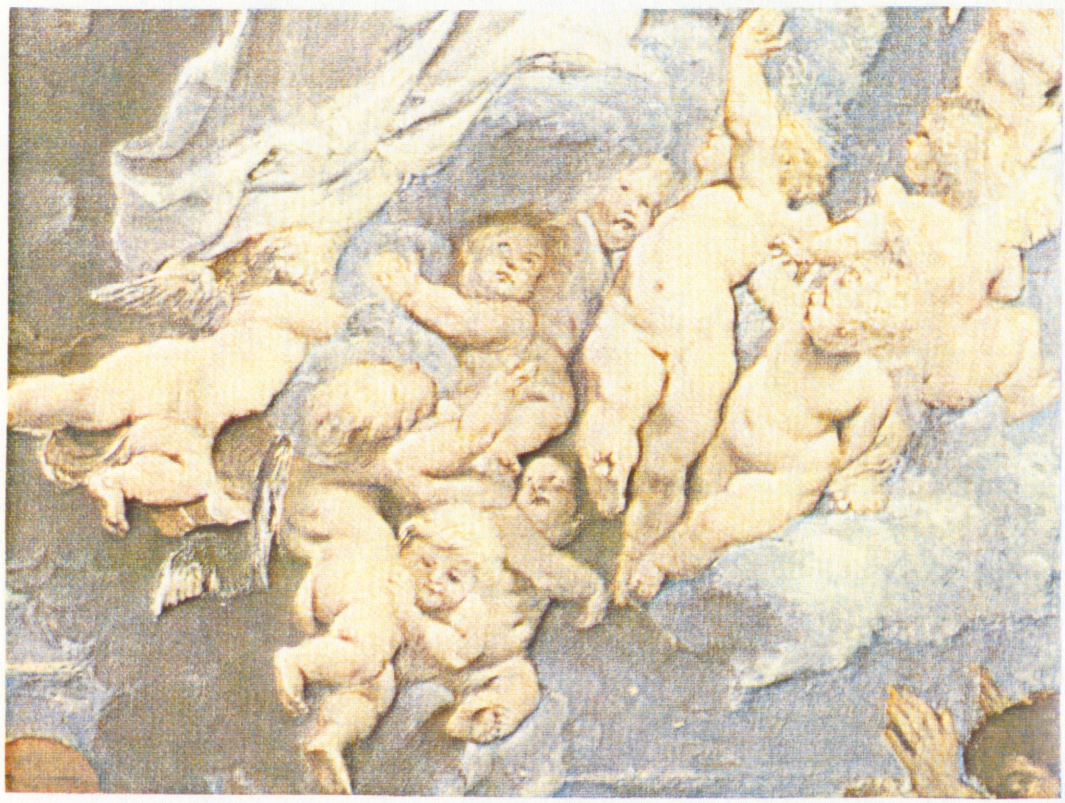

Fig. 4.4. Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin (detail), Buckingham Palace, London. 1611-15. Colour Plate 7 of Peter Paul Rubens. By Jennifer Fletcher. London: Phaidon, 1986.

and vault towards earth, their "lusty whooping" (2.1) ringing out over spires that house the "dark-faced clergy" (2.3). While those keepers of the "doleful creed" (2.4) stoop round their altars, the "warm skies" (3) churn, noise strides "Far downward" (1.8) and the "chub-faced, shining-thighed/Fat Ganymedes of God" (1.6-8) burst in to "daze them with a twinkling peep" (2.7). It is not just Peter Rubens' power to illuminate the mortal mind through art which inspires Slessor in this poem, but Lindsay's infectious vitalism and energy. This same vitalism was to stir Slessor's belief in the magical properties of poetry and in the power of imagination which can "smoke old memories anew" and "wake to flame" ("Marco Polo" 1.3-4) new dreams of old worlds.

The youthful exuberance and blind optimism of these poems is engaging - but the drama and crowded theatricality of the gods' visit to earth, the noisy raffishness of the tavern revelry in "Thieves' Kitchen" and the mannered movements of the "tumbling babes" (1.1) from heaven in "Rubens' Innocents" seem somehow forced. As Charles Higham notes, their vitality is "imposed" from without "rather than operating from within". [19] Despite this sense of forced "rebirth" for the gods of old, Slessor's energy is youthfully genuine and spontaneous. Even more importantly, the heaping up of rich, colourful, sharply delineated images - the very technique which contributes to the artifice of the poems - anticipates the poet's more mature handling of multi-image characters and scenes in works such as "Five Bells" and "Captain Dobbin". Slessor's love of action and energy and his fascination with past events is later transformed into a preoccupation with time - time that is ceaselessly moving, ever-fluid and ultimately unfathomable.

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[19] Charles Higham, "The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor" Quadrant 4.1 (1959): 67.

The poems of Slessor's Vision period which can be most clearly linked to Lindsay are: "Earth-Visitors" and "Realities", dedicated specifically to the artist's ideas and etchings; "Pan at Lane Cove" and "Rubens' Innocents", both of which celebrate the Lindsayian passion for classical myth and renaissance art; and "Nuremberg", one of Slessor's earliest attempts to deal not only with the mysteries of double-time but the power of art to make a single moment seem immortal.

It is in "Earth-Visitors", however, that Slessor pays specific tribute to Lindsay's creative power. Founded on the artist's belief that the gods once coupled with earthly maidens to produce that superior strain of human being - the artist - Slessor's poem celebrates the eighteenth century world of taverns, guileless farm girls and "strange riders" (1.1) in the snow that Lindsay loved so well. The poet brings to life this "staining with wild radiance" of "a country bed" (4.2) with a characteristic use of the richly decorative language that marked - and sometimes marred - his work under Lindsay's influence. Mercury's laugh is like a "bubble of gilt" (3.6), "sleepy girls, half tangled in dreams" (3.4) pluck "crushed gold" (3.7) feathers in their fingertips and the gods speak in a tongue that is as "sweet as pineapple" (2.7). With its sensual, evocative images and its fine, almost cloying attention to details of costume and setting, "Earth-Visitors" is a faithful translation of Lindsay's etchings into words. The beautiful artifice and emptiness of the artist's world (fig. 4.5) is captured brilliantly in the last stanza of the poem which describes a visit by Venus to Lindsay, now the sole mortal recipient of such godly favours:



Fig. 4.5. Norman Lindsay, Illustration for Earth-Visitors. From Earth-Visitors. By Kenneth Slessor. London: Franfrolico Press, 1926.

She is there suddenly, lit by no torch or moon,

But by the shining of her naked body.

Her breasts are berries broken in the snow; her hair

Blows in a gold rain over and over them.

She flings her kisses like warm guineas of love,

And when she walks, the stars walk with her above. (5.6-11)

There is something about the snowy night-time setting, the sensual descriptions and slightly archaic language which calls to mind "The Eve of St Agnes". Significantly, Keats belonged to that hallowed group of English poets which Lindsay enthusiastically supported and, like Slessor, possessed a similar tendency towards visual evocativeness in his work. (It is interesting to note that Keats was moved to write poetry by the inspiration of specific paintings.) The marked pictorial quality which distinguishes all of Slessor's poetry is, in "Earth-Visitors", at its strongest and most superficial. There is no attempt either to penetrate the mysteries of Lindsay's peculiar philosophy or to attach any deeper significance to his art than that of a fairytale kind of beauty. Slessor paints Lindsayian dreams to perfection in this poem - an exercise he repeats in "Thieves' Kitchen" (fig. 4.6). And yet, while he evokes the ribald good humour and sexual abandon of Lindsay's etchings in the latter work, something of the older poet's fascination with time and mortality can be heard in the cry, "Leap, leap, fair vagabonds, your lives are short ..." (3.1).

In "Pan at Lane Cove" there is a similar note of sadness. The poet mourns the



Fig. 4.6. Norman Lindsay, Thieves' Kitchen. Plate 26 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings. Ed. Daniel Thomas. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977.

passing of a golden age burning only briefly in the "Paradise" (5.7) of Lane Cove. In its ardent entreaty to the gods and myths of the past, however, the poem is pure Lindsay. Despite the ages which have been and vanished since the gods walked freely in the world, the "earth is ripe for Pan again" (4.5) in the shape of the arcadian beauty of the Australian bush. Slessor's gift for startling pictorial images is evident again in this poem - a factor which must have been influenced by Lindsay's own gift for exotic figures and complicated linear compositions:

> Scaly with poison, bright with flame,
> Great fungi steam beside the gate,
> Run tentacles through flagstone cracks,
> Or claw beyond, where meditate
> Wet poplars on a pitchy lawn.
> Some seignior of colonial fame
> Has planted here a stone-cut faun
> Whose flute juts like a frozen flame. (1.1-8)

It is true that much of Slessor's early work is steeped in Lindsayian philosophy and marked by a certain style in its use of visual images which calls to mind the most flamboyant of the artist's black-and-white etchings. Nowhere are both tendencies more evident - and perhaps least successful - than in the poem "Realities", dedicated to Lindsay's etchings. Here Slessor provides proof positive that he was receptive in the extreme to Lindsay's art and ideas. The only one of his poems to specifically address the artist's work (as opposed to his philosophies), "Realities" describes in haunting detail the

temptations of Lindsay's arcadian world for a poet obsessed with beauty. Curiously, the poem is not unlike "Ode on a Grecian Urn", expressing a similar desire to become one with the loveliness and precious immortality of the imagination. Like Keats, Slessor finds a "reality" in the perfect world of art which he cannot find within the limited ranges of earthly actuality:

> ... I, who have climbed in these unrooted boughs
> Behind the world, find substance there and flesh,
> Thoughts more infrangible than windy vows,
> Love that's more bodily, and kisses longer,
> And Cythera lovelier, and the girls of moonlight stronger
> Than all earth's ladies webbed in their bony mesh. (4.1-6)

In the arcadia created by Lindsay, the "world's tissue has utterly crumbled away" (3.8) and the "ghosts of flesh are stirred/With a new blood, the fluid of eternity" (3.10-11). Slessor, however, cannot refrain from imbuing the poem with a Keatsian pathos born of the realisation that beauty might well be truth, but in reality is only fleeting. While he avows his wish to live forever in this perfect world of art, the falling inflections and measured metre betray his certainty that he is, after all, only mortal:

> O, shining ones! Could I for ever keep
> Within your radiance, made absolute at last,
> No more amongst earth's phantoms to be cast,
> No more in the shadowy race of the world exist,

But, born into reality, remember Life
As men see ghosts at midnight - so with me
Might all those aery textures, the world's mist,
Melt into Beauty's actuality! (4.9-16)

In "Marco Polo" Slessor paints a vision of the past, a purely pictorial sequence of images which Lindsay himself might have drawn, given the same inspiration. Having read how "Marco Polo came/By bridle-path to Kanbalu" (1.1-2), Slessor describes in intricate detail the "frescoes cut with curious flowers" (2.2) and "bridges cleft of serpent-stone/Bowed by their side, like branches blown/From some high granite Tree of Life/Whose roots were coiled round Kublai's throne" (2.5-8). Images of "forest-towered elephants", "fire-fish", "green cornelian tortoise-rows" and "Gold-feathered cranes" (3.3-7) are heaped together in Slessor's dazzling word-painting of Kublai Khan's great garden and palace as they first appeared to Marco Polo. The first four stanzas of the poem are purely descriptive, leading the reader through the sensual splendours and wonders of a bygone, almost mythical era. It is not until the fifth stanza, however, that Slessor, Polo and the reader become aware of the focal point of the picture - a marvellously evocative image of Khan captured in a moment of imperial splendour:

But past the fountain-pools I peered,
Beyond the birds, to that divan,
Where, fingering his tawny beard,
In silence dreamed the splendid Khan.
Green china bowls of wine were there,

And oranges and milk-of-mare,

While, stamping on his jewelled wrist,

A falcon climbed with eyes aflare. (5.1-8)

There is an enamelled precision in the way the poet describes Khan "fingering his tawny beard" (5.3) and the falcon "stamping on his jewelled wrist" (5.7) that combines the linear movement of a Lindsayian etching (fig. 4.7) with the depth, drama and colour of an oil painting. While Slessor retained his preference for concrete images in his mature poetry, they later became less distinct, blending one into the other in poems such as "Five Bells":

But all I heard was words that didn't join

So Milton became melons, melons girls,

And fifty mouths, it seemed, were out that night,

And in each tree an Ear was bending down,

Or something had just run, gone behind grass,

When, blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought,

The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky,

Knifing the dark with deathly photographs. (49-56)

Slessor has taken his love of vivid pictorial images and wrapped them in the ethereal flux of time and change. The sharp-edged, vibrant pictures of Dürer and Khan have been unfrozen in his later work to convey, rather than conquer, the movements of time and mortality to which all men are subject. The images become multiple, their edges



Fig. 4.7. Norman Lindsay, The Bauble. 1924. Plate 94 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

blurred - and their effect startling. In "Captain Dobbin", Slessor takes a snapshot of the sea-captain at the moment of his retirement and juxtaposes it against two settings - the South Seas and suburbia:

> Captain Dobbin, having retired from the South Seas
> In the dumb tides of 1900, with a handful of shells,
> A few poisoned arrows, a cask of pearls,
> And five thousand pounds in the colonial funds,
> Now sails the street in a brick villa ... (1-5)

The slight artifice of the younger poet has disappeared - as well as the preference for hard-edged visual impact. In its place is a recognition that images change, blur and melt, receding one into the other with the effects of time, movement and memory. While Slessor professed a preference for the concrete image over the abstract in his poetry, his later works are almost abstract in their manipulation of concrete images - a quality which must have aided John Olsen significantly in his mural-tribute to "Five Bells", commissioned in 1972 (fig. 4.8). The difference between his earlier and his mature poems can be likened to the difference between a two-dimensional painting or freeze-frame and a full-length feature film. Certainly, there is a fluidity, a surreal quality in his later work which seems less arbitrary than the faithfully detailed, exotic images of the Vision period. This surrealness is an effect of the poet's search - a by-product of his desperate need to penetrate the mysteries of change and time to which not even concrete images are immune. The visual unreality which Slessor introduces into poems such as "Five Bells" is

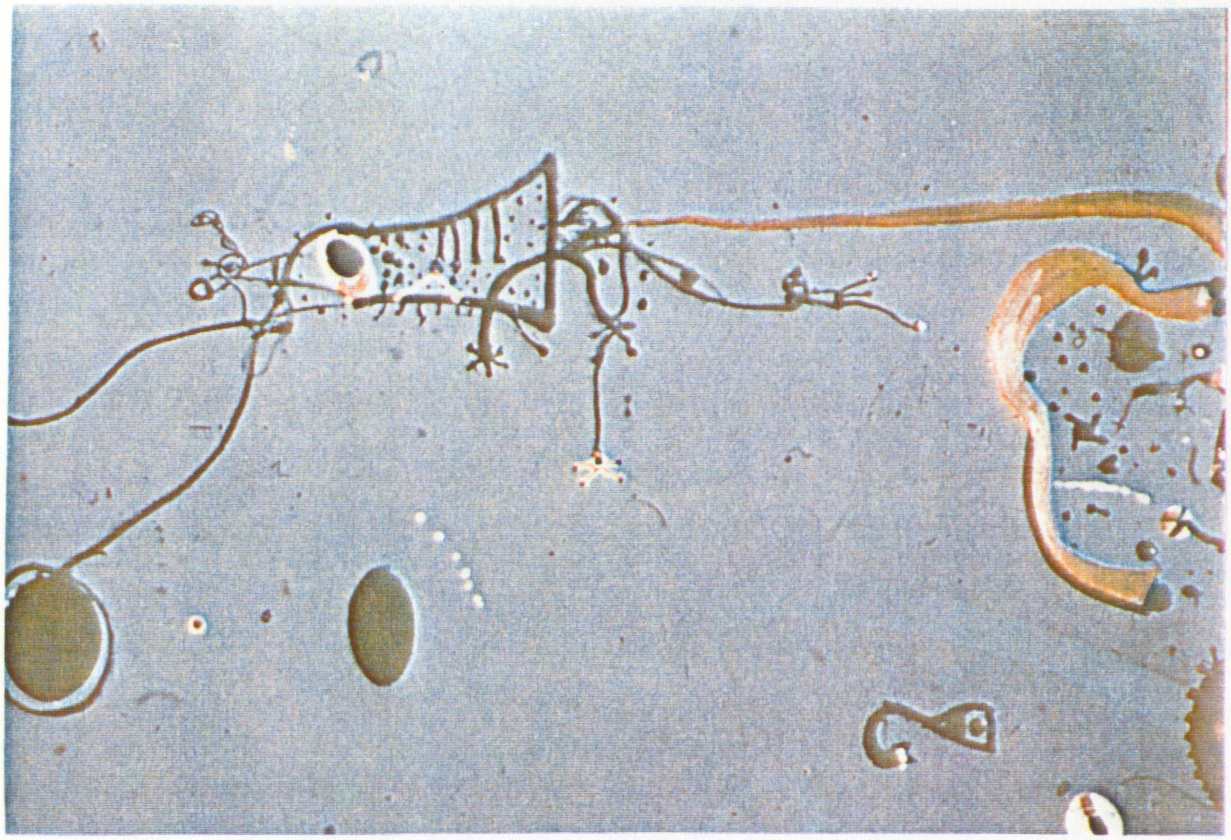

Fig. 4.8. John Olsen, Salute to Five Bells (detail), Sydney Opera House. 1972-3. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

part of the poet's anguished attempt to unravel the nature and the meaning of reality itself:

> The tide goes over, the waves ride over you
> And let their shadows down like shining hair,
> But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend
> Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;
> And you are only part of an Idea. (102-106)

In "Five Bells", Slessor calls up image after image, one melting into the other, until we are drawn not only into the half-dream, half-nightmare state of the poet struggling to find his lost friend, but into the very nature of water itself which seems to have no shape but that of movement and reflection. Here, in his finest poem, Slessor uses words like paint to brilliantly capture those very qualities of water and, therefore of time, which are so elusive - movement, transience, change, fluidity, eternity. With its mysterious, strangely coloured reflections, its "waves with diamond quills and combs of light" (118) and its subtle "falls of moonshine" (9), the harbour seems to be the subject of an impressionistic study of water and light. Even the "spent aquarium-flare/Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper" (81-2) calls to mind the streaks of harbourside colour which stain the dark surface of the water at night. In Slessor's haunting poem-painting the harbour takes on a mystery which borders on the surreal.

Ultimately, those poems which can be traced specifically to Lindsay deal with art

in a cosmetic and purely superficial way. While they copy, or at least, assimilate Lindsay's style, they do not seek to emulate painterly qualities or to cross the spatial-temporal frontiers which the artist himself so jealously guarded. What these poems *do* succeed in doing, however, is in providing Slessor with an outlet for his own illustrative gift - one which he would later use to explore the real, rather than the imagined, world.

Slessor's Proclivity with "Paint"

Slessor manipulates words in the way that painters manipulate pigment. Seascapes, cityscapes and landscapes roll across the poet's imagined canvas with all the seeming fluidity and spontaneity of paint. Building up his poems with rich, almost tactile images of colour, texture, shape and light, Slessor seems to recreate scenes which require very little comment or explanation on the part of the poet. The visual impact of the imagery often speaks for itself. Perhaps this is why popular critical opinion has dubbed him an "unintellectual poet". Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. As John Docker and T. L. Sturm have shown, Slessor's deep interest in Lindsay's Creative Effort provides clear proof for the existence of underlying layers of meaning in his work. [20] The persistent criticism that Slessor was not an intellectual poet can be traced in part to his non-academic background - and to the vagaries of a journalistic career which culminated on the one hand in his unsuccessful stint as an official war correspondent and,

[20] See John Docker, "Norman Lindsay's Creative Effort" for a reappraisal of the ideas which influenced poets such as Slessor and T. L. Sturm, "Kenneth Slessor's Poetry and Norman Lindsay" for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Slessor's poetry and Creative Effort.

on the other, in his editorship of the vulgar Sydney rag, Smith's Weekly. [21] Slessor's association with Lindsay and Vision have cast further shadows on the soundness of his intellect - a point debated with considerable *angst* by Geoffrey Dutton in his recent biography of the poet:

> Douglas Stewart estimates, no doubt correctly, that the first meeting [with Lindsay] took place in late 1922 or early 1923. It was a fateful one, that was to hamper Slessor's development for many years and perhaps inhibit him from ever attaining his full potential .... Jack Lindsay says that Slessor stood apart from *Vision*, but the evidence of his poetry shows how much he was affected by his mentors. If only he had gone further with Hardy, or learned more from the Imagists of the 1910s, with whom he was certainly familiar ... [22]

Slessor, however, was not Lindsay's blind disciple. While infected with the artist's spirit and energy and a great admirer of both his standards of craftsmanship and his strength of purpose, Slessor believed most firmly that poetry is not the place for dogmatic assertions about art and literature - a factor which surely contributed to the apparent lack of intellectual contrivance in his work. As he protested

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[21] For a full account of Slessor's mixed fortunes as a war correspondent see Dutton, Kenneth Slessor.

[22] Dutton Kenneth Slessor. 64, 66.

> I am concerned with nothing except poetry as pure poetry and not as a vehicle for noble aims or burning hatreds or for righting wrongs or extolling social or philosophic improvements. I do not believe that pure poetry has anything to do with purposes, admirable though some of them may be. The truth is that great poetry is not necessarily moral poetry - and even if in some cases a moral significance can be found, this may be merely an accidental side-effect of no consequence to the intrinsic poetry itself. [23]

There is no doubt that the younger poet *did* take up some of Lindsay's ideas in his earlier poetry. Perhaps these were in themselves, the "accidental side-effects" of Lindsay's own enthusiasm for Slessor's poetry, or of the poet's admiration for that power of "creative effort" which he found in the older man's work. [24] It should not be forgotten, however, that Slessor was an outspoken enemy of poetic dogmas and, while tolerant of this tendency in his friendships, bristled with anger at any suggestion that *he* may have been guilty of such sacrilege. Jack Lindsay's attempt to implicate Slessor as a keen supporter of Vision's propaganda is a case in point. In his scathing reply to the younger Lindsay's article, "Vision of the Twenties" (published in Southerly in 1952), Slessor attacks his use of "sumptuous" polysyllabic words: "I didn't understand half of

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[23] Kenneth Slessor, "The Quality of Magic" Southerly 31.4 (1971): 250.

[24] Slessor 250.

them then", he wrote, "and I understand them even less after twenty-nine years". [25] Most wounding of all, according to Slessor, is the use of such pretentious concepts as "devitalisation", "vitalisation" and "self-annihilation" in relation to literary and, especially, poetic judgements: [26]

> All this seems to me a maddeningly pretentious way of talking about the elementals. I am bewildered not so much by the vocabulary itself as by the question of what such pseudo-technical sociological expressions have to do with the making and judging of pure poetry or pure literature. [27]

Despite Slessor's indignant denouncement of Jack's "allegations", he remained an ardent admirer of Norman Lindsay. Although he eventually moved away from the fauns and nymphs of his Vision period to chronicle the "grotesque" beauty of Darlinghurst and the surreal qualities of Sydney Harbour at night, Slessor retained the fundamental respect for tradition and craftsmanship which had first drawn him to Lindsay. [28] It is on this firm foundation that their friendship was based and, because of its strength, was able to survive the serious differences of opinion which eventually withdrew Slessor from both Jack and Norman's influence.

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[25] Kenneth Slessor, "Spectacles for the Fifties: A Rejoinder to 'Vision of the Twenties'". Southerly 13.4 (1952): 216.

[26] Slessor 215-216.

[27] Slessor 216.

[28] See A. C. W. Mitchell, "Kenneth Slessor and the Grotesque" Australian Literary Studies 1.4 (1964): 242-250.

Although Slessor, as Vivian Smith says, "rejected the extremes of Rimbaud" and was disdainful of either poetic dogma or poetry as a venue for dogma, he did not forsake significance for beauty. In "Winter Dawn", Slessor's evocation of the cityscape at daybreak seems in the first stanza to be pure description:

> At five I wake, rise, rub on the smoking pane
> A port to see - water breathing in the air,
> Boughs broken. The sun comes up in a golden stain,
> Floats like glassy sea-fruit. There is a mist everywhere,
> White and humid, and the Harbour is like plated stone,
> Dull flakes of ice. One light drips out alone,
> One bead of winter-red, smouldering in the steam,
> Quietly over the roof-tops - another window
> Touched with a crystal fire in the sun's gullies,
> One lonely star of the morning, where no stars gleam. (1.1-10)

There is a haunting beauty about this steaming city bathed in the "golden stain" of sunrise - and a terrible pathos. The boughs on the trees are broken, the "Harbour is like plated stone" (5) and a single spot of colour in the city "drips out alone", smouldering in the mist (6). This is a seedy winter city waking with "the dead suburbs" (2.2) to a day which is no different from any other. Even the sun's light leaves a stain rather than a glow, the "flakes of ice" are "dull" (6) and there is only "One lonely star of the morning, where no stars gleam" (10). Slessor's skill in "Winter Dawn" lies in his ability to make even the simplest touches of colour - the "one bead of winter-red" (7), for example -

convey the steaming, tawdry desolation of the city at sunrise without detracting from its Turneresque beauty. [29] The contrast of the colour and "crystal fire" (9) which touches the rooftops and windows of the city with the humid mist and pervading sense of underlying damp and decay is strangely reminiscent of the way in which Turner draws vibrant areas of definition from the indistinct backgrounds and blurred skies of his canvas. Indeed, a comparison between Slessor's imagery and Turner's lyrical Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying shows a similarity of vision which is startling given the unrelated nature of their subjects (fig. 4.9).

In "William Street" Slessor almost adopts the stance of an impressionist painter, splashing a few gaudy spots of Darlinghurst life across his canvas, then standing back not only to look at his work but to make the challenging pronouncement, "You find this ugly, I find it lovely" (1.4). In many ways, "William Street" is a sense-painting with its "red globes of light" (1.1), its "grease that blesses onions with a hiss" (3.3), the "rich and rasping" (3.1) smells of the city and trousers "bumping knee by knee" (2.2). Slessor also manages to cleverly conjure a sense of landscape in the street life "ranging the pavements of their pasturage" (4.3) with a satirical reference to the stilted and idealised bush settings which Australian poets and painters were still labouring under in the 1920s.

In her article, "The Landscapes of Slessor's Poetry", Leonie Kramer praises Slessor's painterly skills, likening the precision, clarity and "frozen beauty" of "Winter

[29] See Vivian Smith, The Oxford History of Australian Literature, for reference to "Winter Dawn"'s Turneresque qualities. (353).



Fig. 4.9. William Turner, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On (detail), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Page 122 of Turner: the Masterworks.

Dawn" to a still-life painting rather than a landscape:

> ... the French term for still life - "Nature Morte" - seems peculiarly apt for it. The sun is like a "glassy sea-fruit", the Harbour like "plated-stone", men asleep are "embalmed in stony coffins", daisies are "painted in antic china" and the flower tossed on the lawn is "like a bright penny". [30]

Kramer also refers to Slessor's equally great gift for verse-portraiture. Whether writing about such historic figures as Captain Cook or the more ordinary, though no less beautifully, drawn lives of Joe Lynch and Captain Dobbin, Slessor is master of the multiple image, of the man viewed simultaneously from many sides. Although far removed from the Cubism of Picasso in terms of style and certainly of philosophy, Slessor shares with the artist - as well as with others like him - the ability to see around, and even through, many vantage points which appear, in turn, to be synchronised in a single-image painting. Picasso's Femme nue se coiffant, huile (fig. 4.10), painted just a few years after the writing of Slessor's highly polished, multi-faceted poems shows that the modern preoccupation with challenging the post-Renaissance dictum of a single-view for every work of art was still valid 30 years after the advent of Cubism.

Though seemingly worlds apart, Slessor's verse portraits and the Cubist works of painters such as Picasso are both products of the modern movement toward the multiple

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[30] Leonie Kramer, "The Landscapes of Slessor's Poetry" Southerly 37.1 (1977): 6.



Fig. 4.10. Pablo Picasso, Femme nue se coiffant, huile (Woman Doing Her Hair), private collection, New York. Page 65 of Picasso: Métemorphoses et unité. By Jean Laymarie. Geneva: Editions d'Art, 1971.

image. While Kramer is not concerned with the similarity between Slessor's work and Cubist painting, she does discuss the somewhat external tendencies of Slessor's verse portraiture - that is, a sense of detachment from the subject which is vaguely disturbing. This charge, interestingly enough, can also be levelled at modern painters from post-impressionism onwards. The "depth of insight" which Kramer finds lacking in Slessor (but which she feels is evident in the works of Browning, one of the last of the Victorian poets) is perhaps more symptomatic of the detachment and sense of alienation from their subjects which modern poets and painters from Eliot to Nolan have felt. [31]

Kramer's comments bring us back to the charge that Slessor is not an intellectual poet. While such a possibility has caused critics considerable guilt and remorse on Slessor's behalf over the years, there is another side to the argument which is as disturbing as it is fascinating. W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that the case against the inter-relations between the arts is founded on the assignation of specific qualities to poetry and painting which are not only genre, but gender, specific. By this critical rule of thumb, painting is spatial, natural, limited, imitative, physical, external, silent, beautiful, visual and feminine. Poetry, on the other hand is temporal, man-made, infinite, expressive, mental, internal, eloquent, sublime, aural and masculine.

Given the long-cherished concept of Australian mateship and the strongly

[31] Kramer writes that Slessor "...does not probe deeply, and though the influence of Browning upon him is sometimes in evidence, the nuances and rapid and frequent changes of perspective that characterise Browning's "Men and Women" imply more depth of insight than Slessor seems to command". 9.

anglophilic tradition in mainstream Australian literature, such comments are worthy of reflection - particularly in light of Slessor's critical rejection as an intellectual poet and the comparative neglect of his work (given its stature) over the years. Rosemary Dobson is one poet who has suffered at the hands of critics who have been repulsed by her attempts to marry the two arts. Perhaps it is for this reason that painters such as Sidney Nolan were so successful in *their* quest for an art fashioned on the semantics of poetry. Is it possible that poets such as Slessor and Dobson, whether by virtue of their strong pictorial impulse or their fateful choice of art as a subject are unconsciously considered emasculators of an age-old tradition? Mitchell's equation of the French and the English as belonging respectively to "nations of the eye and the ear" adds further piquancy to the argument. French impressionism was largely responsible for the birth of Melbourne's Heidelberg school during the 1890s, while the symbolist works of poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud helped incite the Angry Penguins to rebellion during the 1940s. Given that "blurred genres" in Lessing's system are associated with French refinement, "monsters" and *modernism* - and "distinct genres" with Germanic manliness, purity and classicism - the Australian suspicion of the systematic or unconscious exploitation of the visual element in poetry (whether traditional or avant garde) is more easily understood. It must be remembered that James McAuley's principal bait in seeking to trap Max Harris during the Ern Malley affair was "Dürer: Innsbruck", a poem which not only celebrated an artist, but exploited the surrealist love of imagery.

This is not to say that Kramer - or any other critic - is bent on destroying Slessor's reputation as an intellectual poet because he relies on imagery to convey

meaning in his poems. The trap which many critics fall into, however, is in mistaking a lack of commentary or analysis for insufficient insight on Slessor's part. Using rich layers of metaphor, daubs of sensual colour and broad, brilliant strokes for sometimes complex detail, Slessor approaches poetry as a painter would his canvas - and therein lies the difficulty. When Slessor describes Captain Dobbin as keeping "a lock of the sea's hair" (31), he captures more of the man's love for his salty mistress than a ream of verses exploring and explaining the analogy. The power of Slessor's poetry lies in his ability to capture what he sees before him with immediacy and conviction - but in a manner which reveals "paintings" within the imagery. In this way, Slessor exposes the wistful fragility of the retired adventurer in "Captain Dobbin" simply by describing the act of reading:

> Over the flat and painted atlas-leaves
> His reading-glass would tremble,
> Over the fathoms, pricked in tiny rows,
> Water shelving to the coast.
> Quietly the bone-rimmed lens would float
> Till, through the glass, he felt the barbed rush
> Of bubbles foaming, spied the albicores,
> The blue-finned admirals, heard the wind-swallowed cries
> Of planters running on the beach (49-57)

The atmosphere of suppressed excitement, the sense of nostalgia and unbearable longing in Dobbin's actions is conveyed by Slessor's ability to juxtapose the poignancy of the scene against the exotic world of the old man's memory. The power of the image

speaks amply for itself. In this respect, a comparison with Lindsay's portraits is intriguing. What Lindsay fails to reveal with the pen, the poet exposes deftly with a word. Given that Slessor's modernism was founded on his willingness to write poetry like a painter, the gulf between the works produced by two such similar sets of abilities is more easily understood.

The Painter Within the Poet

While it is true that Lindsay filled many of the aching gaps left by a certain lack of culture and traditions in the mainstream of Australian life, it is in Slessor's own untapped abilities as a visual artist that the real basis for their friendship - and its decisive influence on the course of Australian poetry - can be found. Many writers attest to the mesmeric power of Lindsay's personal charm and charisma and the intoxicating effect which his ready praise had on their poorly-nourished egos. Few, if any of these young worshippers succeeded in transforming their poetry under the influence of Lindsay's tutelage and enthusiasm. As Slessor's juvenile illustrations for the school-magazine Pi demonstrate (fig. 4.11), the poet was already comfortable with the draughtsmanship and *fin de siecle* style which made Lindsay's art so popular during the 1920s. The intuitive sympathy and critical understanding which Slessor received from Lindsay (a man with well-known literary leanings) met the same response in the poet. Both shared an enthusiasm for the other's talent and for those elements in their own work which found its opposite expression in a poem or painting. It was for this reason more than any other that Slessor was able to so readily absorb Lindsay's influence during the crucial decade preceding Five Bells and weave his half-hidden illustrative gift into a poetry rich in

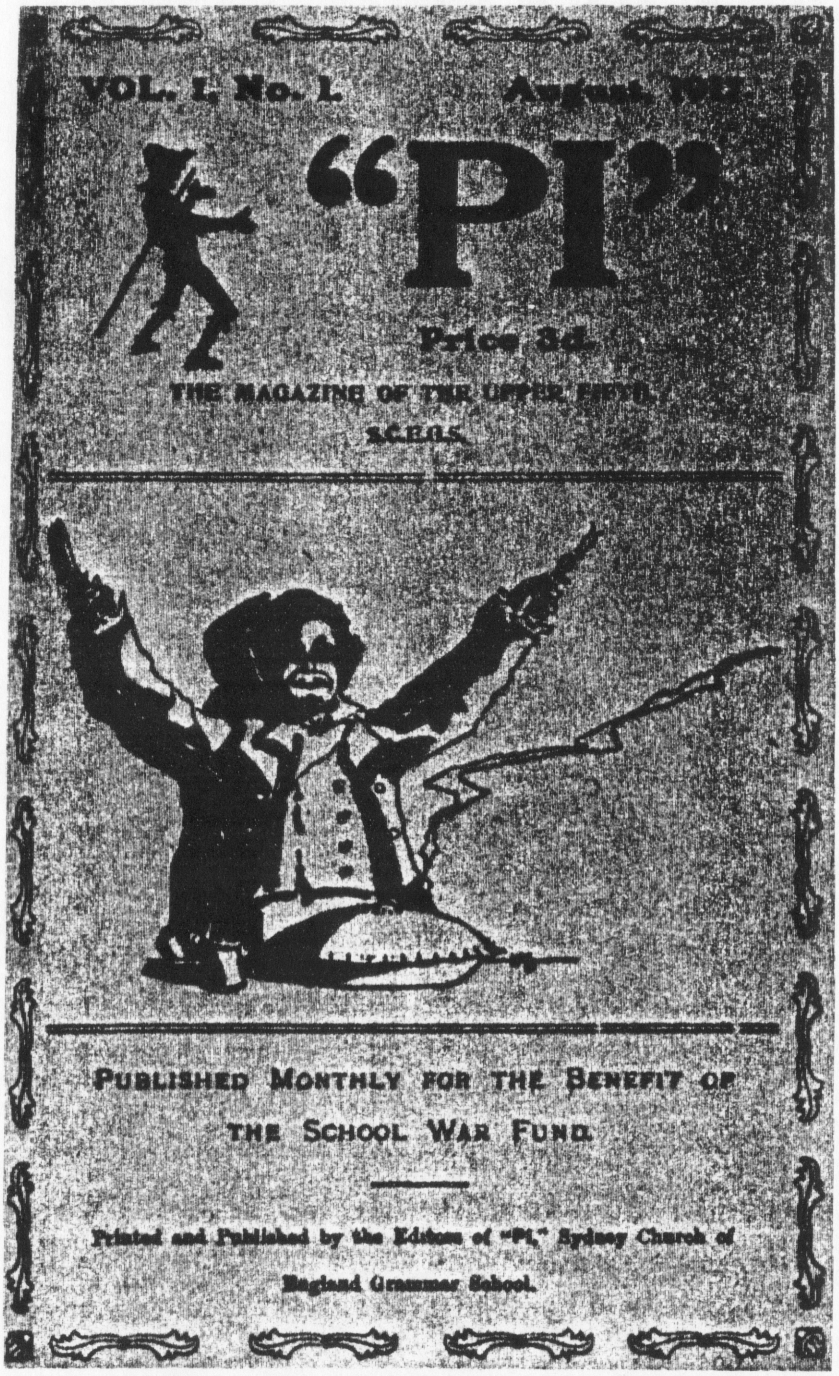

Fig. 4.11. Kenneth Slessor, Illustration for Pi Magazine, Sydney Church of England Grammar School Library. From Kenneth Slessor: A Biography. By Geoffrey Dutton. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1991. N.pag.

initially exotic, and ultimately surreal, images.

Slessor's exceptional visual skills - and the depth of his response to Norman Lindsay's influence - may even be the product of an undeveloped talent for drawing. Robert C. Slessor has revealed that his brother was not only a budding journalist but a small-time illustrator during his high school days. "Some Personal Notes", published in Southerly in 1971, casually records that Ken

> produced and edited a school magazine (a quite unofficial one) called "Printers' Pi". He even illustrated this four to six page magazine himself. In those days, he would write birthday and Christmas verses, illustrate them and send them to his parents, relatives and friends. [32]

Geoffrey Dutton notes that Slessor attained first-class honours in art for the Leaving Certificate and, as a youth, was not only good at drawing, but pursued it with avid pleasure. [33] Finding proof of Slessor's artistic proficiency long before his association with Lindsay raises intriguing "chicken and egg" questions about the influence of art on the poet's evolution. Not only does it indicate the independence of the poet's passion for the "concrete image", but points to a personal impulse in his poetry which Lindsay *fostered* rather than engendered. Interestingly, Slessor's preoccupation with

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[32] Robert C. Slessor, "Some Personal Notes: Southerly 31.4 (1971): 243.

[33] Geoffrey Dutton, Kenneth Slessor: A Biography (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking Penguin, 1991) 23.

painting as a theme also pre-dates his association with Lindsay by at least four years. Indeed, Geoffrey Dutton asserts that Slessor had been looking at Pre-Raphaelite paintings when he wrote the opening stanza of "Ophelia" in 1919 - a supposition which, given the uncanny similarity to Millais' picture of the same name (fig. 4.12), is undoubtedly true:

> So still she floats, so still and clear
> The river-lilies straggle near,
> And tangle with her tresses;
> Their ivory cups, their waxen green,
> Enclasp her, and she slides between,
> White in the water-cresses. [34]

Poems devoted specifically to painting also emerge at this time. Interestingly, "To a Forgotten Portrait", published in The Bulletin in 1919, anticipates many of Slessor's future concerns with the tides of time and history as well as with art:

> Wind in the corridor, wailing in sniffle and eddy and gust,
> Whose is this face that looms pale through the skin of a century's dust?
> Admiral, general, murderer, merchant or duke - who can say?
> Crony of George the Third, or a tourist to Botany Bay?
> Prelate or dandy or rogue? And the narrow or primrosy path?
> Droning sad sermons or ogling the belles in the Pump Room at Bath?

[34] Unless otherwise indicated, all poems in this section are quoted from Dutton, Kenneth Slessor.

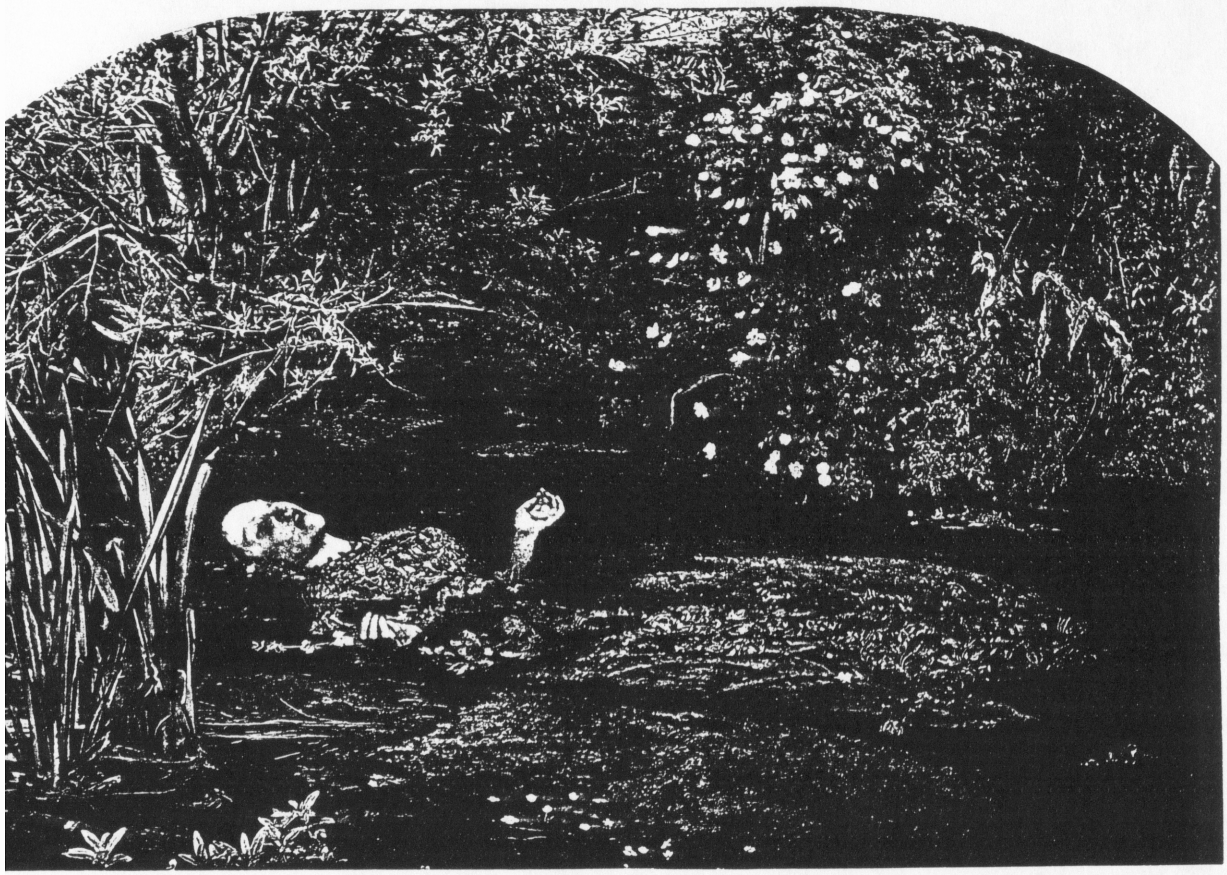

Fig. 4.12. John Everett Millais, Ophelia, Tate Gallery, London. 1852. Page 281 of English Painting: From Hogarth to the Pre-Raphaelites. By Jean-Jacques Mayoux. 1975. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

Tremulous high lights, that shake in the damp of his lip, seem to swell;
Surely he breathes, is awake, and can see, and can hear, and can tell.
All that he knows (and so wise is he now with his bundle of years,
Watching the world with those eyes, and hearing it spin with those ears)!

Speak to me, Painted One! ... What is it stirs on his lips? Is it dust?
But what shall become of you, knotted old face, when the picture-cords rust?

Perhaps the most telling example of Slessor's natural ability to incorporate painterly technique in his poetry is provided by "Blind", a beautiful sonorous lyric published in the Sun just one year later. An early precursor of "Winter Dawn", this haunting poem celebrates the imaginative, as well as the actual, palette and, according to Dutton, is fitting testimony to Slessor, the frustrated painter:

The painter wipes his twilight canvas clean,
    But half his palette spills.

Beyond the flood,
    That wine-red ship, the sun,
Careened in molten lakes of dragon's blood,
    Whose rims have overrun.

Undoubtedly, Slessor had a highly developed visual faculty. Perhaps his final choice between the two arts (if, indeed, there was one) was determined by his belief that

poetry has a greater visual range and flexibility. Because he was such a staunch believer in the concrete, as opposed to the abstract, image in both art and literature, it is possible the poet valued in his chosen field a certain freedom which he felt painting lacked. This can partly be attributed to the power of that which cannot not be *seen* in poetry and the power of that which cannot be *said* in painting. For Slessor, visual art - assuming that it is not abstract - is spatially and temporally fixed. Poetry, on the other hand, is free to range over a number of images, each of which is unique to the reader's individual imagination. As Slessor says, time is fluid in poetry, while painting is finite. Perhaps this is why the poet finds artists such as Rubens, Lindsay and Dürer so inspiring; he is less concerned with particular paintings than with the process of creativity embodied in each work and with the artist's "alchemy" in capturing forever a moment of time in paint, ink or metal.

This is certainly true of earlier works such as "Nuremberg" in which Slessor paints his own vibrant picture of Albrecht Dürer drawing beneath the "thousand towers" (3.1) of the city. As the artist engraves the passing moment in metal, the spires seem to flower "like leaden trees outside the panes" (3.2) and the "flux of years" (2.3) to cease. Time stands still inside "that high chamber sealed away/From earthly change" (2.4-5) where the artist works his magic. For Slessor, it is the creation of art and not the art itself which is significant in his poetry. And it is poetry which brings to life the worlds of possibility that lie behind a painting - as well as the mystery and magic which the creative process involves.

Time, the Magician

Many critics have failed to understand Slessor's acceptance that the very mysteries of life and death cannot be solved, however much the poet rants and raves about the inevitable catastrophies of time. "Five Bells" is about the search for, rather than the discovery of, meaning. The poet recognises that death cannot be understood by the living - nor can the dead return to life except by way of memory, "the flood that does not flow" (2). If life's meaning *could* be found and unravelled then perhaps the paradox would be resolved and even the ultimate barrier of death be broken down:

> If I could find an answer, could only find
> Your meaning, or could say why you were here
> Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath
> Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice? (113-116)

As the swiftly altered tone in the following stanza indicates, however, Slessor accepts that time and mystery and memory are intertwined and cannot be separated by human understanding:

> I looked out of my window in the dark
> At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
> That arched their mackeral-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. (117-127)

The measured pace of the opening lines, the sudden change from desperate struggle to weary acceptance reflects Slessor's own wonder that the world, however much human beings try, cannot be fully understood. Despite the tragedy of this struggle there is a mystery in the movements of time which also has a certain magic - the same magic with which Slessor invested the court of Khan and the towers of Nuremberg during his Vision days. Through imagination, the poet can cross the barrier of centuries to experience events in the far and glorious past - just as the artist's illusions seem to preserve parts of time itself.

In "Five Bells", however, the artist-magician has been replaced by time, the magician, whose power is formless, unguessable and absolute. While the ships sleep and the poet in half-defeated stillness looks out through his window, it is the sea, Slessor's metaphor for time, which defiantly arches its "mackeral-back" (119) and smacks the sand. Despite its potential for death and destruction, the sea has a tantalising, elusive beauty, with its "diamond quills and combs of light" (118), which fleetingly brings to mind the less abstract world of Lindsay's mermaids and sirens (fig. 4.13).



Fig. 4.13. Norman Lindsay, Galleon's End. Plate 11 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Because time and the sea cannot be fully fathomed (although by personifying them the poet can briefly grasp at their meaning) they have a magic which is as indefinable and impenetrable as the artist's alchemy. Slessor has described this quality of magic as being "the essence of all real poetry" and, ironically, its only truly immortal component:

> What makes a line of poetry memorable? By memorable I mean in the sense that it will be remembered and read again and stored in the mind ten or twenty or one hundred years after the ephemera of its time have been forgotten. What makes it memorable, I think, is not only its meaning or wisdom or metaphoric application or the intensity of its emotions, but also its other components, its devices of music, its triggers of association, its compressed imagery, its syllabic rhythm or chime of vowels or alliteration of consonants and, above all, its X-power - in other words, what I prefer to call its quality of magic (since magic is manifest but cannot be explained) which, for reasons that are mostly mysterious and defy analysis, gives it a permanent lodging in the mind. [35]

Slessor's heightened sense of this quality in the very mysteries of existence - as well as of poetry - brings us back to the poet who wrote for Vision under Norman Lindsay's influence. The younger Slessor finds mystery in the gods and fauns and satyrs which peopled Lindsay's vitalist landscapes, in the time-defying works of old masters and in great figures of the past such as Khan and Marco Polo who live on in modern-day

[35] Kenneth Slessor, "The Quality of Magic" Southerly 31.4 (1971): 250.

myths and legends. The older Slessor, however, finds this same beauty and mystery in reality - in the "dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze" (4.1) who walk William Street, in the haunting ring of harbour bells, or in the fading life of an old sea-captain who "sails the street in a brick villa" (5). Real magic, for the mature poet, is to be found not in dreams of the past but in the unanswerable riddles of life and death - and in the mysterious tides and flows of time to which all men and women, along with Cook, Joe Lynch and Captain Dobbin, will one day be subject.

A Prelude to Change

While Slessor found Lindsay's pantomime world diverting in the gloomy aftermath of World War One, he was not completely seduced in the way that Hugh McCrae or Jack Lindsay had been. Lindsay gave the young man something new and vital to write about - and a philosophy on which to focus his own ideas about poetry, literature and art. For Slessor, Vision represented a beginning rather than an end - and an exciting outlet for the whims and fancies of poetic experimentation. The promise of a belated Australian renaissance was certainly welcomed by the culture-loving poet, but there is no doubt that he soon began to look beyond the parameters set down by Lindsay and his disciples for new poetic techniques and inspiration. Just as the European Renaissance had marked the beginning of a modern age in painting, architecture and sculpture, so the Lindsayian version could only represent the first steps toward a new, invigorated Australian literature.

Jack Lindsay may have damned the radical works of contemporaries such as Edith

Sitwell and e.e. cummings in his notorious forewords to Vision, but Slessor must have kept a more open mind with regard to modern poetry than his involvement with the journal might suggest. In a telling lecture on the subject of modern English poetry, given less than eight years after the demise of Vision, Slessor clearly expresses his dislike for that "little cemetery of sweet essences" ("Captain Dobbin" 163) which marks a repressive worship of the past:

> In what I propose to quote from the work of modern writers, no doubt there is much that is unmusical and graceless. For the fruit of some of these experiments, I feel a violent distaste. None the less, I welcome them more readily than the harvests of stagnation; I would prefer my feelings to be outraged by Mr. E. E. Cummings, rather than have my intellect candied into stupor by Mr. Edward Shanks. I regard the silliest, the vulgarist, the crudest of the moderns as of more value than the literary Shintoists who cumber up anthologies with their trancelike worshipping of ancestors. [36]

Although Slessor supported many of the pursuits of modern poetry, he was quick, however, to denounce those sudden explosions of poetic revolt which moved too quickly away from the established traditions and finer points of craftsmanship that he considered essential in the making of great poetry. As he so astutely observes, "even T. S. Eliot

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[36] Slessor, "Modern English Poetry" 272.

obtains his most powerful poetry by a simple inflection or variation of the standardised pentameter". [37] For this reason, Slessor's modernism is of a gentle, ambivalent and evolutionary kind - it does not seek to shock or jolt, but merely to reach further out into those "unguessable" ("Rubens' Innocents" 3.6) worlds of human existence and meaning which all poetry in some form seeks to explore. As Vivian Smith remarks,

> ... for all his modernism, Slessor remained in many ways a traditional and conservative poet. He brought a new expressiveness and flexibility into Australian poetry, but like Brennan, who rejected the extremes of Rimbaud, Slessor did not accept the more radical and way-out aspects of modernistic innovations. He rejected the disruption of normal syntax and punctuation, and the elimination of poetic logic ... A vivid sense of contemporary images expressed in the present-day idiom of a man living in a godless universe and a highly individual music and rhythm were more than sufficient for Slessor's needs. [38]

Importantly, Slessor's gradual transition from a poetry written in defence of the traditions and culture which Lindsay embodied to one which not only embraced modernism but dared to mix the genres (in a manner which the artist, suprisingly, approved of) parallels important changes at work in Australia itself. By the late 1930s,

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[37] Slessor, "Modern English Poetry" 273.

[38] Vivian Smith, The Oxford History of Australian Literature Ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981) 351.

isolationism as a principle was beginning to wane. With the encroaching sense of another world disaster brought on by manic convictions of racial supremacy and strict national "types", protectionism and nationalism fell further out of favour - as Richard White says, such notions were "uncomfortably close to Nazi ideas about the Aryan master race". [39] The Depression also undermined national confidence in a "true blue" Australian type - as did the search for sophistication in an increasingly international world. Isolation, it seemed, had led only to cultural backwardness and insularity. Ironically, it was this complete reversal in national trends during the late '30s and early '40s which fostered a new generation of poets and painters eager to share their knowledge and explore new forms of visual and literary creativeness. Another kind of isolation - that produced by war - brought writers and artists together in a spirit of radical experimentation which would alter the face of Australian art and literature for ever.

[39] White 157.

5 Catastrophes of Bloodshed: The Battle with Tradition

Looking Outward

The 12 months leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939 marked the beginning of a seminal period in the evolution of Australian poetry and painting. No longer gripped by the material and cultural devastation of Depression, the nation spent the final years of the decade recovering both its prosperity and its curiosity about the world at large. As Richard Haese writes in Rebels and Precursors, Australian cultural life - at least, for those in the know - would never be the same again. Referring to the inexplicable shift in public and artistic attitudes which characterised this restless period, Haese quotes Virginia Woolf as observing that in or about 1910 "the world changed":

> That was the year of the first of the great post-impressionist exhibitions arranged by Roger Fry in London at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912. Something similar could be said of creative artists in Australia between 1939 and 1942. [1]

Haese contends that two events were instrumental in shaping the course of the most revolutionary decade in the history of Australian painting. These were the Herald Exhibition of 1939 and the Contemporary Art Society Exhibition of 1941. As he

[1] Richard Haese, Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art 59.

acknowledges, these crucial exhibitions of modern overseas and local art not only gave notice of modernism's official debut in Australia, but encapsulated many of the political and artistic contradictions which would be inherent in the coming decade:

> ... the Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art gathered together in Melbourne Town Hall canvases that included many from the most advanced of modernist painters in France and Britain. It was a triumph for liberals and radicals, in that order. Then in 1941 the Contemporary Art Society held its most notorious exhibition, which brought together works testifying to the dynamic changes that had taken place in Australian painting since the 1930s. And this too was a triumph - for modernist radicals and for all those committed to the political left. [2]

The Herald exhibition was not the first - nor the only - collection of modern European painting to reach Australia. As Alice Danciger (a minor artist of the period) has noted, small exhibitions of European and American painting were frequent, though low-key, events throughout the 1930s. [3] What distinguished the Herald exhibition from its

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[2] Haese 59.

[3] In her article, "Looking Back to the Forties", published in Art and Australia [23.1 (1985): 84-88], Danciger writes

> In the early 1930s when I was a teenage student at Dattilo Rubbo's Art School in Sydney, tastes in painting were still academic. Until then there was very little exposure to the main international art movements. However, as several young artists and students went abroad to study in London, Paris and the United States of America, a new vitality in outlook became apparent as the 1930s progressed. Then in 1935 when the first contemporary exhibition from overseas was brought to Australia by Mrs

predecessors was the aura of controversy it generated and a new hunger on the part of average Australians for international forms of art. Even more importantly, the exhibition of works by such modern masters as Dali, Picasso and Braque fuelled a fire already smouldering in the depths of Australia's creative psyche. Art which could be used as "a tool of protest against a world ... spun off its axle" was emerging in a country which seemed to have lost something of its provincial smugness and absurd sense of detachment from events in other parts of the world. Australia's geographical and ideological centre - its "country of the mind" - had shifted, leaving it acutely conscious of its place on the world stage. [4]

The changes which characterised the era were not confined purely to art. Although seldom noted as the birthdate of modernism in Australian poetry, the publication of Kenneth Slessor's Five Bells in 1939 marked the first successful foray by a local poet into the post-war "wasteland" explored by T. S. Eliot just 15 years before. With its surreal images and modern sense of dissolution and loss, "Five Bells" represented a remarkable leap forward for Australian literature. Indeed, the progress of Australian poetry between the publication of Hugh McCrae's Satyrs and Sunlight in 1906 and the appearance of "Five Bells" little more than three decades later would have been deemed nothing short of astonishing in a nation less given to provincial agonies about its literary and artistic capabilities. Nor was Slessor's achievement an isolated one. The following decade saw

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> Alleyne Zander, it had a strong impact on both artists and the public. The show featured the most advanced British work at the time .... (84)

[4] Hughes 135.

the emergence of some of Australia's finest poets - Judith Wright, Douglas Stewart, Rosemary Dobson, Francis Webb and David Campbell. While not all these poets answered the clarion call of Slessor's modernism, each in his or her own way sought to experiment within the range of a developing Australian tradition.

The publication of Judith Wright's The Moving Image in 1946 marked another watershed in the evolution of Australian poetry. Demonstrating yet again how far the nation had come, not only in terms of its expressive literary talent but in its changing self perceptions, The Moving Image proved that poetry could be both modern and undeniably, if unconsciously, Australian. Poems such as "South of My Day's Circle" explored the lyrical possibilities of blank verse without kowtowing to prescribed poetic conventions or bending under the weight of indulgent experimentation: for perhaps the first time, Australian readers of poetry saw their landscape viewed as a thing of beauty through modern eyes.

The decade which intervened between the publication of Five Bells and The Moving Image, however, was the most tumultuous, intensely political and creative period in Australia's literary and artistic history. Overshadowed not only by the clouds of a second world war but by the first-time threat of foreign military invasion from Japan, the 1940s proved to be a decade of crisis for Australians and for Australia at large. While the nation came through the encroaching horrors of war relatively unscathed, it could not avoid the war waged within itself during these stormy years - a conflict made inevitable by the contradictory forces of isolation and overseas influence, provincialism and national

pride, the search for a strong, Australian-based tradition and the equally virulent impulse to break away from outdated creative modes and concepts.

Curiously, it was painting which took up the yoke of this struggle - and literature which paid the price. While there is no doubt that mainstream (and usually Sydney-based) poets of the period pursued modern forms of literary expression with an awakening sense of zeal, they did so with a respectful eye on the English traditions which had given Australian literature its predominant shape. The battle between tradition and experiment in Australia was fought largely by a group of Melbourne painters who were infinitely more restless - and daring - in their artistic ambitions. In their pursuit of change, these painters turned to poetry of a generally "international" and avant garde kind, incorporating its elements in their work and, in the process, pushing the limits of painting itself. Ironically, the result of this inter-artistic experiment was an intensification of the very battle they were struggling to resolve. Those catastrophes of "bloodshed" which characterised the war between rebellion and tradition during the 1940s - catastrophes which already had their metaphorical precedents in Australian history (fig. 5.1) - helped split the direction of poetry and painting, turning one towards the international and the avant garde and the other back toward the strong English traditions on which it had been founded.

The Impact of War

Perhaps no single event in the evolution of Australian art and literature has been as

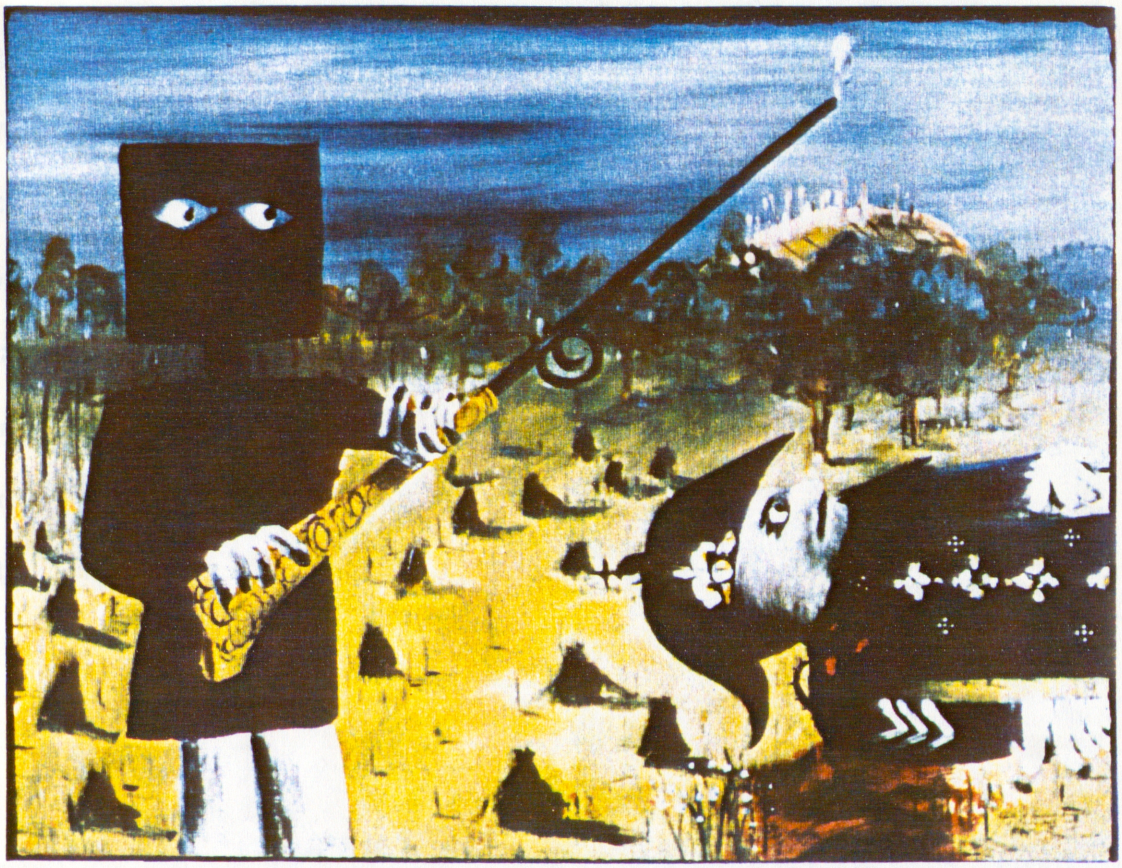

Fig. 5.1. Sidney Nolan, Death of Sergeant Kennedy, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1947. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

underrated as that of World War Two and its impact on the national psyche. [5] While the work of Australian war artists and the influence of visiting GI poets such as Karl Shapiro and Harry Roskolenko have been acknowledged in recent years, the broader effects of war on non-official imagery and, in particular, on the literature of the period have been largely ignored. Unlike other nations caught up in the fracas which enflamed the northern hemisphere during the thirties and forties, Australia produced many of its most remarkable artistic and literary works - and moments - during the war years. The geography which had conspired to separate the Antipodean nation from its European roots became its physical protector (notwithstanding the terrible sense of national suspense produced by the Japanese presence in the South Pacific) and left poets and painters free to record the passions, convictions and terrors of the era with an unselfconscious abandon - and urgency - unprecedented in Australian art and literature.

Despite Judith Wright's assertion that "there was on the whole, very little sign that the war with its world-wide misery had made much impression" on Australian poets, the imminent outbreak of hostilities on a scale not seen since 1918 played an enormous role in shaping their work. [6] While it is true that war as a specific subject did not figure largely in poems of the period, the certainty of some dark force encroaching on their once-innocent world is unmistakable in the work of poets from Kenneth Slessor to Max

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[5] In a 1987 interview, Judith Wright contended that war had been largely ignored as a decisive influence on Australian literature. According to Wright, its impact was profound, creating an atmosphere of darkness and anxiety in which all poets, regardless of their outlook or political beliefs, were compelled to work. Judith Wright. Videorecording. Interviewed by James Murdoch. (Sydney: Quest Films for the Australia Council, 1987).

[6] Judith Wright, "Australian Poetry Since 1941" Southerly 31.1 (1971): 21.

Harris. Some proof of the war's impact on the direction which poetry took at this time is demonstrated by a glance at the work of three poets who barely knew each other and who were virtual strangers in terms of their subject matter and poetic styles. Kenneth Slessor, A. D. Hope and Judith Wright are arguably Australia's finest poetic talents. While the point may be debated vehemently by protesters armed with their own candidates for the title, it is nonetheless true that the works of these three poets have managed to weather both the vagaries of time and the "outrageous fortunes" of literary fads and fashion. Perhaps even more tellingly, each was among the first to break through the barriers of Australian provincialism and write poetry of international excellence - a poetry which, though undeniably Australian, had a universality which made it accessible to readers anywhere in the world.

None of these poets is generally regarded as a contemporary of the other. Yet each wrote some of his or her finest poetry in the few years preceding or following the outbreak of war in 1939. While war does not feature as a dominant theme in any of these works, the gathering storm clouds of international upheaval - and the atmosphere of unrest which they created - are an indisputable presence. Writing in 1938, A. D. Hope painted Australia in the very first lines of his famous poem as "A nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey/in the field uniform of modern wars" (1.1-2). While the poem deals specifically with national identity rather than war, it certainly espouses (if only by intimation) an awareness of the protective isolation which Australians hoped would keep them safe from foreign invasion during the coming decade. Slessor, more ominously, mourns Joe Lynch "between a round of bells/From the dark warship riding there below"

(4-5) in "Five Bells". It is particularly interesting that Slessor explores the mysteries of life and death between the round of bells which ends with his return to reality and his acceptance of the unfathomable power of time. Ironically, it is the warship which reminds him of death - and the warship which carries all the destruction of a force which is antithetical to the poet's creative one. Just a few years later, Judith Wright also expresses the fear and horror of the times in her poem, "The Company of Lovers", a celebration not only of love, but of the artist as an archetypal lover of all humankind:

> Grope in the night to find me and embrace,
> for the dark preludes of the drums begin,
> and round us, round the company of lovers,
> Death draws his cordons in. (13-16)

That war could press so darkly around each of these poets in exploring apparently unrelated subjects, is some indication of the storm cloud power which the threat of world hostilities had over the Australian imagination during these years - and the influence which international pressures were beginning to have on the national psyche. While there is no doubt that long years of insularity had contributed to a growing sense of restlessness among young artists, it is also possible that the sense of urgency and intolerable pressure created by war contributed to the bursts of activity and achievement which helped alter the landscape of Australian art and literature in the years immediately preceding, and during, the fifth decade of the century.

Unlike the Melbourne art scene which was, in the main, consciously and explosively political, Sydney poetry circles were distinguished only by quiet bursts of achievement from individuals working largely in isolation. As Judith Wright notes, it was more the war itself than a feeling of brotherhood and commonality among poets which altered local perceptions of Australian poetry. Referring to the world's - and the nation's - implicit acceptance of its own provinciality before 1940, Judith Wright remarks that it was "World War II which changed all the balances and brought us out of complete insignificance into mere marginality, as far as the rest of the world is concerned":

> We had pretty well learnt not to think ourselves capable of much in the way of poetry or literature; the few English professors who came here made that clear enough, and the few writers who ventured overseas either never came back (like W. J. Turner) or came back with a few very modest successes (like Lawson and the Palmers); this was accepted as about as far as we could hope to go, sub-provincial as we were. We were of no interest. Then came the Japanese war, the fall of Singapore, the unbelievable failure of the British Navy, and finally Pearl Harbour and the invasion of New Guinea. Our world fell about our ears. [7]

It was not merely the threat of war which changed Australian self-perceptions, but a sudden, almost shocking shift, in the way the nation viewed its relationship with the rest

[7] Wright, "Australian Poetry" 19.

of the world. As Wright points out, Britain seemed to have failed its favourite child by allowing the Japanese conquest of South-East Asia - a tragedy which seriously challenged Australia's unquestioning faith in the motherland. Britain's replacement by US military forces as a dominating presence in Australia during the war was no less an assault on our provincial sense of identity. According to Wright - and others - the "surprising and flattering" interest which American poets and writers such as Karl Shapiro and Harry Roskolenko showed in Australian culture was crucial in the development of our artistic fraternity's budding self-esteem. The Americans, she says,

> bought up our small editions of locally-printed novels and poetry, apparently not just as native curios but out of sincere desire to know what we were doing. This kind of treatment was very surprising, but it was one of several factors that set us on a sudden course of producing more poetry and more prose than we ever had done. Our few publishing firms struck it rich; even writers did, in the form of self-confidence if not in money. We remained insular and local-colourish (our US cousins seemed to like it that way), but we felt part of something. We turned towards the Pacific, not the Indian Ocean. [8]

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[8] Wright, "Australian Poetry" 19-20. One of those other "several" factors which contributed to the flurry of Australian publishing activity during the 1940s was the wartime ban on book imports. The public demand for locally produced works of fiction and poetry suddenly increased with the result that the war years proved to be a boom period for firms such as Angus & Robertson and Ure Smith. The publishing roll begun in 1938 during the Sesquicentury of Australian settlement with the appearance of works by well-known local poets such as Slessor, FitzGerald, Ingamells, Shaw Neilson and McCrae continued, surprisingly enough, until the end of the war. As Judith Wright notes, 54 books were published in Australia during 1944 "in spite of wartime" and, of these, an impressive 26 were works of poetry. Another, by Douglas Stewart,

While nerve-racking and in many ways demoralising, war had the effect of shaking the nation - at least briefly - out of its destructive dream of peace. As Manning Clark notes, "the mood of Australians changed" during the 1940s "from complacency to anxiety and, in some cases, panic". [9] In this case, however, panic was the perfect tonic for a creative elite which had been ailing from the ill-effects of isolation, forcing its younger members to look beyond the stultifying complacency of the suburbia they despised to a world enflamed with change. Spurred by these upheavals, Australian painting of the 1940s progressed at an astonishing rate. By 1945, local painters had dealt successfully with surrealism, social realism, expressionism and abstraction, achieving more in the six years since the outbreak of war to develop a distinctive national style than the two generations preceding them. Distance, inexperience and a general brashness on the part of Melbourne painters meant that these achievements were often rudimentary. But as Robert Hughes observes, "they helped jolt Australian painting from its warm pastoral complacency", pointing the way for future generations of artists who drew on the visual vernacular they had created. [10] As Hughes concedes, "nearly every painting that was produced by significant figurative artists in Melbourne during the fifties - Charles Blackman, for instance - bears traces of its origin in the 'Angry Decade' ". [11]

Much has been written of the negative effects of war on the creative imagination -

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was the popular verse drama, Ned Kelly.

[9] Manning Clark, A Short History of Australia (1963; Rev. ed. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin 1986) 211.

[10] Hughes 138.

[11] Hughes 138.

less, however, has been said of the masterpieces it has produced (given the right conditions). Goya's eyewitness accounts of the Spanish wars and Picasso's anguished commentary on the fight against Franco's fascism are just two examples of visual artists recording the destruction of man by man - and, even more importantly, the horror and fear it produces. In this sense, Albert Tucker's harrowing depictions of humankind's brutality in works such as Psycho (fig. 5.2) and The Possessed (fig. 5.3) have as much to say about the tortured spiritual state of the artist himself as those who have been physically and mentally broken by first-hand experience of war. Tucker's maturing talent notwithstanding, both these paintings have an intensity which is somehow lacking in his pre-war works - and in those of Sidney Nolan whose Head of A Soldier (fig. 5.4) betrays a similar sense of inner turmoil. Interestingly, this new passion and feeling of bottled hysteria in the works of painters from the period is the product not only of a direct knowledge of war, but of the atmosphere of anxiety it creates. Works such as Joy Hester's Screaming Man (fig. 5.5) and Tucker's Victory Girls (fig. 5.6) show that war was present as a real and terrifying tension in the lives of ordinary Australians and, in a more direct sense, as a threatening physical reality in the shape of visiting American GIs.

Importantly, horror took on a political mantle at this time. During the 1920s, isolationism as a principle had thrown a protective blanket across Australian society - a society already reclining comfortably on the cushions of its own provincialism. While contemptuous of Australian complacency and cultural emptiness, artists such as Lindsay had been as violently opposed to the decadent menace of Lawrence and Joyce as they were to the weary sentiments of the still-popular bush ballads. Vision, the most



Fig. 5.2. Albert Tucker, Psycho, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1942. Page 84 of Albert Tucker. By James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982.



Fig. 5.3. Albert Tucker, The Possessed, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1942. Page 84 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.



Fig. 5.4. Sidney Nolan, Head of Soldier, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1942. Page 46 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.



Fig. 5.5. Joy Hester, Screaming Man, Albert Tucker, Melbourne. 1945. Plate 36 of Joy Hester.



Fig. 5.6. Albert Tucker, Victory Girls, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. Page 91 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

progressive and perhaps even intellectual journal of the day, rose up to rail feverishly against the evils of foreign modernism which threatened to destroy the golden idyll of the old traditions. Angry Penguins (fig. 5.7), on the other hand, was anxious to stop another kind of rot - that induced by isolation from the wave of change which threatened to sweep away the debris of outworn literary and artistic ideals in the northern hemisphere. The journal was not, however, as slavish in its adoration of the international avant garde as its reputation has suggested. Like Vision and the Jindyworobaks, Angry Penguins was eager to develop a unique Australian interpretation of current changes and events - but one which, unlike its predecessors, would give the national art and literature a well deserved place in the world league. Interestingly, these movements were almost logical in their progression, moving as they did through the three steps necessary for an unselfconscious national art and literature: a sensitivity to tradition, an awareness of identity and an acceptance of international change.

Internationalism and modernism thus became the bywords for a group of artists and writers who believed that cultural and geographic isolation was stifling Australia's progress in the arts. Just as Vision had gained the support of poets who believed a certain degree of isolation could protect a culture in danger of corruption from the crudities of modernism, so Angry Penguins sought the sophistication of overseas trends and techniques in defence of an art and literature assailed by the crudities of provincialism and outdated national ideals. Springing as it did from the upheaval of the Second World War, the journal not only accepted change as inevitable, but welcomed it with open arms. Eager to denounce those philistines among local artists and writers who refused to



Fig. 5.7. Sidney Nolan, Cover for Angry Penguins. Autumn, 1944.

acknowledge the validity of such progressive developments as abstraction in art or surrealism in poetry, Angry Penguins embraced a range of radical political views, psychology, art and philosophy with a confident disregard for tradition which was nothing short of astonishing in a nation still given to the worship of Lamberts, Streetons and Lindsays.

There is an irresistible kind of symmetry, not to mention irony, in the appearance of Angry Penguins just two decades after the demise of Vision. [12] Max Harris's unbridled enthusiasm for modern expressions of art and literature smacked of the same youthful chauvinism which characterised Jack Lindsay's editorial calls for an Australian renaissance in 1923. Both magazines discussed poetry and painting with equal vehemence and were significant importers of overseas trends and ideas - Vision in its condemnation of contemporary international movements and Angry Penguins in its support. Each reflected the unthinking youth and reckless energy of its contributors and each provided the right kind of incubatory environment for an impressive range of budding Australian talents. While Vision published early poems by Slessor and FitzGerald, Angry Penguins showcased the work of a variety of unknown painters from Albert Tucker and Noel

[12] While Norman Lindsay is certainly a unique figure in the short Australian history of interchange between the arts (a fact borne out by the absence of a comparable poetic giant in the annals of local painting), a later contender for the role could be the young Max Harris. Like the older man, Harris had an aura of infamy - the former through charges of moral decadence and the latter through accusations of literary decadence in his editorship of Angry Penguins. As Lindsay had with Vision more than 20 years earlier, Harris gave the journal both its distinctive title and its radical brand of literary and artistic philosophy. The support of John Reed as patron, critic and financial advisor notwithstanding, Harris provided Angry Penguins with the same kind of inflammable energy and contempt for convention which had once sustained Lindsay's Vision (and even played a pivotal role in the conception of Nolan's Ned Kelly series).

Counihan to Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan.

Angry Penguins, however, was not only born into, but born *of*, one of the most intensely political decades in Australia's history. For this reason, the poetry and painting which co-existed happily on its pages was created not only in a spirit of comraderie and co-operation, but in conscious defiance of a set of values which 'modern' poets and painters believed was preventing Australia's progress in the arts. Critically, these values were seen as being inextricably linked with the social, political and even moral attitudes of the day: for all the Penguins, art was not produced in isolation from the life it reflected - it was life itself and, as such, could not be separated from the forces that gave it shape. It was in such a framework that poetry and painting inter-acted to produce Australia's first truly modern paintings.

This willingness to stretch the accepted limits of what was considered "good" art in Australia encouraged poets and painters to draw together in defence not only of a new style but of new ideas. Spurred by the frustrating delay in the arrival of a fully-fledged Australian modernism - and given further impetus by the horrors of war - each member of the Angry Penguins group was distinguished by his or her impassioned belief in the need for change. While some members of the group have since argued that they were merely detached observers of each other's genius and talent, they nevertheless were united in their views of what constituted the creative process and, whether in quest of inspiration or technical expertise, eagerly transgressed the boundaries of their chosen art.

It seems strange, perhaps, that the baton of inter-artistic experiment should be passed from Kenneth Slessor, a Sydney-based poet with strong traditional roots, to an avant garde group of Melbourne painters who knew little or nothing about his achievements. [13] As modernism and internationalism crept into the culture after 1930, however, fraternisation between the arts became less the domain of friendship and more a by-product of the search for new and invigorating forms of expressions. What made such experiments possible on a grander scale in the 1940s was not just the advent of war, but Australia's powerful new political allegiance with the United States. War forced Australian artists to rely on their own resources while making them acutely aware of the tide and pull of international events in which they were inevitably caught, giving painting an unprecedented impetus. Closely aligned with the jolting fear and alienation produced by war was the instinctive realisation that Australia needed to develop its own visual imagery - an awareness made possible by the first tentative loosenings of the bonds with British tradition.

Poetry, Painting and Politics

The agitation produced by world hostilities not only heightened political

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[13] Apart from their respective outbursts of creative furore, Australian poetry and painting responded very differently to the pressures created by war. It is difficult to say why Melbourne and Sydney should have split their sympathies and allegiances at this time - except to note that Sydney has always had a stronger academic tradition than Melbourne. Given this tendency it is not, perhaps, surprising that painting in Melbourne was more experimental (if less technically perfect) than that produced by its more northern counterpart. What is especially interesting, however, is that The Darkening Ecliptic, the notorious cycle of poems written as a hoax by James McAuley and Harold Stewart under the psuedonym of Ern Malley, were, in fact, the work of Sydney-based poets.

sensitivities in Australia, but polarised camps of fascists, liberals, socialists and radicals under banners of "good" and "evil", "old" and "new", "right" and "left", "individual liberty" and "common good". The politics - and the art - of the forties became increasingly divided between the pro-English, conservative academicism of staunch traditionalists such as Robert Menzies and Lionel Lindsay, and the avant garde anti-fascism of pro-communist groups such as the Contemporary Art Society (CAS).

Perhaps no single individual has done more to further the cause of modern art while attempting to destroy it than Robert Menzies. Alarmed by the rapidity with which modernism was emerging as a new force in painting, Menzies proposed the establishment of a Government-sanctioned Academy of Art in 1939 to preserve the integrity of aesthetic traditions founded more than 50 years before by the Heidelberg painters. Outraged by the prospect of political intervention in the evolution of Australian art, a group of mainly Melbourne-based "modernists" including George Bell, Adrian Lawlor and John Reed formed the CAS in specific opposition to the increasingly conservative stance taken by "the establishment". The Society was torn by conflict virtually from its inception - not the least of its battles being the psychologically bloody struggle for control between its more moderate elements and the communist sympathisers who formed the bulk of its ranks. Nevertheless, the story of the CAS's rise neatly parallels the development of a truly modern Australian art - one whose fires were fanned by the ruling party's strident opposition to its very existence. [14]

[14] For a detailed account of the storms which rocked the CAS see Haese.

The roots of Menzies' fateful proposal to direct public taste via a government-sanctioned academy of art go to the heart of Australia's provincial insecurities about its national identity. Not only did the country's leader devote all his available resources to the defence of an order which, as Manning Clark says, was doomed ultimately to decay, but to a set of values which he saw as being inseparably British. [15] As Clark contends in A Short History of Australia, "he believed passionately that ... British institutions and the British way of life were synonomous with civilisation. All who did not share this view were the deluded victims of a superstitious barbarism". [16] Menzies' leadership of the conservative vanguard and its increasingly hysterical rejection of communism also parallels the rise of fascism in Europe during the thirties and forties - a factor which was instrumental in the formation of the CAS. Not surprisingly, many artists and writers, (particularly in Melbourne) were members of the Communist Party, both in protest against the aesthetic and social status quo which reigned at home and the repressive regimes led by Hitler, Franco and Mussolini in Europe. With the arrival of refugee artists such as Bergner, Vassilief and others from Europe in the 1930s, the two elements became inextricably linked in the minds of pro-communist sympathisers.

One of the most important outcomes of the association with communism was the tendency for artists and writers to draw together in self-supporting groups - usually against the common enemy of philistinism and outworn ideals. Fascism, censorship and academic painting became synonomous with right-wing politics during the 1940s - an

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[15] Clark 207.

[16] Clark 207.

association which made communism seem an inevitable choice for many modern artists. Commitment to a lofty artistic ideal, however, rather than inequalities of the kind which the Bolsheviks attempted to redress in 1917, was the driving force behind their politics. For the Angry Penguins in particular, fascism as a political concept represented false authority and the deprivation of ideas. In this sense, communism was simply its antidote. [17] As Janine Burke notes, the protection and promotion of creative ideals remained the principal impetus behind the formation of distinctive groups of writers and artists:

> Much of the cultural work of the 1940s was interconnected with and dependent on the network of friendship, fine, complex and highly wrought, that linked individuals, one to another ..... In Melbourne at this time there were a number of alternately harmonious and warring factions and groups that sometimes overlapped, were sometimes ignorant of each other and at other times uninterested in one another's activities. But the zeitgeist of the group ... could be generally described as committed, an abused word but one that still implies an attitude of dynamic involvement underpinned by political belief. [18]

Although formed in response to a time spirit which demanded commitment of a political, familial or artistic nature, these inter-connecting groups seem, on the surface of

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[17] This point is supported by the group's collective refusal to toe the CAS hardline in 1943 - an action which split the society in two. See Haese, Rebels and Precursors.

[18] Burke 14.

it, to be oddly unrelated. Their nuclei included John and Sunday Reed's farm at Heidelberg, the Angry Penguins magazine, the CAS, George Bell's painting school, the Boyd family and Gino Nibbi's bookshop in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. These groups had sub-sets of their own and were as much the product of charismatic personalities such as Sunday Reed and Max Harris (or accidents of birth and ancestry in the case of the Boyds) as the political, social and artistic struggle which gave them shape. What is important, however, is that each group was engaged (with varying degrees of awareness) in a battle between tradition and change being waged at all levels of Australian life. Even more importantly, this battle encouraged interaction between poets and painters in ways previously unexplored by local art and literature. It was "a time", as Richard Haese says,

> when artists refused to see themselves or be seen by their literary friends as painters in a narrow sense. They could be and were both poets and painters, social critics and aestheticians, ideologues and craftsmen, literary editors and art activists - the old categories were irrelevant. [19]

The necessity of the collaboration between Australian poets and painters made such an ideology inevitable. But while Sidney Nolan's portrait of Max Harris (fig. 5.8) or Albert Tucker's brooding likeness of Adrian Lawlor were the natural result of friendships springing from these groups, it is in the struggle to express an inner world of the

[19] Haese 5.



Fig. 5.8. Sidney Nolan, Max Harris. From Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends. By Jane Clark. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

imagination that the influence of literature, and poetry in particular, had it greatest impact. As we shall see, the poetic impulse in painting - an impulse fostered principally by the politics of the times - produced an art which would help change the vocabulary of the national culture, dragging it out of the nineteenth, and into the twentieth, centuries. Paradoxically, it would also contribute to a dispute which altered the course of Australian literature, bending it away from the experimental and back towards a conservatism more in keeping with the reactionary mood of the post-war world and the strong English tradition on which it was founded.

Creation in Isolation

One of the most important by-products of the quest for international expressions in art and literature - and, paradoxically, the need created by war to internalise artistic expression - was the development of a style of Australian painting which was capable of appealing to "the heart as well as the eye". [20] With the long, slow advent of modernism in the wake of World War One, Australian painters had begun the painful transition away from a purely representational art to one which better expressed the uncertainty and fractured psychology of the times. Reproductions of works by contemporary giants such as Picasso and Dali had an undeniable influence in bringing about this change - it was, however, the influence of literature which played a special role in the development of the Melbourne school of painting during the 1940s.

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[20] John Christian, introduction to Symbolists and Decadents (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977) n.pag.

Importantly, war helped foster an introspection and resourcefulness which not only heightened friendships between poets and painters, but forced them to borrow more deeply and directly from each other's work. Painters turned to whatever unbanned books they could find, while pro-modernist poets in search of the tantalisingly distant international avant garde were astonished to find a virulent and uniquely Australian version flourishing on the doorstep of their own art world. The double dose of isolation administered by war and geography also fostered a tendency to explore the inner world of feelings and ideas - even if they were ultimately expressed in poems or paintings about the external world of actions. Poets and painters became their own seething volcanoes of creativity, giving art and literature a fiery and unpredictable impetus during the 1940s - one which, as Albert Tucker acknowledges, was crucial in producing an Australian painting of unprecedented individuality:

> We were all frustrated. I know now it was a good thing and one of the reasons such a body of work was produced was that we could not escape from the situation we were in and were forced back on ourselves. This was the whole basis of our work. If we could have got out, believe me, we would have. The wish was quite wrong of course, because we were getting our noses rubbed in our own problems and forced to face them which was the best thing for us - a well-disguised blessing because we fed on ourselves. [21]

[21] Quoted in Bonham and Mollison 27.

Poetry and painting (in Melbourne especially) turned increasingly inward in the search for new forms of inspiration - and for escape from the turmoil and ugliness of war. Expressionism, surrealism and abstraction all enjoyed a sudden burst of patronage from poets and painters who, while eager to copy the achievements of their counterparts overseas, were not necessarily conscious of the path their work was taking. While each of these stylistic movements enjoyed a brief hey-day during the 1940s, it was less the result of a deliberate attempt to establish them as identifiable aesthetic forces than a natural, even inevitable, impulse to explore more than the fabled, but tired, old themes of the bush. Painting in particular became literary not only in terms of its external sources, but in its desire to describe the world *inside.*

Despite the supernova of war-time publishing activity, Australian painters in Melbourne during the 1940s were openly ignorant of contemporary poetic achievements. With the advent of war and the intensification of Australia's separateness from the rest of the world, painters became more interested in non-local forms of modern literature. Desperate for cultural succour from overseas (despite the stringent censorship laws, books were more readily available than original examples of great modern masters like Picasso) painters such as Tucker and Nolan devoured Eliot, Rimbaud, Stein and Joyce with a passion which only extreme isolation and prolonged cultural starvation could foster. Literature, of course, did not undergo the same diminishment as painting during the process of reproduction - nor was it as expensive or as difficult to obtain. Given also that the Melbourne painters were looking for new depths of meaning in Australian painting and were eager to shun the empty vistas of the Heidelberg school, modern literature of

the kind propounded by Eliot and Hemingway provided the symbols, metaphors and urban imagery needed to explore the abstract new concerns of the twentieth century.

That these painters took their literary inspiration from overseas rather than from within their own culture is not surprising. Australian representatives of modernism possessed neither the requisite degree of radicalism for the sparking of artistic revolutions nor the bristling sense of newness needed to satisfy the local hunger for up-to-the-minute innovations in art and literature. Modernists such as Slessor and Wright worked largely within the tradition rather than against it - and the former certainly maintained his vocal intolerance towards all forms of abstraction in visual art. A telling indictment of the Melbourne group's obsession with the avant garde is their enthusiasm for Max Harris's disastrous novel, The Vegetative Eye, a work savaged with great ceremony by A. D. Hope, an arch enemy of modernism and friend of traditionalists, James McAuley and Harold Stewart.

No artistic tradition, however, had a more profound effect on the group of painters that gathered about the Angry Penguins journal than Symbolism of the kind propounded by the French poets, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. With its strong visual emphasis, its ease of accessibility (often via the State Library of Victoria) and its aura and romance of rebellion, symbolist poetry inspired Melbourne painters in a way that local poetry was powerless to equal. Feeling themselves to be in a parallel situation (both artistically and socially) to these nineteenth century rebels, painters such as Tucker, Nolan and Hester absorbed themselves in the colours, imagery and romance of a tradition which was worlds

away from the rigidity of Australia's often stifling anglophilia.

Given that Australian painters were searching for international and internalised forms of expression in Melbourne during the 1940s, symbolism was a style and philosophy particularly well-suited to their aims. Biting deep against the grain of conventional forms of literary and artistic representation, the movement had made itself felt only briefly in Australia in the shape of Christopher Brennan's Poems 1913. Brennan's solitary flirtation with symbolism failed to grip the Australian imagination in the early part of the century. By the 1940s, however, poets and painters were more than ready to explore the dark underside of their own imaginations - and express the rebellion which had been brewing in the Australian creative psyche for decades.

John Christian writes in his book, Symbolists and Decadents, that symbolism of the kind which flowered in France during the latter part of the nineteenth century was characterised not only by "the restless search for new modes of expression", but by a deep distaste for "scientific rationalism, and the materialism and smug moralism that flowed from it". [22] In this respect, symbolism as an alternative tradition provided an appropriate degree of rebellion for Melbourne painters of the 1940s who shared a greater affinity for French art and literature than for the British academicism which Menzies cherished. Chief among the style's distinguishing qualities is an interest in the interior world, in the expression of ideas (rather than things) and the desire to make pictures which, in the words of French painter, Puvis de Chavannes, are "not Nature, but parallel

[22] Christian.

to nature". [23] With its internal, often dream-like nature, symbolism also has a universal quality which travels better than either realism or naturalism. Appealing to the imagination rather than to the specifics of any one time or place, symbolism has none of the barriers imposed by strict academic painting. Perhaps its only taboo is reality in a representational sense. As Christian contends

> ... since art obeys only its own rules, it need not, indeed should not, reflect external reality. 'To *name* an object', Mallarmé declared, 'is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment to be found in the poem ... *suggestion*, that is the dream'. Hence his deliberate ambiguity, a quality which again is central to Symbolism in general. Symbolism can be, as it was for example, for Munch, a search for an image to embody a preconceived idea, but it is equally often an image to which we have to supply our own interpretation, and these images themselves often contain internal ambiguities, such as androgynous types or hybrids ... [24]

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[23] Quoted in Christian, who also writes

> The term symbolist and decadent art is virtually impossible to define, so different in temperament, scope and achievement were the artists concerned. The only real common denominator was an approach to subject matter, a belief that a picture is neither simply an arrangement of lines and colours, nor a transcript from nature, but that behind a picture lies another order of meaning.

[24] Christian. This kind of subtle ambiguity is especially evident in Nolan's Ned Kelly series with its child-like, androgynous figures floating in a kind of sexual nether-region in the picture plane and in Arthur Boyd's religious paintings from the period. (Nolan's picture, Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl from the Kelly series is particularly interesting in this context). Kelly's black-squared armour in the Kelly series and Tucker's lipless grin in Images of Modern Evil are also hybrids in the symbolist manner, acting as a visual metaphor for layers of meaning in the work.

Direct borrowings from literature - in particular, T. S. Eliot and Rimbaud - were also a natural product of the search for meaning, rather than mimicry, in painting. Even an artist with such a strong traditional streak as Arthur Boyd could profess his aim to put together a picture which might act in the way a novel would - that is, a picture with "a God's-eye view" of the world. [25] Deeply influenced by Brueghel's depiction of religious scenes in his own landscape or environment, Boyd set out in paintings such as The Mining Town (fig. 5.9) to emulate the sixteenth century artist's ability to range over the complexity of human experience within a single canvas. The Mining Town is also influenced by segments of Ulysses (a book much revered after its years of banning and scant availability in Australia) to the extent that the small central scene of the coffin falling out of the funeral car is directly lifted from Joyce. Boyd also recalls doing a series of "laughing heads" which were related to works by Dostoevsky, an author also admired for the strong psychological thrust of his writing. [26]

The tortured lives led by the Symbolist poets elicited a special measure of sympathy from the Penguins. The loneliness which many Melbourne painters felt during this period (prompting them to form supportive networks of friends) also gave them a strong sense of being at odds with the world around them and an almost heroic impulse to succeed in their efforts to transform Australian culture - despite the enormous opposition they faced. Such feelings, of course, made it possible for poets and painters alike to draw on the romantic tradition in Australian art and literature: themes of psychological turmoil

[25] Melbourne: The School of the Forties.

[26] Melbourne: the School of the Forties.



Fig. 5.9. Arthur Boyd, The Mining Town (Casting the Money Lenders from the Temple), Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1946-47. Page 23 of Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne in the 1940s. Exhibition Catalogue. London: Hayward Galleries, 1988.

and social decay were soon complemented by a resurgent interest in the lone figures of history who fought physical, rather than ideological, battles against the harsh Australian bush or the even harsher provincial society that struggled to repress them. Undoubtedly, the Ern Malley affair and its ensuing dramas also contributed to this atmosphere of intense alienation. [27] Commenting on the resurgence of "explorer-hero" themes in the 1940s, Judith Wright makes the observation that

> Nearly all the poetry written during these years retained the Romantic-Symbolist approach; but instead of taking the path of the European "inner exploration", it was turned outward to explore the possibilities of the country itself and Australian history and character. Its boundaries were still Australian, its references limited; action, not contemplation, was its note, except in a few instances. [28]

Symbolism, of course, was tailor-made for the Australian need to undertake the heroic psychological journey - and to develop a visual language expressive of the country's uniqueness. With its gentleness, order and misty horizons, the English painting tradition was poorly suited to the colour, starkness and violent beauty of the bush. The surreal quality of the landscape captured by Nolan in Ned Kelly was made possible by the symbolist obsession with what the mind, rather than the eye, can see. In order to break

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[27] Max Harris was brought before the South Australian courts on obscenity charges arising from the publication of The Darkening Ecliptic.

[28] Wright, "Australian Poetry" 21.

down academic preconceptions of what the Australian landscape looked like, painters such as Nolan were forced to internalise their response, to create an original visual language capable of accommodating the imaginative as well as the real. In the same way, Heidelberg painters of the 1890s turned to the revolutionary techniques of French Impressionism to capture the light and beauty of a landscape not easily described or explained by conventional visual vocabularies.

Surrealism was another, more "mainstream", literary movement which engaged the Penguins' imagination during the 1940s. Interestingly, John Christian sees surrealism as an usurper of the symbolist tradition, one which extends a branch of western tradition that has been particularly important in the development of Australian painting. As Christian implies, the link between the two makes it possible to trace a distinctly different sequence of movements toward modernism than is generally accepted by art historians:

> Posterity has not been kind to the Symbolists, largely because the main tendency of modern art has seemed to be towards abstraction and against any form of literary allusion. The Surrealists are the chief exception, and it is significant that they admired the Symbolists. However, art-historians have recently begun to see in Symbolism an 'alternative tradition' to the classic sequence, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Abstraction, and there is much to support this view. Not only did so many 'modern' artists have roots in Symbolism. Symbolism's rejection of naturalism and conception of art as a world *parallel* to the real one

anticipated the basic principles of Abstraction. [29]

While surrealism as a strong and distinctive movement failed to take hold of Australian art at this time - despite the best efforts of the Angry Penguins journal - there is no doubt that many of its features were absorbed by the Melbourne group. One of the most pronounced characteristics of surrealism is the assumption that visual images are symbols which can be read by the unconscious mind and that the arts are not just free to interact, but will do so of their own accord, particularly if left to the powerful promptings of the collective unconsciousness. Ironically, it was this very breakthrough in Australian painting which proved such a disaster for Australian poetry - not only in terms of the technical difficulties which second-rate exponents of the genre such as Max Harris encountered, but in carving out a future mainstream literature in which open experimentation and the innovations which accompany it, go hand in hand.

The Assault on Modernity

Because Australian poetry and painting were assailed by the same forces at roughly similar stages in their development, their responses to the divergent pulls of tradition and experiment were, initially, not unalike. What is interesting, however, is that, after 1948, the two arts tended in a broad sense to go their own separate ways. While literature became increasingly academic and conservative, reaching back into those long-avoided coffers of tradition, painting became more and more expressionistic - and its chief exponents more obviously "modern" and avant garde. Only in the 1960s was the

[29] Christian.

imbalance partly redressed, with the advent of an experimental American influence on local poetry and prose.

It would be tempting to trace this fracture of attitudes between poetry and painting to the two court cases which jostled with the war for attention on the front pages of the newspapers in 1944. The William Dobell and Ern Malley affairs encapsulated not only the insecurity and uncertainty plaguing public attitudes at that time, but the attitudes of artists and writers as well. The fracture, however, is not purely the result of a war between tradition and experiment. Many such battles had been fought before in other cultures without such decisive results. The age-old war between tradition and change became bloodier, however, in a country which felt it had barely grasped hold of its slender past before the dragon of a violent and incomprehensible future arrived to menace it. Tradition in Australia became important simply because there was less of it. Ironically, it was for the very same reason that change seemed such a desperate necessity.

What is fascinating about both cases, coming as they did at the end of a long period of contradictory impulses in art and literature (beginning with Lindsay's pro-artist, anti-modernist tome, Creative Effort and culminating in the avant garde extremism of the Angry Penguins) is that they summed up the age from which they had sprung. In both cases, the issues were confused, the purpose clouded - unless it was to find scapegoats for change - and the question of victory for either the traditionalists or the modernists an ultimately dubious one. William Dobell won his case against those disappointed Archibald Prize entrants who protested that his work was a caricature (fig 5.10). The modernists, of

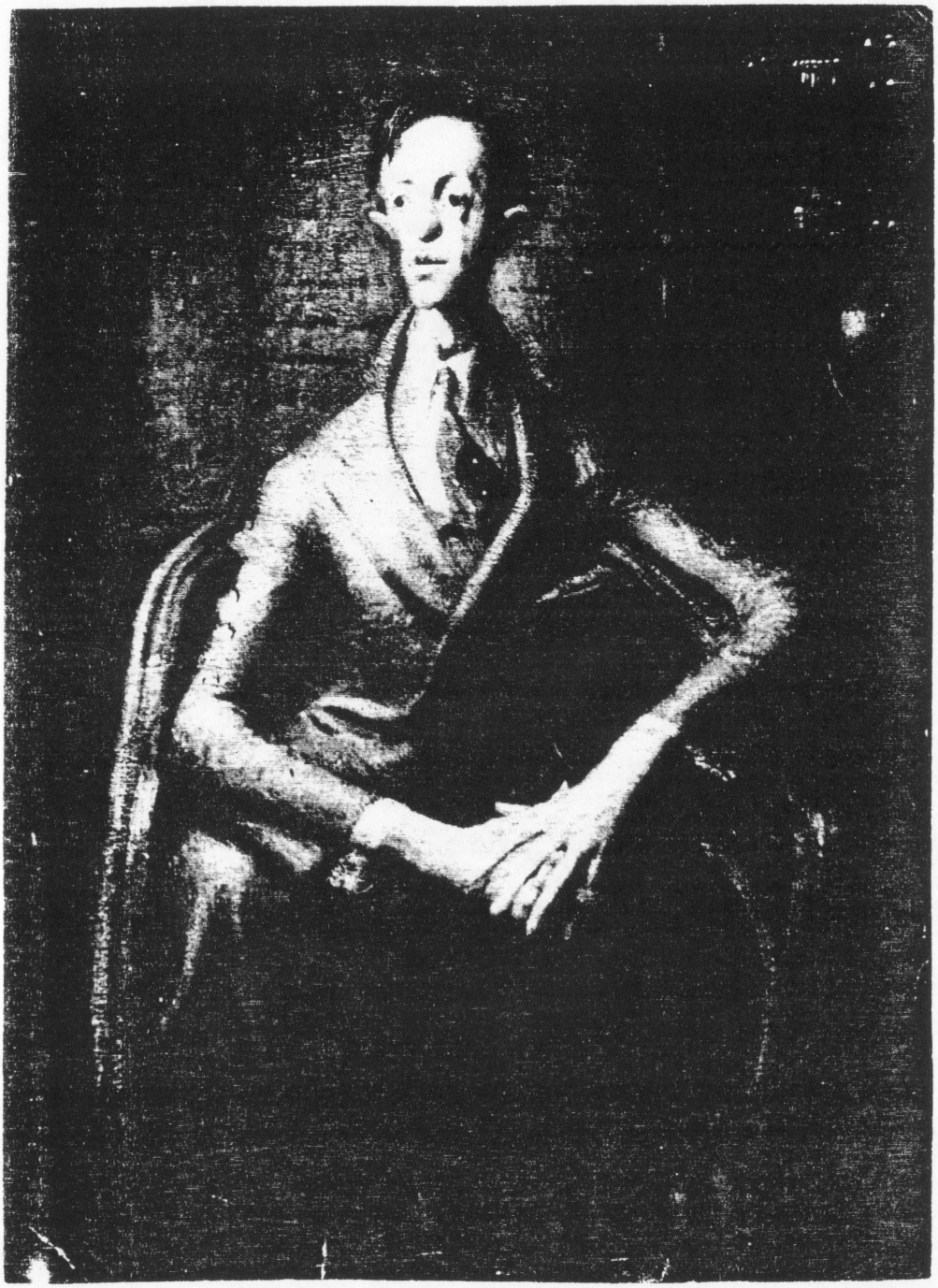

Fig. 5.10. William Dobell, Portrait of Joshua Smith, Private Collection. 1943. Plate 91 of Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788. By Bernard Smith. 1945. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988.

course, claimed their victory and Australian painting appeared to resume its sporadic pursuit of progression and experiment. Dobell, however, did not consider himself to be a modernist - nor was his work as radical as that of his Melbourne counterparts. While an infinitely superior technician to most of his fellow entrants, Dobell could, at best, be called an expressionist. If the artist had won the Archibald Prize for an *abstract* portrait (and it is extremely doubtful, given the notorious conservatism of the Trustees, that he could), a true victory for modern art might have been claimed - assuming, of course, that *he had still won the case.* It is a telling indictment of the times that a man who appeared to have bent the rules of portraiture just a little in favour of his own expressionistic style should have been tried before the court and the Australian public as a fully fledged modernist. If Dobell had lost, the case may well have been remembered as a trial by censorship rather than tradition.

The Ern Malley affair went closer to the heart of the issues surrounding tradition and experiment in Australia during the inter-war period. In their quest for change, the Penguins were largely contemptuous of the need for craftsmanship in art, preferring the avant garde values of spontaneity and automatic suggestion, and were irritatingly and raucously vocal in their determination to storm the bastille of Australian literary tradition. It was in painting that the group made its most worthwhile contribution to the arts - the locally produced "surrealist" poetry published in its otherwise high quality pages could at best be considered a poor second. While the magazine reproduced many fine contemporary works by poets such as Dylan Thomas, the obtrusive and often incoherent pieces produced by Max Harris and others were clearly not in this league.

Harris, of course, was very young and his work smacked of all the arrogance and inexperience common to poets of his age. His disrespect for tradition was equally symptomatic of his youth. But given that Harris was allowed to dominate the magazine - much in the way that Jack Lindsay had steered the course of Vision 20 years previously - it is not surprising that modernist poetry was left wide open to gleeful attack by conservatives such as McAuley and Stewart. Harris had committed the unforgivable - a sin neatly and purposely avoided by Slessor in the previous decade - by embracing modernism well outside the bounds of the tradition so beloved by anglophilic Australian literature. Both Slessor and Dobell were technical masters in their field and therefore unassailable. But Harris and many of those who contributed to the magazine were not, by any stretch of the imagination, craftsmen - even Sidney Nolan's draughtsmanship was, and still is, questionable. Nolan, however, found his own traditions in the myth of Ned Kelly and eventually succeeded in capturing the Australian imagination with his romantic interpretation of the landscape and his questing sense of newness. When combined with freshness of vision and a strong narrative structure, Nolan's artlessness became almost an accomplishment in itself.

What the Ern Malley affair demonstrates is the uneasiness with which a country of barely hatched traditions will greet the impulse to fly too soon into the storm clouds of experiment. Still struggling to find their own wings within the context of a widely accepted local tradition, many artists and writers felt that the Penguins were being too ambitious in their pursuit of overnight change in art and literature. In some cases, the Penguins were, of course, right. Painters such as Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan, Russell

Drysdale and Arthur Boyd went on to revolutionise Australian art. The often incomprehensible poems produced by its "surrealist" contributors were another matter altogether.

Just as Vision had clung a little too fervently to the disappearing coat-tails of European tradition, Angry Penguins ran blindly into a wall of experiment for experiment's sake. In their eagerness to rid Australian art and literature of the strictures imposed by anti-creative academic formalism, the Penguins failed to set high standards for their avant garde style of poetry - nor did they respect the discipline and craftsmanship necessary for the evolution of a truly progressive and lasting form of art. It was this unwillingness to stand on the building blocks of tradition which led ultimately to the journal's demise, giving hardline conservatives, McAuley and Stewart, the perfect ammunition for their infamous attack. As Ian Burns writes in The Necessity of Australian Art there was a good case supporting the anti-modernists during this period:

> Artists of the thirties and forties have been categorised as either modernist or traditionalist, or sometimes realist. While modernism has claimed for itself the embodiment of progress, one finds progressive attitudes as readily within the so-called traditional as within the modernist practices. In most accounts, much is made of the reactionary character of the traditional school, but little consideration has been given to the aspect of its 'anti-modernist' critique which frequently attacked the socially regressive features of modernism - a critique which modernism, in making its own

defence, ignored. [30]

Even so, there is little doubt that incompetence - even of the kind which Harris attempted to pass off as artistic ingenuity - was not the true focus of the hoaxers' rage. The youthful bravado and lack of expertise which stamped the Angry Penguins journal merely provided McAuley and Stewart with the excuse they needed to launch their damaging assault against modernism. As Humphrey McQueen argues

> If the hoaxers' target had been merely the pretensions of a twenty-two year old poetaster, the Malley affair would be neither unusual nor memorable. The significance lies elsewhere. Harris's arch vanities left a far more substantial target open to attack. That target was nothing less than the entirety of Modernism, both as a cultural form and as a social condition. 'Ern Malley' was intended to signal the end of Modernity. [31]

Ultimately, Angry Penguins proved too reckless in its eagerness to facilitate the downfall of outworn artistic and literary precepts. Such brashness augured well for a painting only newly formed from the impressionism of the Heidelberg school, but proved unsettling for a literature founded on centuries of English tradition. What the journal *did* succeed in doing, however, was in bringing together poets and painters in a spirit of

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[30] Ian Burn, et al., The Necessity of Australian Art (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988) 6.

[31] McQueen, The Black Swan of Trespass 89.

rebellion and experimentation which would help alter the course of Australian art and literature (admittedly in quite different ways) for generations to come.

6 Four Poet-Painters of the 1940s

Sidney Nolan

Sidney Nolan's original wish to be a poet is well-documented. "As late as 1939", writes Richard Haese, "he seems to have been undecided whether to be a painter or poet; in the end, he remained both." [1] Nolan's passion for poetry - and, in particular, for the works of the French symbolists, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud - had a profound effect on his maturing art. Rejecting all notions of tuition in painting, Nolan turned to literature in his quest for an excellence of ideas rather than technique, for an art dependent on personal interpretation rather than the mechanical imitation of nature. Importantly, Nolan's hero-worship of these romantic precursors of modernism fed his increasingly rebellious spirit, giving the young painter role models which inspired him in a way that slavish respect for the old masters could not. As Haese observes in Rebels and Precursors:

> There are ... many references in Nolan's art to the work of early European modernists, but Nolan's overriding aim was to be original in the sense of using the direct experience of the senses as the basis of art. It was this conscious desire, in emulation of the practice of Arthur Rimbaud in literature, that distinguished Nolan

[1] Haese 90.

from other contemporaries who accepted the need for apprenticeship, however self-directed. [2]

While Richard Haese has called Sidney Nolan a "completely inner-directed man", it would be truer to say that the painter was a disciple of the poetic impulse - one who was devoted to an art saturated in meaning rather than to facile displays of technical brilliance. [3] "Poetry" wrote Mallarmé, "endows our stay on earth with authenticity and constitutes the only spiritual task". [4] Less obsessed with *reflecting* life than with exploring the mind which beheld it, Nolan contended that "the basic need in a painting is to transmit emotion" and that it is an artist's entitlement to take "any steps in the dreamworld of art" to achieve that end. [5]

While Haese acknowledges the crucial role played by literature in providing Nolan with creative precedents, he draws tantalisingly short of exploring its significance as a substitute for technical knowledge in the developing painter's work. Virtually all Nolan's paintings hinge on an underlying structure of meaning which has less to do with the surface application of paint (in this case the quick-silver alchemy of ripolin enamel) than with what the marks on the canvas *signify*. Essentially, Nolan relied on the symbol to carry both the intellectual weight and the visual impact of his paintings. While an early

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[2] Haese 90.

[3] Haese 90.

[4] Quoted in Christian.

[5] Sidney Nolan, Melbourne: The School of the Forties.

work such as Head of Rimbaud (fig. 6.1) demonstrates the self-conscious nature of Nolan's youthful preoccupation with literary themes, the much later Ned Kelly series shows how deftly this foray into symbolism and abstraction had taught him to invest images with meaning. Much as Slessor had used art to test the limits of his own poetry and prepare it for the painterly fluidity of "Five Bells", Nolan was guided by literature in his quest for a painting capable of describing intuitive, rather than simply sensory, experience.

Somewhat significantly, both men discarded the influence of their creative mentors at the moment in which they reached the zenith of their powers as painter or poet - Slessor with "Five Bells" and Nolan with Ned Kelly. Yet each retained something of his former flirtation with the other's art. Slessor's "diamond quills and combs of light" metamorphosing into mackerel-backed memories recall not only the richness and rarity of the unreal splendours of Xanadu, but Lindsay's own fascination for mermaids and other mythical sea-creatures. In the same way, the symbol of the black square with its surreal and unifying presence in Ned Kelly grew inevitably from Rimbaud's own fascination with the visual motif in modern poetry. But while poetry and painting are present as subliminal languages in both Ned Kelly and "Five Bells", they do not dominate either work - nor is it likely that they formed part of a conscious preoccupation in the minds of their creators. Interestingly, each work marked a special epoch in the creative lives of these men: Slessor ceased writing poetry shortly after the publication of "Five Bells", while Nolan returned with seemingly diminished powers to the literary themes which had once inspired him.

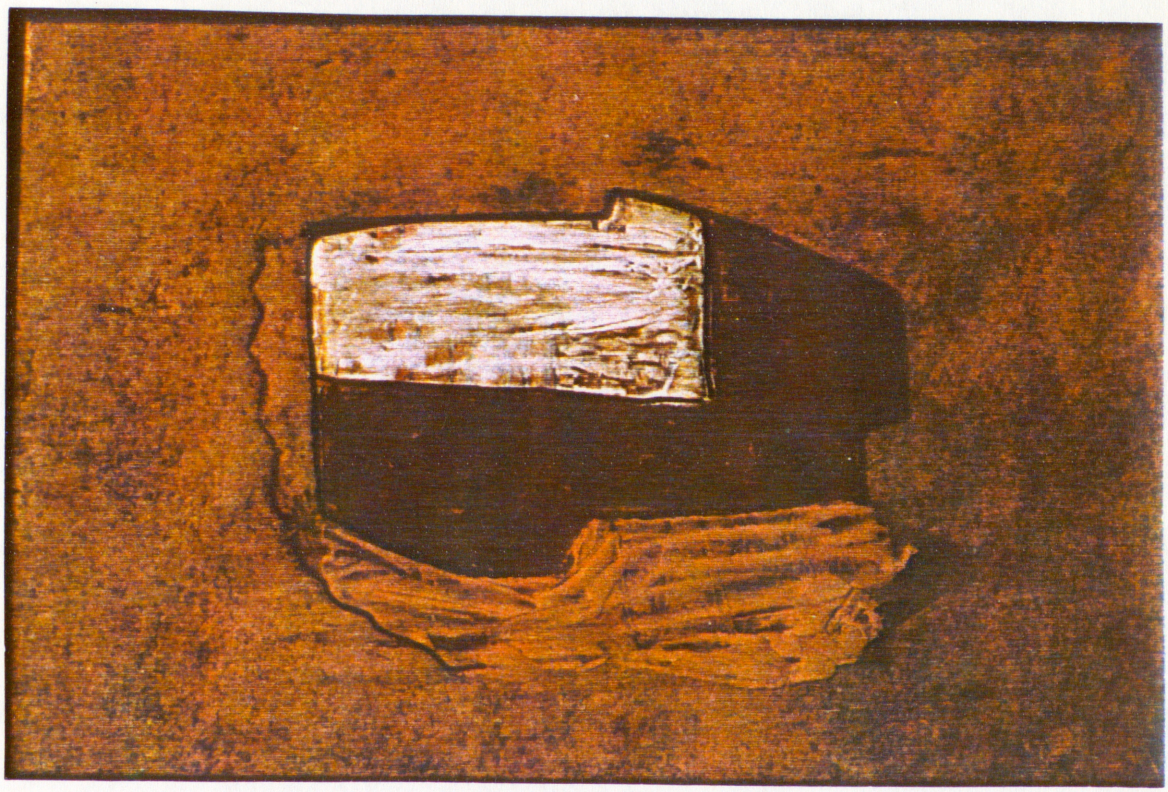

Fig. 6.1. Sidney Nolan, Head of Rimbaud, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1938-39. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Unlike Slessor, however, Nolan was "willing to sacrifice purposeful order and structure" in his work in favour of a startling kind of primitivism. [6] Indeed, it could be argued that without the poetic impulse or quest for deeper significance that unified his art, Nolan's paintings might well have ceased to exist - not only in critical, but in literal, terms as well. Devoid of the haunting symbol of the "slotted" black square, the impact of the painter's romantic portrayal of Ned Kelly on the Australian imagination would have been greatly dissipated. [7] Nor would the series have remained more than a naive interpretation of the Australian landscape. So overwhelming was the symbol's presence in these paintings, that the bushranger's abstracted armour came to represent all that was mysterious and unknowable not only about Kelly himself but the national psyche.

As Robert Hughes observes, the helmet acts as "a metaphysical radiator" in the same way that Albert Tucker's sinister red-crescent smile in Images of Modern Evil - completed just a few years before - encapsulates much that is visually, as well as intellectually, significant in the paintings. Despite the comparison, Hughes is nevertheless reluctant to draw too close an analogy between two of the most influential and important paintings series in the history of Australian art:

> It is a remote comparison, and not to be thought of in terms of cause and effect: but it indicates a common ground of symbolical

[6] Haese 184.

[7] Hughes 165.

technique, and a shared interest in iconographic form: an issue which had never arisen in Australian art before. [8]

Both artists testify that, while aware of each other's "talent and genius", they tended to shy away from direct borrowings or conscious mutual influence at this time - evidence which apparently supports Hughes's own coyness in probing the reasons for the unexplained resurgence in iconographical painting in Melbourne during the 1940s. [9] While he is correct, therefore, in saying that the two series should not be thought of in terms of cause and effect (ie one upon the other), he is wrong in choosing not to explore those "shared interests" in iconographic form which, for both painters, sprang primarily from an intimate interest in symbolist and modern poetry. Tucker was inspired by Baudelaire and, in particular, T. S. Eliot, while Nolan was drawn irresistibly to Rimbaud. Each of these poets was a pioneer or a master of the iconographic form in modern poetry and each had a profound effect on the development of Tucker and Nolan at a time when the influence of other arts on painting was taken almost totally for granted - at least within the Angry Penguins circle. As Arthur Boyd says of the Melbourne group, "we were all convinced that art was part of an integrated human enterprise which included

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[8] Hughes 165.

[9] In an interview recorded with James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham in 1982, Albert Tucker remarks

> Even though we worked closely together and were very aware of each other, none of us was at all influenced by the other in our work. We talked about techniques and materials. We were engrossed in our own lives and the overall general problems of the artist; but we didn't talk specifically about our personal problems to each other, or our personal painting motivations."

James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, Albert Tucker (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1982) 27.

literature and religion and philosophy". [10] To ignore this fact is to ignore much of the impetus behind the explosion of iconographical forms in Australian art during the 1940s.

Essentially, the helmet and the crescent motif spring from the same desire - that is, to invest an image with a universal form of language denied to purely representational art. While acknowledging the red-crescent's evolution from a source as inane as Adrian Lawlor's crooked smile, Albert Tucker believes the image emerged ultimately from a "deeper reality" - from the collective unconsciousness in which "grow all sorts of flora and fauna". [11] Nolan's motif is perhaps more localised, more intrinsically in tune with Australian myth: Kelly's helmet speaks coded volumes to an Australian audience about the mystery and tragic isolation of the bushranger - but it also conveys the romance and contradictions of the character with stark and poignant simplicity to an audience much broader than that of Nolan's own countrymen.

Significantly, the bold, dominating helmet acts as an important compositional device in Nolan's paintings. Kelly's square-headed, black-faced armour is the focus of virtually all the paintings in the series and, as a "visual metaphor" for the loneliness and mystery of the bushranger, is the exact point at which Nolan's poetic and painterly senses meet. [12] It is from this motif that we derive our visual understanding of the painting -

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[10] The School of the Forties.

[11] The School of the Forties.

[12] Quoted from a personal discussion with Professor Terry Smith, University of Sydney (August, 1990).

and from this motif that we draw our deeper knowledge of Kelly himself. Perhaps even more importantly, it is the presence of the "metaphysical radiator" which fills the gap left by Nolan's unrepentant disdain for feats of technical wizardry. As always with Nolan, it is the poetry of what he is *saying* with paint which dazzles, rather than his prowess with the brush. An indictment of Nolan's desire to shed the inhibitions of conventional technique is his preference for ripolin enamel - a medium which requires direct, spontaneous handling. It is almost as if Nolan feels he must forego the distractions of technical perfection in order to transmit his lightning flashes of poetic insight onto the canvas. In developing an art which springs so purely from the poetic impulse, Nolan discards many of the traditional visual indicators of reality.

The Influence of Poetic Technique

Many of Nolan's contemporaries attest to his impatience with the rigours and restraints imposed by conventional approaches to painting. Like Kelly and Rimbaud before him, Nolan chaffed at rules and regulations, refusing with characteristic larrikinism to explore any technique which restricted the natural flow of his own creative impulse. As John Sinclair, a fellow-student at the Melbourne National Art Gallery (and subject of the infamous Boy and the Moon painting) recalls, Nolan was "never a student in the ... sense of someone who learns an accepted craft and then uses the skill acquired for his own purposes". [13] Speaking of Nolan's short and seemingly unproductive stint at the Gallery School, Sinclair writes:

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[13] John Sinclair, "His Student Years" Art and Australia 5.2 (1967): 436.

> Even at this early stage he knew where he was going clearly enough to reject everything that was irrelevant or potentially dangerous to his own identity ... he did not even pretend to study in the approved manner and I still smile at the recollection of the pallid, misshapen drawing of a plaster foot that stood neglected on his easel for months. It was the only drawing he did under official guidance and it was awful. [14]

Nolan's interlude at the Gallery School proved fruitful for other reasons. While he had long been writing his own poems, the influence of specific poets had, as yet, made little impact on Nolan's artistic consciousness. According to Sinclair, Howard Matthews, a senior student, introduced the painter to the poetry of Verlaine and Rimbaud - an introduction which "amounted to a revelation". As a result, "Rimbaud's poetry became Nolan's artistic credo and [his] tissue-paper drawings became saturated with Rimbaudian imagery". [15] Nolan's 1939 discovery of the French Symbolists introduced poetic themes to his work which were to become an obsession not only in the build-up to Ned Kelly, but in the work of his later maturity. [16] So completely did Nolan absorb the spirit of the

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[14] Sinclair 436.

[15] Sinclair 436.

[16] George Johnston's recollection of the genesis of Nolan's Gallipoli series on the Greek island of Hydra during the winter of 1955-6 shows that poetry - and poetic interpretation - remained an important influence in Nolan's later work. Originally obsessed with Homer's Illiad, Graves's Greek Mythology and images of Troy, Nolan eventually wove these themes around Australia's own myths about the ancient Turkish coast:

> Alan Moorehead had been living on the neighbouring island ... writing his book, Gallipoli ... It affected me, and I gave it to Nolan to read. It was like unlocking a door. From then on, when the *retzina* circled and

rebellious poet that passages from Rimbaud's Les Illuminations read like poetic renditions of the paintings they at least partly inspired. With its barrenness, mystery and sense of interminable distances, the landscape of Ned Kelly (fig. 6.2) could be described (even by Kelly himself) as a lonely world in which:

> The paths are rough. The hillocks are covered with broom. The air is motionless. How far away the birds and the springs are! It can only be the end of the world, ahead. (II.v Les Illuminations)

Nolan's personal obsession with symbolist poetry, however, brought a great deal more to his work than Rimbaud-inspired imagery: despite the young painter's unwillingness to learn traditional methods of painting, he was surprisingly knowledgeable about poetic technique. Poet Barrie Reid was particularly struck by Nolan's fascination with poetry during his first meeting with the painter at Heide in 1947:

> wild winter buffeted at the shutters of the waterfront taverns, we would talk far into the small hours about this other myth of our own, so uniquely Australian and yet so close to that much more ancient myth of Homer's. Nolan's poetic imagination saw them as one, saw many things fused into a single poetic truth lying, as the true myth should, outside time.

Johnston also recalls the direct influence of poetry on other works:

> We corresponded intermittently but I did not see him for several years. He was back in London and a poem by an Australian had diverted him again, into exploration of another of the ancient myths, Leda and the Swan.

George Johnstone (sic), "Gallipoli Paintings" Art and Australia 5.2 (1967): 466-7.

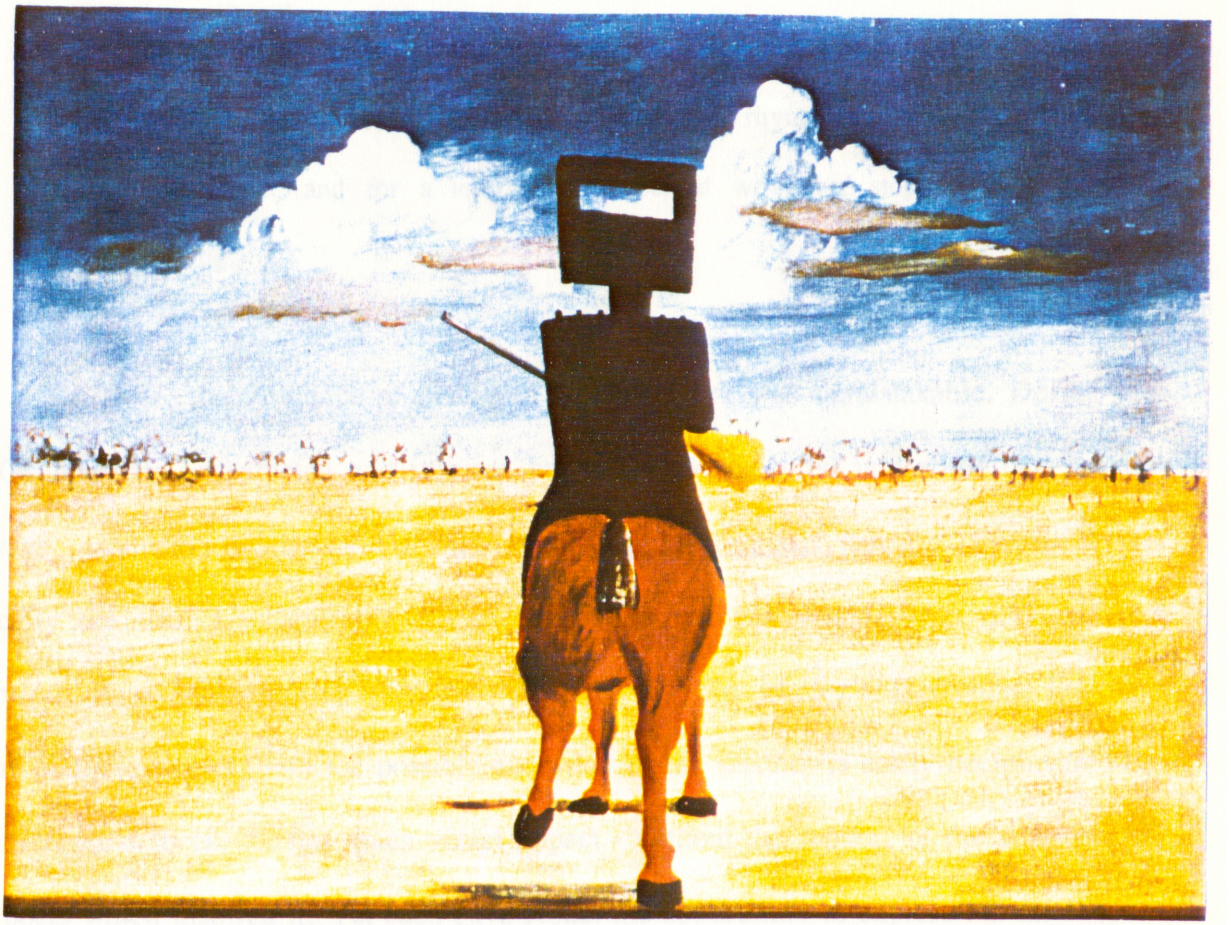

Fig. 6.2. Sidney Nolan, Ned Kelly, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1946-7. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

> I had arrived just as the Kellys were nearing completion; the large hardboard panels, the cardboard studies, the many drawings and watercolours, captured and controlled my eyes. For some time Nolan remained for me a reticent, quiet figure in the background of all this work. But as the days went on, the four of us walked over the paddocks, Nolan talked of poetry, of rhyme and image and metre, and for a long time it seemed we never stopped talking.[17]

By 1947, the influence of poetry in Nolan's work was unmistakable. During the 1940s, alternately distracted and inspired by it, he had detoured into some odd artistic byways, producing works as disparate in quality as Rimbaud Royalty (fig. 6.3), the lyrically beautiful Le Desespoir A Des Ailes (Despair has Wings) (fig. 6.4) and the notorious Sole Arabian Tree (fig. 6.5), inspired by Ern Malley's Darkening Ecliptic. None of these works (with the possible exception of the second) is easily decipherable on an intellectual level - or has much visual impact - without the support of the poetry or of the poets which inspired it. Yet each gave Nolan the opportunity to explore his fascination with the word-pictures, symbols and visual metaphors which fed his obsessive need to *explain,* rather than merely to *render,* in art.

At least one of these painting demonstrates the tremendous role which poetry played in enabling Nolan to explore visual landscapes of his own imagining. Inspired by

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[17] Barrie Reid, "Nolan in Queensland: some biographical notes on the 1947-8 paintings" Art and Australia 5.2 (1967): 447.

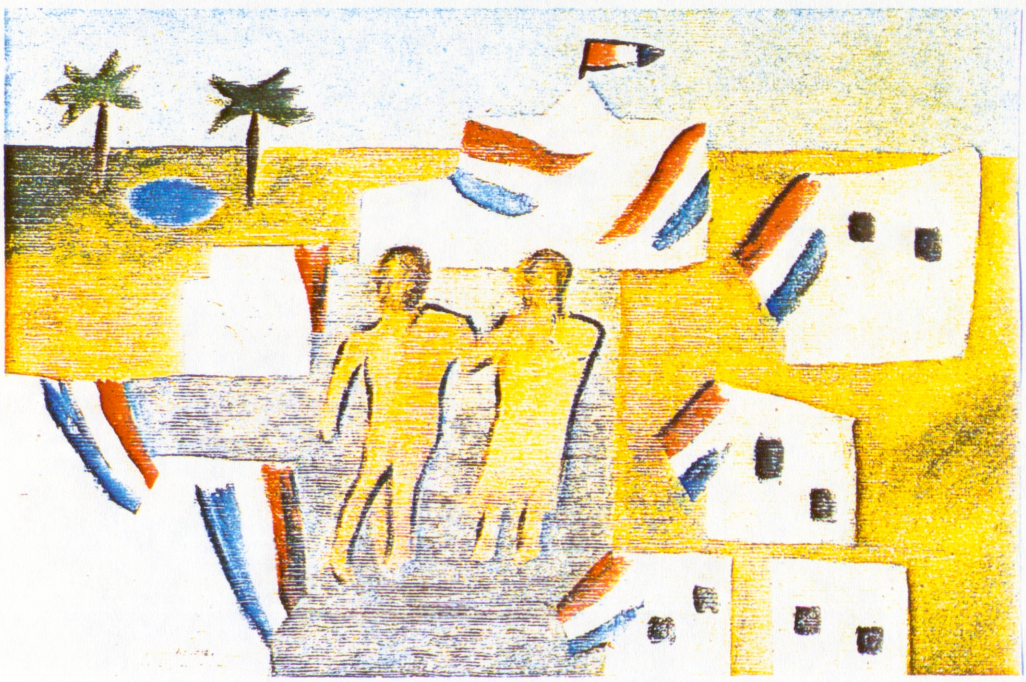

Fig. 6.3. Sidney Nolan, Rimbaud Royalty, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1942. Page 49 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.



Fig. 6.4. Sidney Nolan, Le Desespoir A Des Ailes (Despair Has Wings), Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1943. Page 55 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends. By Jane Clark. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1987.



Fig. 6.5. Sidney Nolan, The Sole Arabian Tree, private collection, Melbourne. 1943. Page 56 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

the work of the French neo-symbolist poet, Pierre Jean-Jouve, Le Desespoir a Des Ailes seems to anticipate the brilliant blue skyline and vast receding distances of Pretty Polly Mine (fig. 6.6), a work executed during the first peak of Nolan's maturity in 1948. Even the winged figure in the top right hand corner echoes Polly's own place in the later picture, while the strong vertical thrust of the half-blurred building and the compositional right-angle it creates is a strong antecedent of the architecture of the mine itself. It should be remembered also that the joke-bird in Pretty Polly Mine is a visual conceit playing both upon the mine's name and on traditional symbols of the outback. Even more importantly, while the former is a work of the lyrical imagination, the latter - at least partly - is based on an actual landscape. For the younger Nolan, poetry was vital not only to his sense of self-discovery as a painter but to the nurturing of those visions of the imaginative spaces in the Australian outback which were to give his paintings their special identity.

The Poet as Hero

Other works from this period reveal Nolan's obsessive interest not only in the texts of the poems which inspired him, but in their creators. According to Jane Clark, Head of Rimbaud "caused a minor storm at the Contemporary Art Society's inaugural exhibition in June 1939" not only because of its deliberate and mystifying lack of painterly technique, but its incomprehensible subject matter. "Tell me Mr Nolan," asked Adrian Lawlor, CAS honorary secretary and manager of the ground-breaking exhibition,

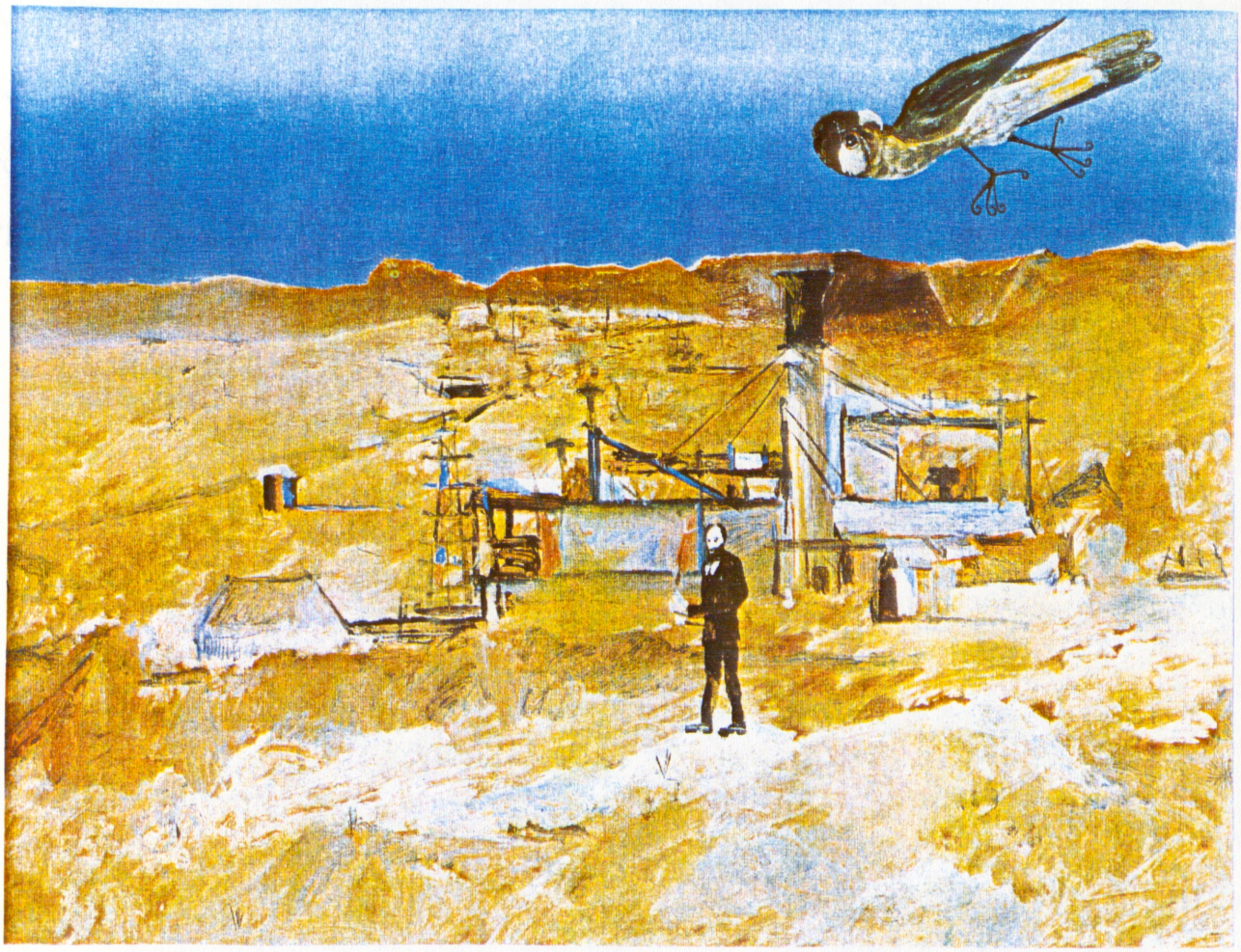

Fig. 6.6. Sidney Nolan, Pretty Polly Mine, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. 1948. Colour Plate 49 of Handbook of Art.

"what exactly is a rimbaud? A french cheese?" [18] As Clark points out, Lawlor knew "perfectly well that Arthur Rimbaud was virtually a tutelary god in the eyes of many twentieth-century poets and painters". [19] Nolan's cult-like worship of Rimbaud permeated much of his painting and undoubtedly fed his later obsession with Kelly, the romantic hero, alone and at odds with the society which made him. In an article, "Faithful Words", written for Angry Penguins in 1942, Nolan writes:

> Whether in his poetry, which established a legend less durable, more adorable than Shakespeare, or in his acts in Africa, he bears the birthmark of an angel, naked and possessed. The mob likes a crucifixion. Rimbaud gave them a crucifixion and resurrection all in one; upsetting at once their idea of a genius and the hand he should play. [20]

Given his later obsession with iconographical forms, Nolan's use of religious imagery is significant. It was this Christ-like quality - Messiah, saviour, martyr and rebel - which drew him also to Ern Malley's Darkening Ecliptic. Nolan's Sole Arabian Tree relates to specific passages in Malley's poem - one which would have struck a chord not only with the poet that inhabited the painter, but the artist already immersed in the lives of the romantic young symbolists:

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[18] Jane Clark, Sidney Nolan; Landscapes and Legends (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 38.

[19] Clark 38.

[20] Quoted in Clark 38.

In the twenty-fifth year of my age

I find myself to be a dromedary

That has run short of water between

One oasis and the next mirage

And having despaired of ever

Making my obsessions intelligible

I am content at last to be

The sole clerk of my metamorphoses.

Begin here:

In the year 1943

I resigned to the living all collateral

images

Reserving to myself a man's

Inalienable right to be sad

At his own funeral.

(Here the peacock blinks the eyes

of his multi-pennate tail.)

In the same year

I said to my love (who is living)

Dear we shall never be that verb

Perched on the sole Arabian Tree

Not having learnt in our green age to

forget

The sins that flow between the hands and

feet

(Here the Tree weeps gum tears
Which also are real: I tell you
These things are real)
So I forced a parting
Scrubbing my few dingy words to
brightness ...

Nolan's illustration is particularly faithful to the text, portraying the lovers in their "green age" of youth perched in Malley's mysterious tree. As Jane Clark points out, the artist has personalised the painting by placing the scene unmistakably in the Wimmera (note the jutting red Mitre Rock near Mount Arapiles) and possibly even identified the lovers with himself and Sunday Reed. [21] In this respect, Sole Arabian Tree is a telling example of Nolan's own process of personal myth-making. The painting, however, also demonstrates the immediacy of his response to poetry as a creative stimulus. Nolan, reports Clark, was particularly taken with the word "perched", remarking in a letter to Sunday Reed that such verbs have "an explicit painterly instruction about them". [22]

The self-assured buoyancy of Sole Arabian Tree, painted *before* the crisis, is replaced with the paint-stained, ravaged features of the mythical Ern Malley in 1973 (fig. 6.7). [23] No doubt the hoax and its ensuing trouble haunted Nolan well into his maturity.

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[21] Clark 56.

[22] Clark 56.

[23] Nolan responded to a request to paint a series on the poems for a special exhibition.



Fig. 6.7. Sidney Nolan, Ern Malley, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 1973. Page 202 of Creating Australia.

Nevertheless, the painter's impulse to celebrate the creative outcast is as evident in this portrait, with its cruel and garish colours, as in his treatment of Kelly or of Rimbaud himself. The point is an important one, given Nolan's reliance on poets as his personal role models. So intense, in fact, was Nolan's obsession with Rimbaud as the epitome of all poets, that he portrayed the young Barrie Reid as a mournfully besuited version of his French hero in a portrait of 1947 (fig. 6.8). By using the reference to Rimbaud's well-known nineteenth century photo-portrait (fig. 6.9), Nolan succeeded in saying more about his perception of the budding young poet (already an Angry Penguins protege at the age of 17) than a painter with perhaps twice the technique and half his enormous iconographic vocabulary. Rimbaud and Reid were approximately the same age in their respective portraits and each had something of the *enfant terrible* about them - the former in his dazzling prodigy with words and the latter in his anti-establishment association with Angry Penguins. Most interesting of all are the links which can be drawn between these two portraits and a portrait of Ned Kelly (fig. 6.10) painted shortly before Nolan embarked on his famous series. The resemblance between the three works is startling (note the sullen expressions, the boiled collar formality and nostalgic use of the cameo frame) - and a sure indication of the fact that Nolan saw Kelly not just as a romantic folk hero, but as a creative and rebellious spirit who, like Rimbaud himself, was largely misunderstood by his own time. In this sense, Nolan's fascination for the life of the symbolist poet not only turned him towards a painting rich in meaning and allusion, but gave him a heroic picture of poetic insurgence and defiance with which to frame his later obsession with the tragic bushranger.



Fig. 6.8. Sidney Nolan, Portrait of Barrett Reid, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. 1947. Page 68 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.



Fig. 6.9. Arthur Rimbaud (photograph), State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. Page 38 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.



Fig. 6.10. Sidney Nolan, Ned Kelly, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1946. Page 74 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

It is perhaps significant that Nolan was in the company of another poetic renegade during his fateful journey to Kelly country in 1946. Already a notorious figure for his part as a self-styled victim of intellectual philistinism in the Ern Malley hoax of 1944, Max Harris must surely have sharpened Nolan's sense of outrage at Kelly's "crucifixion" by the Glenrowan police, pricking the painter's imagination with his own (no doubt) idiosyncratic views of the myth. As Richard Haese acknowledges, the presence of Harris on this momentous walking-tour certainly had a role to play in the genesis of the Kelly paintings, principally by heightening Nolan's sense of personal relations with the legend:

> Harris found enriching literary myth in the landscape and history of the south-east of South Australia where he had grown up. In 'The Tantanoola Tiger', a prose piece written in 1945, Harris affirmed the prepotent hold that the story of a marauding tiger in this cave-ridden area had upon his youthful imagination. In discussions with Nolan the subject of myth, then, went beyond mere speculation: Harris and Nolan found for themselves personally sustaining stories in their own backgrounds. [24]

Nolan, of course, was still a fugitive from the Australian army at this time and, in a neat turning of the circle, his own grandfather had been a member of the Victorian Police force during the infamous Kelly manhunts of the 1880s (not even Kelly himself could have devised a more fitting form of poetic justice than the turn of sympathy which

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[24] Haese 252.

the Nolan family would take). These factors, combined with his irresistible sympathy for all rebellious spirits - particularly as they were embodied in the tragic personas of Kelly and Rimbaud - heightened his sensitivity to the myths and legends which sprang with surreal vividness from the mallee scrub around him. According to Haese, Max Harris "argued that the only way for creative artists to make a significant modern statement in Australia was to turn to 'that world which still exists pure as entity ... personal myth'". [25] Given that Harris himself had been tried (and found guilty) little more than a year before on obscenity charges in relation to the publication of the Malley poems - an incident which deeply affected Nolan as an Angry Penguins co-editor - the painter's sense of romantic and misunderstood isolation must have been particularly acute during the odysseus-like tour. In this context, paintings such as The Trial (fig. 6.11) with Kelly's black helmet pitted against the insistent courtroom geometry of established law and order, take on a meaning which surely had special significance for both Harris and Nolan as members of the Angry Penguins group.

Undoubtedly, Harris, Rimbaud, and even the ghost of the crucified Malley, made important contributions to Ned Kelly - not only as fiery and forceful personalities but as principals in a poetic rebellion against tradition which had been outlawed in the landscape of Australia's popular imagination. These poetic figures gave Nolan the sense of personal myth needed to inject new life into a legend of Kelly's stature and, just as importantly, the tools to create a fluid and spontaneous painting style dependent for its strength on the semantics of subject matter rather than mute technical effects. "Language is what counts",

[25] Haese 252.

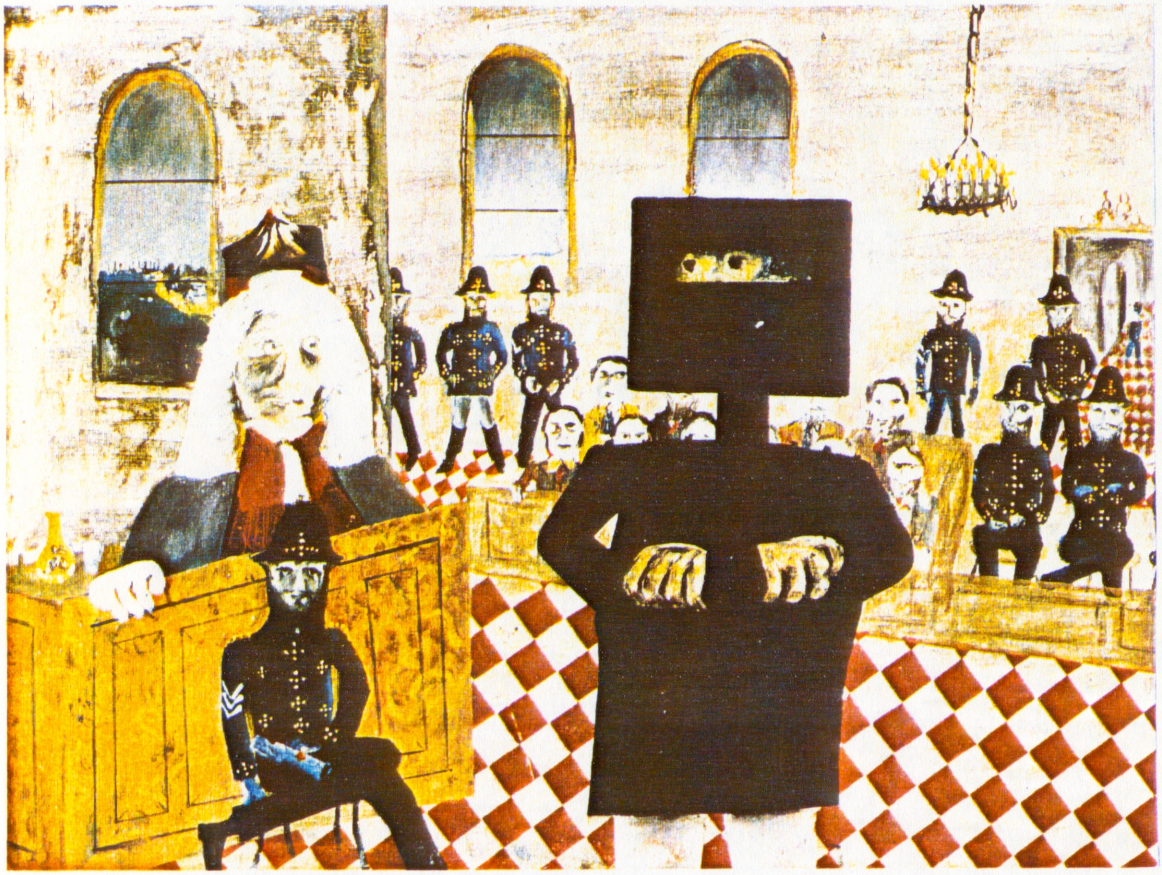

Fig. 6.11. Sidney Nolan, The Trial, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1947. Page 88 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

wrote Nolan of Rimbaud in a 1942 edition of Angry Penguins magazine. [26] Given his predilection for visual metaphors rather than skilful handling of paint, for symbols rather than objects, for meaning rather than representation, he might just as well have been writing of himself.

Albert Tucker

Unlike Sidney Nolan or Joy Hester, Albert Tucker was not a painter torn between the impulse to express his poeticism in words or paint. While he *did* write occasional poetry, these fragmented pieces were less the work of a serious poet than a painter exploring complementary avenues of self-expression in the manner of many of his contemporaries. [27] Poetry, however, was as crucial in the development of Tucker's early work as it was in Nolan's - and as essential in the evolution of Images of Modern Evil as it was in the formulation of Ned Kelly. But while Nolan remained conscious of the poetic sources which informed much of his work, both before and after Ned Kelly, Tucker digested the influence of a handful of specific poets early in his career, absorbing and finally reconstituting the surrealism and expressionism that was to distinguish his mature painting.

Tucker has spoken often of his absorbing interest in the French symbolists, Baudelaire and Verlaine - and of T. S. Eliot, the poet who had more direct influence on

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[26] Quoted in Clark 38.

[27] Writer Eleanor Withcombe thus referred to the frequency and regularity with which such exchanges between the arts were undertaken during the 1940s. (From a personal interview).

his painting than any other. Reflecting that "poetry has always been important" in his work, the painter repeatedly has acknowledged his special debt to Eliot in whose poetry he found a fitting landscape for his own desolate spirit to wander during the arid years of war and depression. [28] Richard Haese also has indicated the extent to which access to the Victorian Public Library transformed Tucker's intellectual life (as it did the lives of virtually all artists studying in Melbourne during this period). [29] But while literature as a body exerted an enormous influence on the young Tucker - and even became a self-conscious preoccupation in a handful of works from his Eliotesque period shortly after the outbreak of World War Two - he did not attempt to explore either poetry *per se* or the personality cult of the poet in the exhaustive and obsessive way that Nolan did. Poetry was essential for Tucker in the sense that it broadened his visual vocabulary and added significance to the imagery of annihilation and despair infusing his surreal and expressionist paintings of 1940-41. While poetry acted primarily as a stimulus to creativity in his work, it provided him with few real benefits as a substitute for painting technique in the way that it did for Nolan. As a commercial artist, Tucker was conscious of the need for draughtsmanship and, at least in his early years, was a faithful student of traditional approaches to painting. Unlike Nolan, who learned to use painting as a

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[28] James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, Albert Tucker (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982) 30.

[29] Haese writes in Rebels and Precursors that

> Without doubt, the single most valuable resource remained the Public Library with its specialized art room. [Sam] Atyeo had been one of the first to discover its riches when driven upstairs by the dearth of intellectual discussion in the Gallery School. Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan followed and in turn introduced it to others. (25)

structure on which to hang his sometimes formless poet's vision, Tucker found in poetry an imaginative landscape in which he could gather "the flora and fauna" of symbols and images which would distinguish his mature work.

T. S. Eliot: Cityscape and Wasteland

It was T. S. Eliot more than any other poet who influenced Tucker's development during the 1940s. Steeped in what Bernard Smith has called "the world-weariness of the Eliot school", Tucker was so taken with the poet that he and his artist-wife, Joy Hester, named their first child, Sweeney, after Eliot's character of the same name. [30] Curiously - and perhaps fittingly - "Sweeney Erect" begins with a passage that recalls Tucker's own crude and energetic painting style:

> Paint me a cavernous waste shore
> Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,
> Paint me the bold anfractuous rocks
> Faced by the snarled and yelping seas. (1-4)

Paintings such as We Are the Dead Men (fig. 6.12), The Futile City (fig. 6.13) and The Waste Land (fig. 6.14) all derive directly from images and fragments of Eliot's poetry, the first drawn particularly from "The Hollow Men". In this poem and in The Waste Land, Eliot explores the alienation of modern man from the society around him

[30] Bernard Smith, Place, Taste and Tradition 227. See Christopher Uhl for reference to Sweeney's naming.



Fig. 6.12. Albert Tucker, We Are the Dead Men, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1940. Plate 3A of Albert Tucker by Uhl.



Fig. 6.13. Albert Tucker, The Futile City, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1940. Page 78 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

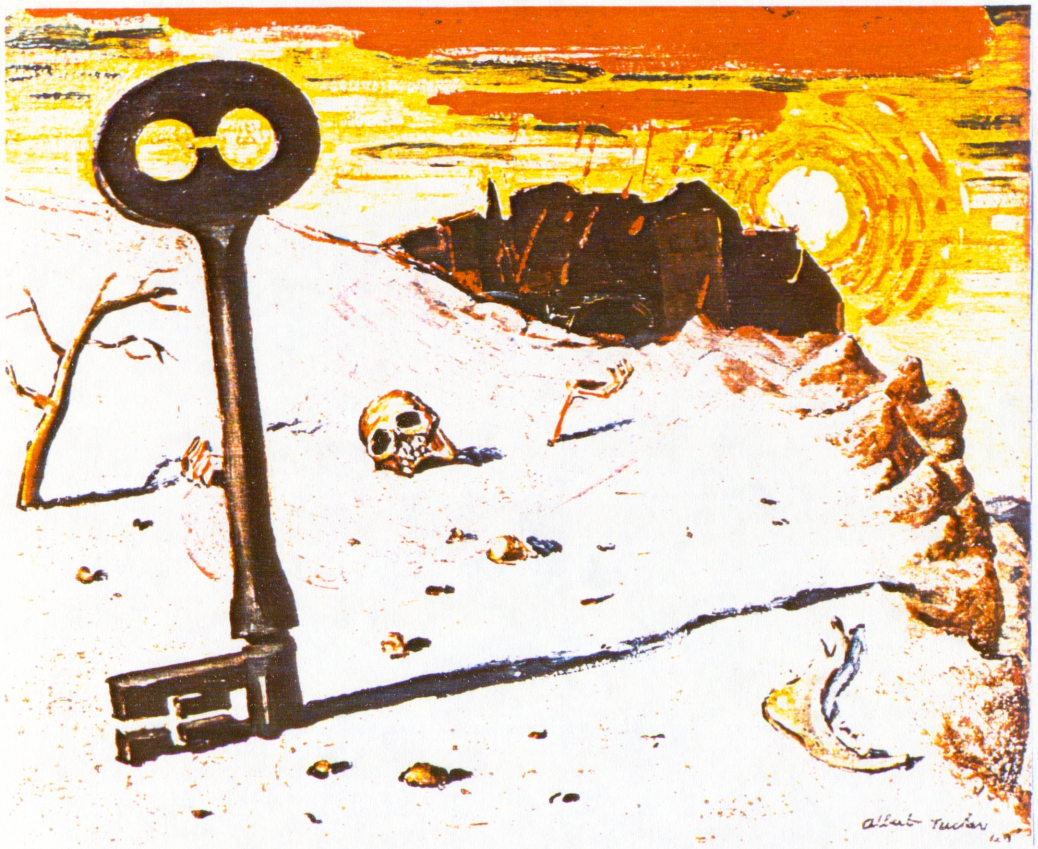

Fig. 6.14. Albert Tucker, The Waste Land, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1941. Page 79 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

and from the inner mental havens he craves so desperately to reach. Tucker also has described the feelings of depression and alienation which war engendered in the artist and "the disintegrative effect" it had on the "surface personality". [31] In this respect, Eliot's landscape of dried bones and twisted city laneways personified his own feelings about the sinister character of Melbourne during the 1940s. As Tucker himself says

> During my disorganized and spasmodic reading I came on T. S. Eliot, and instantly I recognized a twin soul because here there was horror, outrage, despair, futility, and all the images that went with them. He confirmed my own feelings and also became a source, in a roundabout way, of paintings because of the images that would involuntarily form while I was reading the poetry. There was one ... I called it *The Waste Land* ... obviously I'd been thinking about surrealism a lot then. The hopelessness and despair he was able to give voice to just fitted in with my own feeling. [32]

Hopelessness and despair were not just the products of war during these years, however. As Robert Hughes points out, Tucker identified with Eliot's horror of urban ugliness and convention. Quoting from The Waste Land, Hughes remarks

> Blind Tiresias could prophesy but not act, and it must have seemed

[31] The School of the Forties.

[32] Bonham and Mollison 29.

> to Tucker that Tiresias was a metaphor of his own condition. He was trapped in a hostile environment, able neither to change it nor to get out. This frustration, which verged on paranoia, lent his socialist realist paintings an oppressive, sealed atmosphere of evil and despair, which glares through the crude paint, the inept drawing and the naive and literary imagery. [33]

Tucker's abhorrence of the war and his acute sense of being trapped in a hostile, essentially alien, environment made him receptive to Eliot not only as a poet who could lead him out of Melbourne's cultural wilderness, but as one whose specific imagery of urban desolation described his own inner visions of the world around him. Interestingly, Richard Haese notes that while "Sidney Nolan very early found an aesthetic and intellectual sympathy with the highly personal and involuted world of symbolist poetry, Tucker did not recognise his own world until 1940-41". [34] It is perhaps no coincidence then that his passion for "The Waste Land" developed alongside his painting style. As Tucker himself has implied, Eliot articulated those feelings of fear and frustration which plagued him, prompting him to paint a landscape in which the demons of his own war-time experience could be made palpable. Eliot provided Tucker with the key to self-expression as no other poet - and perhaps no other painter - ever had. While The Futile City and The Waste Land are far removed from Images of Modern Evil in terms of technical sophistication and even originality, they nevertheless foreshadow the hard-edged

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[33] Hughes 151.

[34] Haese 86.

symbolism, violence and crude imagery which typified many of the painter's future works.

We Are The Dead Men, the title of which has often been described as "a misquotation" from the opening line of Eliot's "We Are the Hollow Men", is the most specifically literary of the three paintings. While strewn with many of the "stage props of German Expressionism" (taken specifically from painter George Grosz), this 1940 painting illustrates the way in which Eliot's poetry provided Tucker with inspiration in the early years of his development. Portraying a conventional middle-class wedding whose joyless, poe-faced participants are mocked by the clownish spectre of death, We Are the Dead Men takes half-formed, half-remembered images from Eliot's original poem to create an allegory which, despite critical claims to the contrary, are wholly the painter's own. The livid orange sky and lurid greed of the church portal are pure Eliot - as are the stark shadows which etch out the bare-branched tree cutting diagonally across the picture plane. The grimacing, clown-faced scarecrow sprawled across the footpath in a puppet-like dance of death is clearly Tucker's own interpretation of Eliot's "We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw" (1-4). The church portal, leaning precariously sideways out of the picture (is its inevitable ruin imminent already?) perhaps represents "the stone images" (41) which human beings raise vainly in "supplication" (43) to their hopes for immortality.

As Tucker has made clear, Eliot's poems served as a source of "involuntary" rather than specific images and were closely aligned with his own fascination for

surrealism. The painting, however, is not intended to be a faithful depiction of "The Hollow Men", but an interpretation of how the painter has responded to Eliot's surrealistic imagery. We Are the Dead Men is less a tribute to the poem than to the ideas which informed it and which, in turn, inspired Tucker to paint. Interestingly, it is in this painting, rather than in Pick up (fig. 6.15) of the following year, that we first see the gaping blood-red mouth which was to dominate and ultimately devour Images of Modern Evil.

Christopher Uhl has drawn specific parallels between The Futile City and fragments of Eliot's The Waste Land. [35] As he contends, the dominating key motif in the picture's foreground, whilst also echoing aspects of Dali's own symbolism, can be traced to Eliot's exploration of the psychological cages in which the prisoners of modern civilisation are kept:

> *Dayadhvam:* I have heard the key
> Turn in the door once and turn once only
> We think of the key, each in his prison
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison ... (411-14)

Tucker's desert landscape stretching backward to the mouth of an anonymously crumbling city also is strewn with the "dry bones" (390) and skeletal symbols that dominate Eliot's The Waste Land. A slash of livid red paint rains blood across the

[35] Christopher Uhl, Albert Tucker (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1969) 16.



Fig. 6.15. Albert Tucker, Pick up, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1941. Page 88 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

landscape, drying and disappearing before it reaches the parched desert floor of modern civilisation. These images, baking hard in the glare of an intolerable mid-day sun, recall Dali, but they can also be found in specific passages from "Ash Wednesday":

> If there were water we should stop and drink
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
> Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
> If there were only water amongst the rock
> Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
> Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
> There is not even silence in the mountains
> But dry sterile thunder without rain. (335-42)

The Futile City is the painting closest in spirit to Eliot's poetry - and to the surrealism which Tucker strove to emulate during the early '40s. With its violently pulsating colour and startling juxtaposition of the city with the desert expanse, the painting captures (within an astonishingly limited iconographical range) much of the desolation and sorrow implicit in Eliot's poem. The skeletal figure shrouded in black at the centre of the picture provides the first clue that Tucker has learnt to hinge the strength of his paintings on the pivot of a powerful single symbol. Interestingly, these three works provide evidence for a kind of "painter's progress" through Eliot's poetry - one which has not only enabled Tucker to invest his paintings with literary significance but given him the opportunity to develop and refine a method for forming symbolic images in his work. From the theatrical, almost vaudevillian intrusiveness of We Are the Dead Men to the

(still) literary obviousness of The Futile City and the more subtle, but equally imagistic The Waste Land, Tucker gradually absorbed the symbolism, surrealism and social message which would form the basis for his personal iconography in Images of Modern Evil. The starkness, simplicity and personal expressionism of The Waste Land marked an important turning point in Tucker's art - one which showed him not only how literary images can themselves be integrated in painting, but how the *language* of making these images can be applied to painting.

The Birth of the Red-Crescent Smile

While Tucker discarded many of these self-conscious ties with Eliot's poetry in his later painting, he retained an instinct for the kind of imagery which rose up out of "the dead land" of Melbourne's war-time landscape. By the time Tucker was ready to conceive Images of Modern Evil, he had been exposed to other, equally decisive, influences - German Expressionism, the social realism of Danila Vassilief and Josl Bergner, and his own devastating stint in the army as a "chocolate soldier" or conscript. At least one of the recurrent images in the nightmare-like series - the crater-nosed head - derives directly from the horrors of the Heidelberg Military Hospital where Tucker worked for a brief period as a war artist. [36]

Much of the darkness and oppression which typifies Images of Modern Evil could, however, have come directly from The Waste Land itself. Victory Girls, in particular,

[36] Hughes 154.

recalls Eliot's "half-deserted streets/The muttering retreats/of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" (4-6) from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Pick up, a relatively early picture, painted soon after the Eliot series in 1941, also brings to mind lines from "Prufrock". With its tilted picture frame and black, blind-alleyed corners bearing down on the group of lewdly grinning figures (the men with their hands in their pockets and the women with their see-through dresses and legs suggestively astride) the painting makes sex synonymous with the lonely night-life of the city. The positioning of the two male figures in the painting's middleground, followed closely by the threatening darkness of the alleyways, reminds the viewer that it is the very streets of Melbourne itself that stalk these willing women "like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent" (8-9). The picture, however, is considered remarkable for other reasons. Despite the beginnings of what is generally termed "the protoplasmic form" of the red crescent mouth in We Are The Dead Men, and less obviously in Tucker's 1939 Portrait of Adrian Lawlor (fig. 6.16), Robert Hughes identifies this painting as an important source of imagery for the soon-to-be-conceived Images of Modern Evil:

> One of the figures in a picture Tucker produced in 1941, *Pickup in the Dark* threw a crescent-shaped shadow under a street-lamp. The latent sexual content of this crescent-form now became apparent in the curved, red distorted mouths of his *Victory Girls*, 1943. Soon, Tucker was isolating this crescent-mouth and using it as an independent 'sign'. It gave its surroundings - the dark streets of Melbourne - a peculiar symbolic charge; it emotionally transformed them, and it so obsessed Tucker that he found that

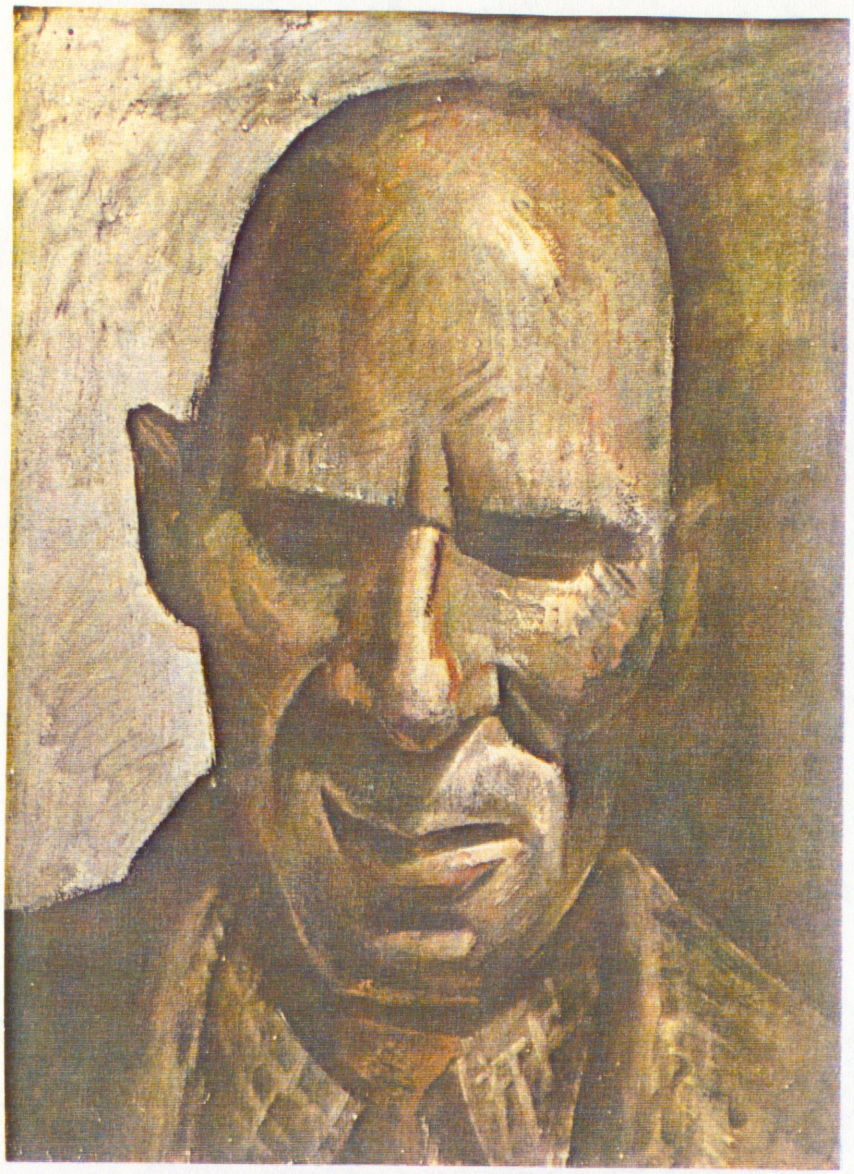

Fig. 6.16. Albert Tucker, Portrait of Adrian Lawlor, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1939. Plate 1 of Albert Tucker. By Christopher Uhl. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1969.

none of his paintings would work without it. The red crescent became his main structural symbol. [37]

While there is no doubt that the origins of this symbol stretch back through Tucker's personal development as an artist and are something of a quirk in his highly individual and expressive iconography, it is interesting to draw parallels between Eliot's imagery and the lewd, twisted mouth which came to dominate Tucker's painting. "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" also recalls the recurrent images of the city-lit night-time and sexual depravity which typify Tucker's war-time work:

Half-past one,
The street-lamp sputtered,
The street-lamp muttered,
The street-lamp said, 'Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.' (13-22)

Image of Modern Evil # 24 (fig. 6.17) could be almost a replica of this passage in

[37] Hughes 152.



Fig. 6.17. Albert Tucker, Image of Modern Evil # 24, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1945. Page 95 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

heightened symbolic form. But what is particularly interesting is the reference to the personified "grin" - a frequent device in Eliot's poetry and one which is evident, at least sub-consciously, in those of Tucker's paintings that were inspired directly by The Waste Land. As Eliot himself says, "The memory throws up high and dry/A crowd of twisted things" (23-24). Images of Modern Evil is shrouded in the kind of imagery that perhaps only Eliot's poetry could do justice to. For Tucker, eager to "expose the masquerades/That time resumes" ("Preludes" II. 6-7), Eliot encapsulated the imagery of the city with its bleak horizons and sordid interiors as no other poet or painter could. Significantly, Tucker began to grasp the visual iconography needed to express his vision of "the saw-dust trampled" (II. 3) streets of Melbourne which consumed him in the early '40s. Like Nolan and Slessor, he discarded his conscious associations with Eliot at the height of his maturity, but the city-stained imagery and sense of sordidly repressed wrongs which permeate his later work remains.

Tucker found the red-crescent symbol to be inseparable not only from the meaning, but from the visual unity, of his works. Like Nolan, he was a symbolist struggling to make of painting something more than a meaningless pattern of accidental marks and brushstrokes. While the cruel red smile is more easily divorced from Images of Modern Evil than Kelly's helmet from Nolan's paintings (at least in a compositional sense), it is also true that without the unifying fact of the symbol, the works would not only lack the powerful social commentary which Tucker intended, but the language of fear and desolation which transmogrifies his cityscape. This is particularly true of works such as Image of Modern Evil # 14 (fig. 6.18) where the sinister glare of electric street



Fig. 6.18. Albert Tucker, Image of Modern Evil # 14, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1945. Page 93 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

lights and gleaming machinery serves only to illuminate the lurid smile of Tucker's polyp figures.

For Tucker, as for Nolan, poetry provided the key to this new way of painting with the tools of a pictorial vocabulary. While Eliot's direct influence had disappeared from Tucker's paintings by the time he came to paint Images of Modern Evil, he had learned from "The Waste Land" and other poems how to formulate images which speak to the mind as well as to the eye. By the same token, Tucker found in Eliot - as in many of the French symbolists - a horror for the decadence of modern civilisation that echoed his own. It was in the "word paintings" of these poets that Tucker first glimpsed the black windy skies and half-lit lamps of his own tortured imagination. While he may have begun by exploring their landscapes in paintings such as Futile City and We are the Dead Men, Tucker ultimately found himself as a mature painter wandering in the wastelands of his own existence, at odds with the world around him in Melbourne during the war.

Joy Hester

According to Barrie Reid, Joy Hester was as much a poet as a painter. [38] But while she wrote copiously and produced poems of occasional quality and beauty she was,

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[38] Writing in a 1967 edition of Art and Australia, Reid remarked that

> Words were important to Joy Hester. She was quite capable of deciding whether her expression should be by means of a poem or a drawing. She read widely and, in addition to the Bible, some books, particularly works by Sartre, and also by Alain Fournier, Julien Green, Eliot and Pound, possessed her almost obsessively. *It is no good to read a book, to enjoy it and then have, reluctantly, to return it to its owner. It's like parting with one's own experience* [she said].

like Sidney Nolan, a poet who best expressed her lyrical feelings about the world around her in paint, gouache and chinese inks. Hester's distinctive drawings were less illustrative than those produced by many of her Melbourne contemporaries - and less obviously derivative. While her slightly surreal portraits of nameless moods and semi-detached psychological states owe much to Eliot and Pound, they are so far removed from the texts which inspired them that they have become, quite completely, Hester's own. In analysing the artist's purely poetic interpretation of literature, Barrie Reid acknowledges Hester's rare ability to transcend her creative sources:

> Nothing from literature affected her more deeply than that masterpiece, the short story *L'Enfant de la Haute Mer* by Jules Supervielle. Her response to this is worth examination as it effectively disposes of the superficial view of her work as illustration. Throughout her life Joy drew the figure of a young girl. Both one of the earliest surviving drawings and her very last drawing, made just before her death, show this same image, this emblem of pure experience. When she read Superveille's story she found her small girl. Her response was immediate .... *a strange and lovely thing which has presented itself to me as a series of pictures almost in colour - so that now I no longer remember the story but the visual impression, and yet it is not descriptive in that sense at all.* [39]

[39] Reid, "Joy Hester" 53.

While Tucker and Nolan had used the picture plane to consciously explore or express specific ideas about poetry, Hester viewed literature as a subliminal part of the creative process. For Hester, the story, poem or novel which had inspired her to draw or paint disappeared beneath the waves of her own rising response to its stimulus. For this reason, it is difficult to draw exact correlations between a painting such as Mad Girl (fig. 6.19) and the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Nevertheless, this work, painted at the height of the poet's influence on both Hester and her husband, Albert Tucker, betrays the fascination for suppressed hysteria and hidden abnormalities which also obsessed the poet. The eyes of the girl, nervously watching the corner of the frame, anticipate Hester's use of the stalk or bloated eye in much later works such as Boy with Bird (fig. 6.20) and Girl with Hen (fig. 6.21). Janine Burke has written at length about the dominating role of the eye motif in Hester's work, drawing clear parallels with the paintings of surrealists such as Ernst and hinting at an equation with Tucker's red-crescent smile. [40] Eyes, interestingly enough, also figure predominantly in Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" in which, appropriately, "Midnight shakes the memory/As a madman shakes a dead geranium" (11-12). The moon "winks a feeble eye" (52), "Eyes in the street" (41) try to peer "through lighted shutters" (42). The poet can see "nothing" (40) behind a child's eye - and most tellingly of all, the corner of a woman's eye "Twists like a crooked pin" (22). This phrase, more than any other in Eliot's poetry, provides an apt description of the eye motif in Hester's work.

While the comparison is not absolute in the sense that Hester makes specific

[40] Janine Burke, Joy Hester (Elwood, Victoria: Greenhouse, 1989) 105.



Fig. 6.19. Joy Hester, Mad Girl, Reed Estate, Melbourne. 1942-3. Colour Plate 5 of Joy Hester.



Fig. 6.20. Joy Hester, Boy with Bird, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1957. Plate 78 of Joy Hester.



Fig. 6.21. Joy Hester, Girl with Hen, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1956. Colour Plate 13 of Joy Hester.

reference to the quotation, there is no doubt that Eliot exercised a considerable influence over her distinctive drawings - particularly during the early war years. [41] As Janine Burke says, "something of Eliot's 'conscience of a blackened street' informs her street scenes" and, while poems such as Hester's "Untitled (1943)" are highly personal evocations of her own state of mind, they make open use of the older poet's preference for personified images and disturbing metaphors:

> there is a throbbing, that I cannot pin
> beneath the skin (tighter drawn
> than winter days)
> Throb, throbbing, engine of the mind.
> Of the heart.
> cold windows barred
> cold windows STARE
> lengthening days remind
> that still exist, WREATHS of roses
> days of pain. [42]

But while many of Hester's poems from the period are clearly Eliotesque in their tone and imagery, her numerous paintings and drawings do not set out to evoke specific passages from either The Waste Land or other poems which profoundly influenced her at this time. While Tucker drew conscious inspiration from Eliot, bordering on the

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[41] See Burke 47.

[42] Quoted in Burke 43.

illustrative in his early attempts to paint the wasteland of modern human existence, Hester's art is highly personal, non-specific, almost devoid of direct literary allusion and intuitive in a way that even Sidney Nolan's was not. Her powerful and individual portraits of figures derived from her own sub-conscious are certainly lyrical, but they retain a purity of expression which is more wholly Hester's own than perhaps any other member of the Angry Penguins group. In the same way, Hester's poetry rarely served as inspiration for Hester's painting. As Janine Burke says

> Joy did not seek to translate these images into drawings. She may have felt that drawings were too literal a vehicle while the suggestive or metaphoric quality of verse could deal with them more satisfactorily. This points to a later development in the relationship between her poetry and her drawings: she saw the two creative expressions as extensions of and complements to one another but she saw their tasks and their possibilities as essentially different. Though Joy would continue to produce poetry, it never equalled the power of her drawings and it would always remain qualitatively a secondary area. [43]

While Hester's poetry best demonstrates the direct impact which Eliot had on her own poetic imagination, the drawings are not as immune to the influence of The Waste Land as Burke supposes. While her work is unique in that it forms part of an almost sub-

[43] Burke 63.

conscious spontaneous response to literature (the influence of Supervielle is a case in point) or to an incident or mood from her own daily life, the drawings have a quality of desolation and straining intensity which weds them to the predominant mood of the poems she so admires. In works such as Gethsemane V (fig. 6.22), the figure which looms at a strangely foreshortened angle from the shadows and cramped spaces of the background, turning its watchful eyes to contemplate some nameless fear beyond the frame, is as much a part of "death's other kingdom" ("The Hollow Men" I. 14) as the lonely characters haunting Eliot's imagination.

Some clue to the sub-conscious nature of her identification with the mood and timbre of Eliot's poetry, as well as her conscious emulation of his imagery, is provided by Hester's own assertion in an unpublished poem of 1942 that "I'm part of Eliot/he's part of me". [44] In the same way, Hester's almost psychotic Face 1 (fig. 6.23) is a strong evocation of Eliot's "breastless creatures under ground" (3) leaning "backward with a lipless grin" (4) in "Whispers of Immortality" and, equally, of her own personal obsessions with death and decay. Notwithstanding the power of sub-conscious suggestion gleaned from her own readings of the work, Hester's unique artistic expression parallels Eliot's poetic style so closely - and so neatly - as to show no noticeable cracks and divisions. The point also highlights a pivotal difference between Hester and her husband: while Tucker strove to *emulate* and describe aspects of Eliot's poetry as they related to his own ideas of city-living and its attendant degradations, Hester's art was based on the power of direct and unexplained *response*. Unlike Nolan or Tucker, Hester's art springs

[44] Burke 62.



Fig. 6.22. Joy Hester, Gethsemane V, Barrett Reid, Melbourne. 1946-7. Plate 52 of Joy Hester.



Fig. 6.23. Joy Hester, Face I, private collection, Melbourne. 1947-8. Plate 53 of Joy Hester.

not from the poetry itself but from her own personal reaction to its effect on her sub-conscious.

Like Webster in "Whispers of Immortality", Hester "was much possessed by death". Works such as A Human Being, with its radiating linear halo around the head and skeletal-like contours, reveal that Hester was, indeed, a woman who "saw the skull beneath the skin" (2). As Janine Burke points out, Hester drenched her work in images of pain, suffering and death during the early war years - an obsession (in her poetry at least) which parallels Tucker's paintings of night-time Melbourne frequented by ghoulish figures of lust and prostitution. [45] In "City Statement", a poem of 1942, Hester expresses the disgust which formed the basis for paintings such as Tucker's Pick up:

> oppressive heat extends the glands of women
> in the street - they cannot leer they only wait
> between each successive breath, and look
> for more - where the god of lust has fled. [46]

As Burke shows in her study of the artist, these lines could well be considered a "verbal counterpart" to many of Tucker's pictures from the period. [47] Certainly, they were probably influenced by preparatory sketches for Images of Modern Evil. But they

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[45] Burke 62-3.

[46] Quoted in Burke 63.

[47] Burke 62-3.

also reflect Hester's own fascination with the inner significance of outward actions and appearances. For Hester, as for every other member of the Angry Penguins group, reality as perceived by the physical eye was not enough. In searching for the hidden motivation behind human gestures and actions, for some deeper significance in the flesh and blood world of material transience and frailty, the artist turned to poetry and poetic interpretation for the hidden reality she craved.

Ever the individual, Hester chose a relatively untrodden path as an artist in Melbourne during the 1940s. Rather than sketching a narrative epic in the manner of Nolan or stripping reality down to its essential symbols as Tucker had, Hester sought to reveal the inner psychology of her imagined subjects and, in so doing, expose her own complex psyche. While there is no doubt that rebellion and poetic forms of painting went hand in hand in Australia at this time, Hester's own defiance in exploring the inner world of the imagination was less the product of a conscious political stance than an instinctive rejection of the western painter's traditional reliance on external forms. Like the nineteenth century symbolists before her, Hester sought those worlds within worlds which belong not only to the poet but to the painter willing to see beyond the distractions of physical reality and into the truth glimmering just beneath its surface.

James Gleeson

James Gleeson has been called Australia's only true surrealist. Unlike artists such as Nolan, Boyd, Tucker and Hester - each of whom can lay claim to surreal *qualities* in

their work - Gleeson was, and still is, a conscious exponent of surrealism as a distinct and identifiable style. Much in the manner of an Australian Dali or Ernst, Gleeson's surrealism can be called international in a way that none of the artists mentioned above (with the possible exception of Hester) ever were - or wished to be. While Ned Kelly, for instance, uses surreal juxtapositions of images and symbols to convey the enormity of the bushranger myth and its dominance over the landscape, Gleeson's surrealism is almost purely psychological. Detached, analytical and immersed in the subterranean world of dreams and ideas to a depth which surpasses even Dali's psycho-surreal narratives (fig. 6.24), Gleeson's paintings belong to a world of the intellect which neither Nolan nor Tucker, even in their most literary moments, could enter.

For this reason, Gleeson's untitled poem-drawings, executed shortly before and after the outbreak of World War Two, represent something of a milestone in the study of the relations between Australian poetry and painting. Unlike his artistic and literary counterparts, Gleeson set out to consciously combine the arts of poetry and painting in a way which drew not only on his surrealist heritage (and, to a lesser extent, on Blake's illustrated verses), but challenged traditional notions of separation between the "sibling" arts (fig. 6.25). Displaying an astonishing grasp of international trends and preoccupations at a time when Australia seemed more geographically distanced from the world than any other, Gleeson manipulated images and text in a manner recalling the experiments of Apollinaire and of *Dada* more than two decades before.

While Nolan's love of poetry found its natural expression in painting and Tucker's



Fig. 6.24. James Gleeson, The Sower, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. 1944. Page 194 of Creating Australia.

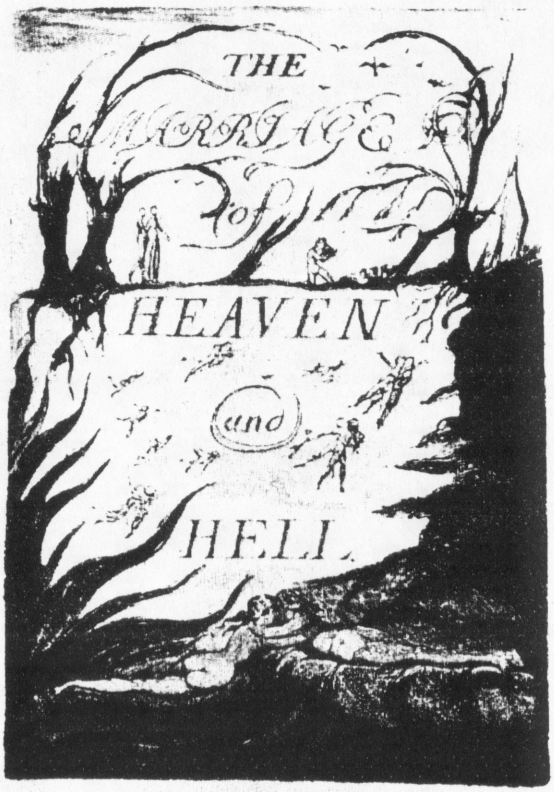

Fig. 6.25. William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1790-3. Plate 8 of William Blake. By Morton D. Paley. New York: Phaidon Press, 1978.

hunger for intellectual stimulus drew him to Eliot, Gleeson sought a synthesis of the arts that could truly be regarded as a marriage of equals rather than an absorption of one medium by the other. As Christopher Chapman observes of these works (figs. 6.26 and 6.27) in his article, "The Body of the Text: James Gleeson's Poem-Drawings", "the exclusivity of the text as linguistic signifier is abolished" and the written text becomes "a visual form - an abstract inscribed marking". [48] In this sense, Gleeson's poem-drawings are experimental in a way that neither Ned Kelly nor Images of Modern Evil, for all their loaded imagery and use of metaphor, are not. For this reason too - and somewhat ironically - Gleeson's drawings are far less successful than either these two examples or his own highly instinctive paintings from the period. What is important, however, is that the experiment was a conscious one (much in the tradition of the French symbolists) and that it served the artist well in his continued quest for multiple layers of meaning in later, more surrealist, works.

Untitled Poem Drawing, 1938-39 is Gleeson's first attempt at this kind of inter-artistic synthesis. Playing on such visual tricks as "for my [love] of [loves]" in which the heart symbol is used in place of the noun(s), Gleeson creates a stream of consciousness picture relying on words, rather than traditional signifiers, to lead the eye from image to image. Half-finished phrases and familiar expressions meander around the rectangular space in a way which simulates the trickle and flood of thoughts and images coursing

[48] Christopher Chapman, "The Body of the Text: James Gleeson's Poem-Drawings" Art and Australia 28.2 (1990): 230.

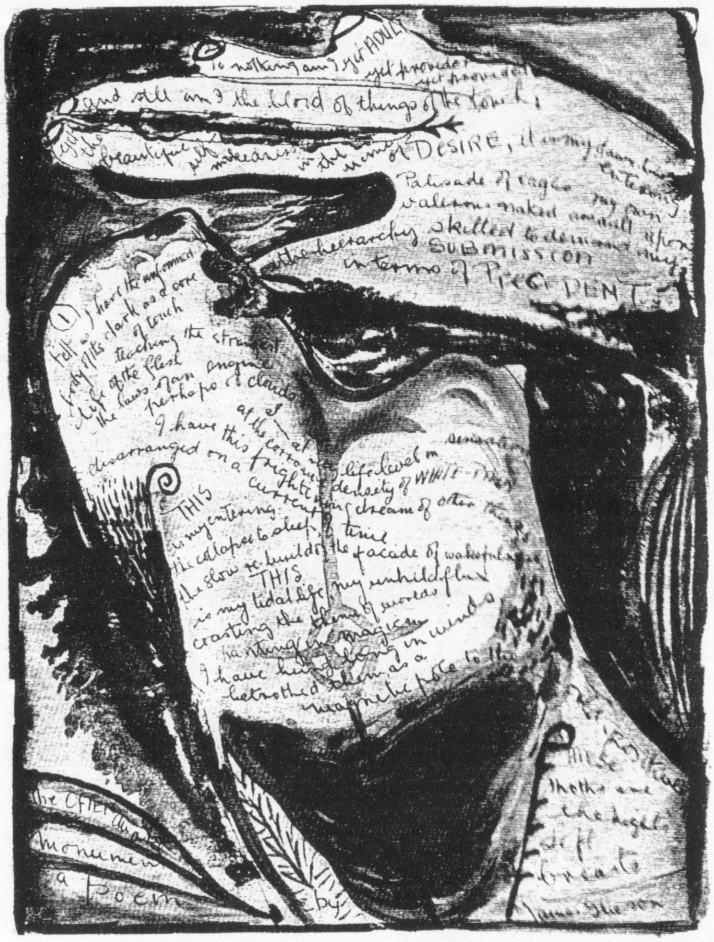

Fig. 6.26. James Gleeson, Untitled Poem-Drawing, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1938-39. Page 230 of "The Body of the Text: James Gleeson's Poem-Drawings." By Christopher Chapman. Art and Australia 28.2 (1990).

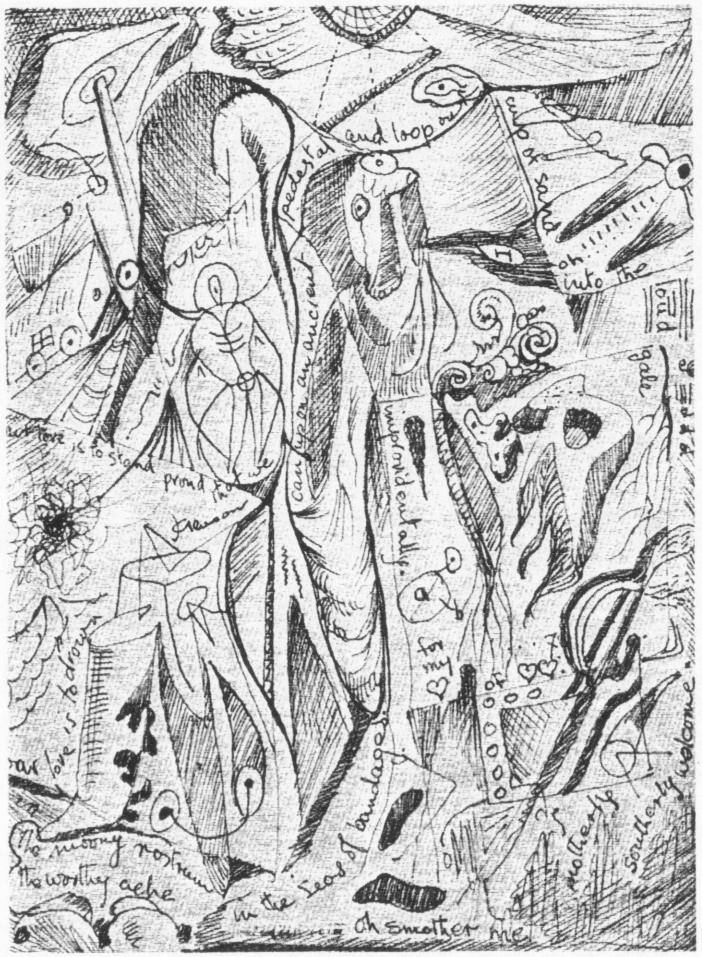

Fig. 6.27. James Gleeson, Poem-Drawing: The Often Awake Monument, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1939. Page 233 of "The Body of the Text".

illogically through the imagination's own "symbolic landscape". [49] Not surprisingly, Gleeson was familiar with Freud, Joyce and Eliot and, in keeping with the times, was also an avid student of psychology, a point distinguishing him from many of his contemporaries. While psychology held a fascination for writers and artists of the time - to the point of faddishness and even pretension - Gleeson maintained a purists's absorption in the workings of the mind that provided his painting and poem-drawings with a special focus. In this sense, Gleeson's interest in pushing the limits of poetry and painting and combining their respective forms is an expression of his own search for descriptive and explanatory powers capable of revealing the inner world which drives us.

Unlike the French symbolists, Gleeson was not interested in symmetry, design or order. He did not attempt to use words as symbolic shapes, nor did he strive to hinge all visual impact on the text. Words and images work together in Gleeson's poem-drawings, creating a kind of hybrid art that is not quite verse and not quite picture, but one which expresses those streams of human consciousness in which all surrealists of the period were immersed. Interestingly, Gleeson in later years named his collection of poem-drawings, Time Retrieved. [50] The title is an important one, given that time and space are crucial differentials in any discussion of the inter-relations between poetry and painting. Perhaps it is more than obvious that Gleeson sought to expand the conventional dimensions of painting by exploring the temporal world of ideas. But did he somehow

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[49] Chapman 230.

[50] Gleeson's poem-drawings were collectively titled Time Retrieved (1938-1978) and formed part of an exhibition, The Painter Poet, at Sydney's David Jones Art Gallery in February 1990.

feel (like many painters before him) that the visual arts lacked the elasticity and depth of their poetic sibling? Gleeson's compulsive search for deepening layers of meaning in his work seems to indicate so.

In this respect, Gleeson is something of a maverick in the Australian art world of the '40s. While the work of most local painters of the day began to take on something of a universal quality (ranging in extremes from Drysdale's bleak landscapes to Dobell's nationless portrait style and Nolan's transcendent myth) Gleeson's work contains few identifiable signifiers of the country in which it was conceived. Given Mitchell's criteria for differentiation between the arts, the point is a fascinating one. In broad terms, the closer painters move towards an art form in which the traditional political and aesthetic limits have been transgressed, the nearer they move also to symbolism, abstraction and internationalism. During the 1940s, many painters practised the art of poetry, drawing on their experiments with the form (mostly sub-consciously or with a curious sense of using whatever artistic "tools" were to hand) to explore their first love or talent. In this way, painting - particularly in the Angry Penguins circle - took on poetic and symbolic dimensions which it otherwise might have lacked. (It must be remembered that the group's strident anti-fascism and occasional leanings toward communism, collective action and collaboration also aligns neatly with Mitchell's system). Gleeson - arguably the most international of the artists who emerged in Sydney and Melbourne during the '30s and '40s - chose, however, to pursue a conscious and deliberate path in his experiments with inter-artistic form. The results are not only highly sophisticated in terms of their intent, but verge on a style of psychological art which depends on "language" rather than

imagery for its impact. As Christopher Chapman says

> The striking quality of the imagery is achieved by a combination of various artistic styles and borrowed images, so that the viewer is struck not only by the combination of images themselves, but also by the systems of signification in which they are entangled.[51]

Pointing as they do to Gleeson's concerns as a surrealist, the poem-drawings are, in this respect, revealing. Imagery for the painter is a coded language system, speaking unfathomable volumes to the human sub-conscious. While the literal jokes ("oh smother me", "motherly", "southerly") disappear from his later works, the visual signifiers remain, drawing viewers into the sub-text of the picture in a way that representational and even symbolic paintings are generally powerless to do. Not surprisingly, Gleeson viewed surrealism as a potential healer of social ills and inequalities. In his article, "What is Surrealism", published in a 1940 issue of Art in Australia, Gleeson averred that

> In surrealism the fire of art and the ice of science have met, and from the synthesis mankind has been endowed with a powerful new weapon for its combat against darkness and evil. [52]

Gleeson, of course, championed the unconscious as a powerful source of

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[51] Chapman 230.

[52] Quoted in McQueen, The Black Swan of Trespass 83.

inspiration for art - but one which acts as a partner to, rather than usurper of, reason. [53] By exploring the sliding shadows and half-formed images thrown up by the human unconscious, he hoped to push the boundaries of our "myopic habits of thinking" and, in so doing, produce a painting of profound social, as well as aesthetic, significance. [54] In this respect, the poem-drawings mark an interesting foray into a world considered relatively new in 1939 - a world of dreams, memories, desires and fears which are part language, part pure image, part symbol. As a surrealist, Gleeson recognised that such a complex and internalised world can be adequately explored only within the context of an art which is temporal as well as spatial. In developing a painting style which paid special tribute to the international qualities of works by Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, Gleeson followed a course set by his predecessors - one leading naturally to the discovery of surrealism via experiments with visual poetics and strongly imagistic, often "automatic", writing. For Gleeson also, this path led away from provincialism and toward the transcendent internationalism distinguishing nearly all surrealist art at this time. By turning his artistic gaze inward, he was able to discard both the outer shell of his nationality and the spatial restraints of the external world around him. In this sense, Gleeson's poem-drawings describe an art in which time, as well as the workings of the mind, truly has been retrieved. [55]

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[53] McQueen 83.

[54] McQueen 83.

[55] In this context, it is interesting to note also what Humphrey McQueen has described as Gleeson's "reverence for the male body". Is it possible that in his quest for a painting capable of embracing time, psychology and science, Gleeson saw these as essentially masculine pursuits in sub-conscious accordance with Mitchell's system? The point is an interesting one given the obsession of many Australian male painters of the period with masculine forms.

7 Rosemary Dobson: Exception and Rule

The Poet Unbeguiled

Unlike her Melbourne contemporaries, Rosemary Dobson was not a poet torn between the conflicting forces of tradition and experiment in Australian art and literature. With her natural love of precision and restraint and an aesthetic sensibility responding more readily to elegance and refinement than to the dark and ugly underbelly of social change and injustice, Dobson does not fit easily into the revolutionary mood of the times - nor does her mainly traditional body of work support the hypothesis that the search for experiment has been a major impetus in the relations between Australian poetry and painting. More closely aligned with the creative conservatism of Slessor than with the avant garde stance of a Harris or even Hester, Dobson is a poet for whom modernism is not, nor ever has been, a burning issue. Preferring to dub herself a "flexible traditionalist", she has remained serenely unbeguiled by experiment for experiment's sake, warning only that

> In both poetry and painting we may be conned by those who operate at ... times of flux and change - artists who (deliberately or not) fool the public, or poets who catch a modish way of speaking but have little to say .... experiment and change are necessary, invigorating and enhancing. But formal disciplines and

> restraints provide both poet and painter with challenges that are immensely exciting. [1]

While Dobson was cheerfully and purposely ignorant of the kind of ideologies which gave rise to the Vision and Angry Penguins schools, her poetry is, nevertheless, the product of an artistic milieu which encouraged the greatest burst of interaction between poets and painters that the national culture has seen. Although she remained coolly unperturbed by those dragons of change which alternately menaced and injected new fire into Australian art and literature during the 1940s, her work is sufficiently permeated by the influence of art to suggest important links with the epoch which fuelled Nolan's fascination for Symbolist poetry and shaped Slessor's friendship with Lindsay.

Needless to say, there *are* important differences between the poet's response to art and that of her peers. While Dobson enjoyed a productive friendship with painter Thea Proctor - one which taught her not only to resolve poetic problems through the deflected

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[1] Quoted in Graeme Kinross Smith, "The Intricate, Devised Hearing of Sight" Westerly No. 3 (1974): 63. Rosemary Dobson also writes in "Poetry and Painting: A Personal View" Quadrant 21.11 (1977): 72:

> ... I hope, rather I am determined, to keep my mind open to innovation and new influences ... In future we will no doubt be beguiled, as we have been in the past, by such side-issues as concrete and visual poetry, and the artistic counterpart with which these merge, "written pictures" - paintings which are composed in calligraphy, script, and symbol .... I feel we must give all such the benefit of the doubt initially but nevertheless I know that in poetry and painting my own innate preference is for order, discipline, spareness and reserve, in preference to their opposites.

medium of the canvas, but to reinvent painterly technique in her poetry - the artist was not a formidable figure in the poet's life in the way that Lindsay and the Reeds were in the lives of their young proteges. Nor was she a fire and brimstone reactionary in the manner of Jack Lindsay - or a rebel in the style of Max Harris. Thea Proctor was simply a polished and innovative technician whose talent for design and instinct for the rules of composition made her a natural mentor for the young poet. Dobson's preference for creativity in isolation also sets her apart from the Vision and Angry Penguins schools - as does her interest in the finer details of a painting. While Slessor tends to respond to the broader sweep of the brush (as in Rubens' paintings, for example) and Tucker to the mood, rather than the specifics, of Eliot's despair, Dobson is gripped by the play of light on a jug, the raised eyebrow in a portrait, the unshed tears of a child standing slightly apart from the action, the touching ignorance of a peasant unable to grasp some great meaning in the action unfolding before him.

What *does* connect her with her contemporaries and predecessors, however, is something which is not so much uniquely, as inextricably, Australian. The "mythologising" impulse present in poetry and painting (an impulse encouraged, ironically enough, by a strong oral tradition in aboriginal and white bush culture) is also present in Dobson's own impulse to "spin a tale" about a painting, to create a new and distinctive story from the imaginative interpretation of a scene. Even more importantly, she is drawn, in the Australian tradition, to a world where actions speak louder than words. Nolan's ability to tell the tale of Ned Kelly in a silent, but visually eloquent, painting narrative finds its poetic equivalent in Dobson's capacity to recreate a scene in which the

economy of one word speaks amply for ten. Like Nolan, like Slessor - like Tucker, Hester and Gleeson - Dobson is concerned with the outward expression of half-submerged emotions and ideas. The larger than life quality she loves in painting connects her with the Australian fascination for the exaggerated and the exotic, for the tension-filled silences that fill the continent's emptiness and fuel its most unresolvable mysteries. It is these two impulses - the desire to paint a scene using words rather than pigment and the inexplicable need to describe the dramatic qualities of silence - which bind Rosemary Dobson to the Australian "school" of interaction between the arts.

Critical Approaches to Painting as a Subject in Dobson's Poetry

Dobson's choice of painting as a persistent theme in her poetry has certainly been responsible for what Leonie Kramer identified more than 20 years ago as a "critical coolness" toward her work. [2] While her extraordinary ability to intellectualise those elusive qualities which make a painting a masterpiece has endeared her poetry to many critics, others have remained resolute in their conviction that the visual and the verbal arts do not mix well - not even in the case of a "flexible traditionalist" such as Dobson.

Throughout the late '60s and '70s, Dobson's work received a degree of earnest and long-overdue critical attention - particularly in appraisals by James McAuley, Stuart Lee and Robyn Heales. But while these went a considerable way toward filling the gap left by a general lack of appreciation for Dobson's poetry, recent times have again seen a

[2] Kramer 6.

certain reticence in examinations of her work. As many critics have noted, part of the problem lies in Dobson's unassuming demeanour as a poet - and in her relatively unconventional choice of painting as a source of inspiration (at least in her earlier poetry). Falling as it does into a grey and largely unexplored area of Australian literature, Dobson's poems about painting - and the influence of art in her work as a whole - present unique difficulties for critics unversed in the elusive language of pictures. Far from exploring the special relationship which exists *ut pictura poesis* between the two arts, they have sought only to define its limits.

The reasons for this uninformed or even prejudicial attitude are multifarious. There is a feeling among some critics that the painting says it all - that an unfathomable silence is, in fact, the key to a painting's great ability to enthrall its viewers. To break this silence is to take away the painter's great impetus to paint - that is, to express in pictures that which cannot be said in words. But perhaps the most serious reservation of all is that poetry, in covering the same ground twice, is reducing itself to the despised status of mimicry or even secondhand interpretation. As A. D. Hope writes,

> On the face of it ... there seems no reason why the creative imagination should not feed on the creative imagination of others with as much success as upon the raw materials of experience. Yet such works are apt to be irritating, however well done, because we feel they are parasitic growths - the life of feeling in them is not

> drawn from their own roots but from the sap of bodies other than their own ... [3]

Hope, however, qualifies this harsh judgement by making reference to the countless fables, legends, histories and even ideas which have provided other poets with their inspiration. As his argument implies, there is very little - if, indeed, anything - which can be considered truly original in the arts. Pointing out that the only criterion for good literature should be the quality of the work, Hope acknowledges that his unfavourable assessment of the genre

> ... is not true of genuine artists who have always drawn their inspiration from the whole range of human experience. They assimilate and create anew whether their subject is a music lesson or Jan Vermeer's painting of a music lesson; whether they recreate the myth of Bacchus and Ariadne from Titian's masterpiece or from the literary sources on which Titian drew for his inspiration.[4]

In his article, "Poems about Paintings", published in Quadrant in 1983, Donald Moore makes a similar point. Opening with the contention that "poems about paintings are a difficult genre which few poets can sustain for any length of time", Moore explores

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[3] A. D. Hope, "Rosemary Dobson: A Portrait in a Mirror" Quadrant 16.4 (1972): 10.

[4] Hope 10.

a number of works by well-known exponents of the genre, including Auden, Dobson, Diesendorf and others. [5] Praising Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" for its "profound observation by a poet about humanity observed by a painter", Moore acknowledges that, wherever there is skill and genuine feeling, poems about paintings can be lifted to new heights: [6]

> Clearly, when the emotion that informs the work of the painter arouses an emotional response in the poem, though it is not necessary for the emotions to be identical, or even in the same key, a poem about a painting can be successful. [7]

Moore does, however, go on to deplore those poems in which description of the painting forms the main element: like Hope, he is critical of poets who fail to extract greater riches from the work. But while Moore finds much to praise in the work of Dobson and Auden, he concludes, virtually without explanation - and with, one feels, a touch of prejudice - that poems about paintings have their limitations if practised to an excessive degree. "Poetry about the work of visual artists is indeed a difficult genre," he writes, "though not an impossible one. But obviously a wise poet will not "try to sustain it for any length of time"." [8]

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[5] Donald Moore, "Poems about Painting" Quadrant 28.6 (1983): 24.

[6] Moore 28.

[7] Moore 28.

[8] Moore 28.

Rosemary Dobson, of course, is a poet who has done so - and with many more successes than failures to her credit. Unlike poets such as William Carlos Williams or R. S. Thomas, however, Dobson does not rely on descriptive evocations of painting to carry the weight of her work: whether sharing in the moment of illumination which compels a painter to paint, or in the lives of those bit-players who gather round a nativity or walk unwittingly through the heart of some great action, Dobson is drawn into all the possible worlds presented by art. Sometimes she will pause to describe those feelings which a beautiful painting arouses in its viewers - or weave her own stories about some detail in the work which teases her imagination. Even more importantly, the inspiration she derives from a particular painting may lead to the creation of a wholly new picture in her poetry - one described by words rather than paint.

It is interesting to note that Dobson is as critical as Moore in her judgement of those poets who look at painting from a purely descriptive viewpoint. In her article, "Poetry and Painting: A Personal View", published in Quadrant in 1977, Dobson laments that Carlos Williams' poem, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is little more than a poor cousin to Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts", an evocative work on the same subject. Praising Auden for extending "the range of the poem to take in all the great collections of European paintings to which his comments may apply", Dobson applauds his "ever-widening interpretation of the painting" which "directs our attention outward". [9] Expressing disappointment, on the other hand, that Carlos Williams' poem "suffers by

[9] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 70.

comparison", Dobson gently complains that what "he does is simply to describe the painting, encouraging us to walk into it by using words of action and sensibility". [10]

While Dobson, too, "walks" into a painting, taking her readers with her, she does not return empty-handed. The poet's restless intellect and insatiable curiosity with respect to how paintings are made - and what they mean - will not allow her to be content with a mere replication, or even interpretation, of their beauty. Dobson wants to discover a painting's larger significance, to slip into the skin which the painter wore when he looked at the world in precisely that way. And, because each painting is unique, her approach differs from poem to poem. Whether dramatising the lives of the figures in the painting or weaving verse about a picture which she has "simply imagined", Dobson rarely adopts the same mood or attitude twice. [11] She is unfailingly true both to her feelings for the painting and to the vision which gave it birth. Not content with effusive admissions of admiration, Dobson strives to "get inside" a painting, to define exactly what it is that makes the work so remarkable or, conversely, to express that quality which keeps it shrouded in mystery.

Interestingly, Dobson makes a valid point about the curious *angst* with which poems about paintings are often criticised. Quoting at length from John Berryman's commentary on his own poetic tribute to a painting by Brueghel, the poet highlights a

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[10] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 70.

[11] Hope 10.

frequent misinterpretation of the genre by scholars and critics. Referring to the poem, "Winter Landscape", Berryman remarks (somewhat bitterly),

> It derives its individuality, if I am right, from a peculiar steadiness of sombre tone ... and from its peculiar relation to its materials - drawn, of course, from Brueghel's famous painting. The poem is sometimes quoted, and readers seem to take it for either a verbal equivalent to the picture or (like Auden's fine Brueghel poem, "Musee de Beaux Arts", written later) an interpretation of it. Both views I would call wrong, though the first is that adopted in a comparative essay on picture and poem published by two aestheticians from the University of Notre Dame ... Nowhere [in the article] is anything to be said as to what the poem is about, nor is any interest expressed in that little topic; and the relation between the works is left obscure except for the investigation of affinities. An investigation of differences would have taken them farther. [12]

Berryman goes on to explain exactly what his poem is about, making the crucial point that the painting acts as a screen for his projected concerns about the imminent outbreak of World War II. Written against "the hysterical political atmosphere of the period", the work, according to Berryman,

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[12] Quoted in Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 70-71.

> is a war-poem, of an unusual negative kind. The common title of the picture is "Hunters in the Snow" and of course the poet knows this. But he pretends not to, and calls their spears (twice) 'poles', the governing resultant emotion being a certain stubborn incredulity - as the hunters are loosed while the peaceful nations plunge again into war. This is not the subject of Brueghel's painting at all, and the interpretation of the event of the poem proves that the picture has merely provided necessary material, from a tranquil world, for what is necessary to be said - but which the poet refuses to say - about a violent world. [13]

Berryman's point is particularly important, given that "Winter Landscape" has succeeded in using the painting's action for its own ends and, whether intentionally or not, in duplicating the mysterious silence which enshrouds the work. There is a powerful tension and irony when this reading is applied - a product, as Berryman says, of the poet's refusal to spell out his intentions. By silently drawing parallels between the action in Brueghel's painting (fig. 7.1) and the atmosphere of impending evil enshrouding Europe before the war, the poem has itself become a new picture - one charged with the "visual" silence of the original and the wordless horror of waiting for what will certainly be a tragic event.

[13] Quoted in Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 71.



Fig. 7.1. Pieter Brueghel, Hunters in the Snow, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. 1565. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

As she is so inclined to do with her own poetic characters, Dobson lets Berryman's words speak for themselves. There is no doubt, however, that she considers his viewpoint a vital one. For Dobson, poems about paintings need not be singled out as belonging to a special group or genre - they are part of the poetic mainstream and as able to express the scope and complexity of human experience as the visual works they imbibe. Painting, in this sense, holds the key to a vast storehouse of human experience and understanding - one which, when opened, can enrich all poetry. Assuming a "sensitive interchange" between the two arts, the poet gently reminds us that each shares the other's interest in the fables and tragedies which reflect the beauty and complexity of our own lives. [14] "Both poets and artists will always return for inspiration to the great universal myths" she says. "As the American painter, Mark Rothko, has said, we need again and again to redescribe their implications through our own experience." [15]

Bridging the Gulf

Contrary to the charge that a heavy reliance on other works of art ultimately dulls a poet's inspiration, Dobson finds her own poetic voice in the impulse to penetrate and express the silence confronting every viewer of a painting. The poet's forays into that part of the imagination where only the eye can "hear", urges her to chart in words the world of unspoken meanings which the painter "narrates". In giving voice to this "eloquent

[14] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 68.

[15] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 71.

silence", Dobson achieves more than just a verbal recreation of the painting. [16] Her aim is not to describe the work, but to explore its hidden possibilities. Not content with the mere act of looking, Dobson is compelled to study, investigate, explain and even speculate. What lives live on, immortalised or imprisoned, beneath the paint? Under what strange circumstances do artists conceive their masterpieces? How does painting, a spatial rather than a temporal art, conquer the intangible regions of time? Whether musing on the cafe-patron Venus who inspires Botticelli's painting or rapt in contemplation of "an angel's wing" ("The Bystander" 1.3), Dobson displays an extraordinary ability to reach through the paint and into the three-dimensional spaces of the world beyond the picture frame.

When Dobson turns to painting as a theme, however, she does not search for inspiration in the arbitrary arrangement of figures on a canvas, but in the deeper reasons for their presence and significance. Like Berryman and Auden, the poet does not content herself with the mere evocation of a painting - nor does she attempt to rival what the painter already has achieved in paint. Dobson sets out to paint her own pictures in words, whether these pictures are themselves based on paintings or on images from life. The point is an important one, given that painting provides Dobson with an inexhaustible supply of ideas - few of which are used twice. As A. D. Hope so humbly admits, even he is unable to distinguish between those of Dobson's poems which are based on real pictures and those which she has imagined.

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[16] Quoted from "In a Convex Mirror" in Stuart Lee, "Rosemary Dobson" Quadrant 9.4 (1965): 57.

"Wonder" is typical of the way in which Dobson uses painting to create something wholly new in her poems. Inspired by a reproduction of Jan van Eyck's Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife (fig. 7.2), the poet leads the reader through the pages of the book and into the very room in which the painting has been conceived. Depicting her own picture of the "soundless room" (2) with its "windows open, a little late sunlight, the mirror,/Two figures, a dog" (3-4), Dobson draws us into the inner sanctum of the artist's imagination - and, ultimately, her own. Just as Roland Barthes declared that the death of the author would enable innumerable new texts to be created with every fresh reading and every fresh *reader* of the work, so does Dobson show us a Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife transformed by her own unique perspective. [17] Even more startling is Dobson's ability to give existing paintings a life beyond the picture frame - one which effectively makes a new work of the original. The poet captures the graceful action of Botticelli's Primavera (fig. 7.3) with such skilful insight that we are instantly transported to that "Landscape in Italy" where, for one unforgettable moment, the borders between art and reality become blurred. So does Dobson suddenly realise

> That but five steps from where we lay
> Drowsing upon the short-cropped grass
> Lightly, with all her springtime flowers,
> Did Botticelli's Flora pass. (6.1-4)

[17] See Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. (1977; London: Fontana, 1987).

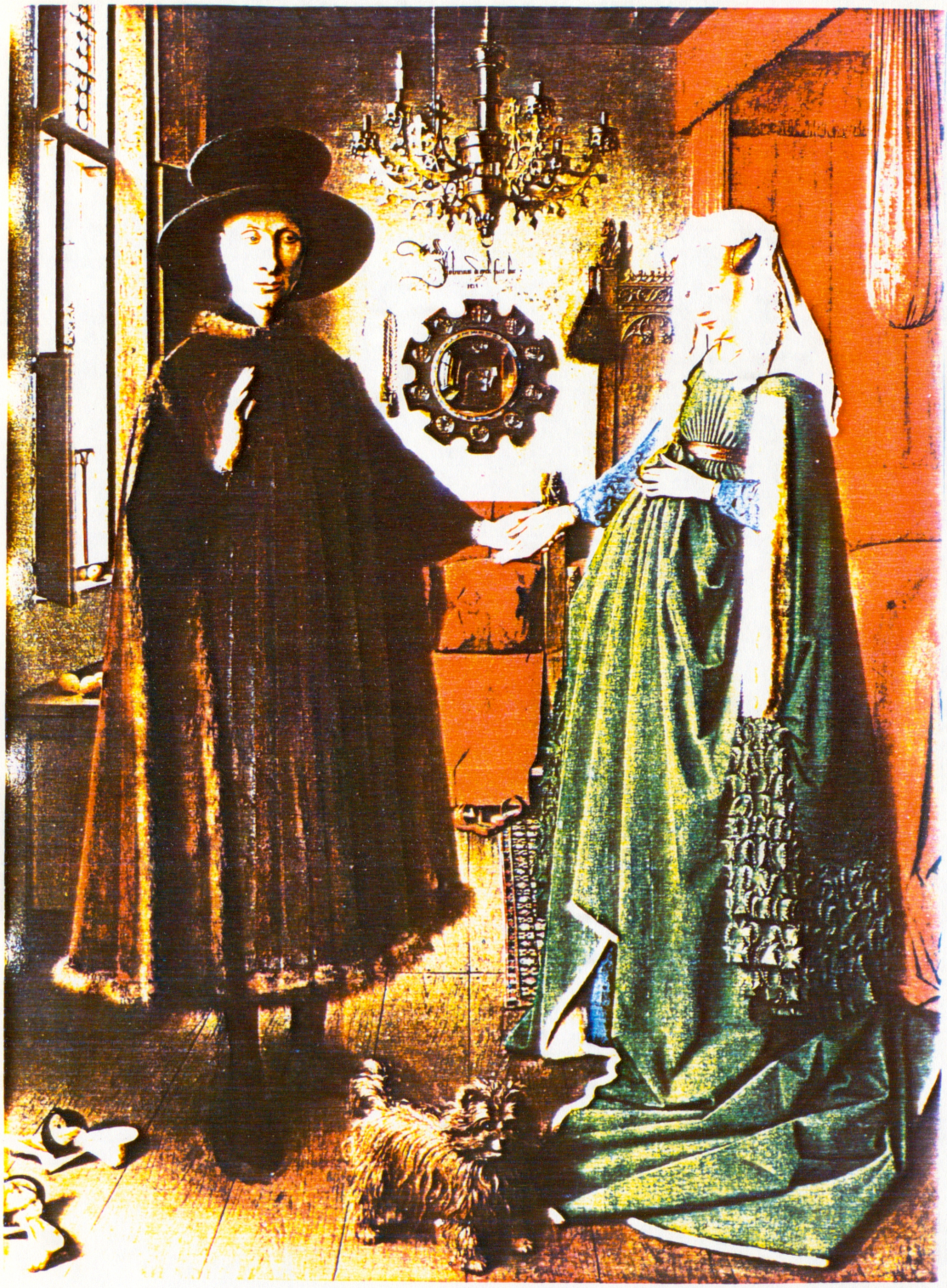

Fig. 7.2. Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife, National Gallery, London. 1434. Page 121 of the Larousse Dictionary of Painters.



Fig. 7.3. Sandro Botticelli, Primavera (detail), Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

The poet's talent for capturing the elusive mood and feeling of a painting (or the mystery of the almost inexpressible response it engenders in its viewers) is as evident in those paintings which she simply imagines as in those which she celebrates. In the title poem from her first collection, In a Convex Mirror, Dobson attaches a religious significance to the lovers who stand "As pictured angels touching wings" (1.2). In this poem, "The room is still and brushed with dusk" (2.1) and the "breathing light" (3.1) fixed "to clear-cold glass" (3.2). While the poet does not at any point spell out the intangible light-shot beauty which surrounds the lovers, it is quietly and powerfully implicit in every line. This astonishing ability to convey that exact quality which makes a painting special reaches it finest expression in "Child with a Cockatoo". Here Dobson gives full rein to her painter's imagination, conjuring an entirely new picture of the child's world juxtaposed in a "stormy landscape with a swirl of drapes" (8) against the exotica of "Terra Australis" (18). Having described the painter's original conception of the "small, grave" (6) Lady Anne, standing with "five bare toes beneath her hem" (7), Dobson zooms back from the painting to reveal a new vision of the child fretting miserably as "the painter's brush" flickers "between the palette and the cloth" (11). Yearning to join her sisters who play against a backdrop of "sun-drenched orchard", the child is given a sulphur-crested cockatoo which not only drives "the tears away" (14) but conjures strange new pictures of "dark men moving silently through trees,/Of stones and silent dawns, of blackened earth/And the long golden blaze of afternoon" (28-30).

Like Slessor and Keats before her, Dobson is tantalised - and ultimately perplexed - by the power which painting has over time. Whether evoking the mysterious beauty of

renaissance works or delving into the probable lives of figures in the picture plane, the poet is intrigued by the multi-layered reality which art emulates, imitates or freezes. But unlike Slessor, who is swept up by the broader significance of paintings - by the energy and sensuality of a Lindsayian bacchanalia or a voluptuous work by Rubens - Dobson is enthralled by detail, by the tremendous scope for the imaginative interpretation of symbols, figures and sub-plots which crowds every inch of the medieval or renaissance canvas. As obsessed with the domestic, as she is with the intellectual, life of the painting, Dobson weaves her own stories and legends about the subjects and the creators of the works she loves. It seems that Dobson is compelled to ask of *all* paintings (as she does in "Still Life"):

> Whose was the hand that held the brush?
> And who the guest who came to break
> The loaf which I, three hundred years
> Belated, still reach out to take? (3.1-4)

Dobson is drawn to explore the reality in which the painting was conceived - that seemingly mundane moment in the everyday history of ordinary men and women which, transformed by the artist's eye, becomes one of extraordinary beauty. Haunted by unanswered questions and by ghosts from the painting's past, Dobson searches for the truth behind its conception and for the artist's unspoken message. Even more urgently, the poet struggles to close the gap created by the painting's provocative silence - to give voice to those thoughts and imagined visions which crowd not only the minds of artists

but all admirers of great art. It is this unquenchable curiosity which allows her to enter the dead body of Saint Anthony in "Two Visions" and, disconcertingly, look at the world of the painting from within the canvas:

> How strange to lie upon a bed
> With hands and feet disposed for death
> And smooth-shut eyes, while overhead
> A flight of angels fills the ear
> With, stainless-sweet and water-clear,
> Blown trumpets sounded by their breath. (1-6)

Dobson's exploration of the painter's psyche leads her further into the painting than most onlookers - or even poets - would dare to venture. In "Painter of Antwerp", Dobson not only imagines the moment in which Brueghel was inspired by his vision of Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (fig. 7.4) but speculates on the ordinary human emotion which may have prompted it:

> At the top of the Alps he paused perhaps, looked
> backwards,
> Rejecting the fanciful, and took for a painting
> Ploughman, fisherman, and moon-faced shepherd,
> The furrow cut cleanly, the sheep contented;
> Put thumb to nose with neither pride nor envy
> At soaring wings - a Southerner's invention -



Fig. 7.4. Pieter Brueghel, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels. Page 25 of Pieter Bruegel The Elder. By Wolfgang Stechow. New York: Abrams, n.d.

Icarus sprawling, two feet out of the sea. (9-16)

For Dobson, as for Slessor, the painting is a precious receptacle for moments lost or forgotten. But while Slessor, responding to the startling visual impact of a much-admired work by Rubens or Lindsay, is inspired to paint his own word-picture, Dobson delves into the painting's inner world, extracting ideas, stories, characters and dialogue with the all the studied fascination of a child reaching its hand into a lucky dip. There is a recognition in Dobson's work that beauty in art is immortal - as there is in Slessor's. The essential difference between the two, however, is that Dobson absorbs herself in the minutest details and subtleties of this painted beauty. Whereas Slessor stands back and watches enthralled as a painting comes to life before his very eyes, Dobson seems almost to step inside the canvas and show herself around, looking under rocks and slipping into cafes with the determined intention of finding out exactly what it was the artist meant. Like Alice in a painted Wonderland, Dobson is endlessly mystified and intrigued by the characters she encounters.

The surprise, however, is not so much that she has stepped through the looking glass into a world of great art, but that this strange and beautiful reflection of reality is filled with scenes from every day life. Perhaps even more surprising is the discovery that this apparent plainness and sameness has a beauty which only the artist can see. So does Dobson realise, sitting in cafe with Botticelli, that even the seemingly ordinary movements of a fellow patron can flame into grace and loveliness - a loveliness which the artist is inspired to immortalise in his master painting of Venus rising from the sea.

Like Slessor, Dobson is obsessed with the past. But unlike the creator of those beautiful poems on memory, "Captain Dobbin" and "Five Bells", Dobson seems, at first glance, less interested in untangling the webs of experience and loss which enmesh us in real life than in exploring the past as it is almost alchemically preserved and presented in the form of a painting. Intrigued by the disparities conjured by time captured in one century continuing to exist in another, the poet explores the possible worlds of the past from the window of the painting. Pictures are, for Dobson, almost like films when viewed from the right perspective. Venturing into the voids created by the painting's stillness and silence, the poet takes her own imagination and uses it to unlock that invisible doorway opening on to a fluid and vibrant past.

Dobson is not disinterested in the transient nature of time, however. Particularly in her more mature works, she shows a deep understanding of the limitations which time imposes on human beings, as well as a melancholy recognition of impending mortality which afflicts nearly all poets. Like the younger Slessor, she is drawn to myths and legends - whether of her own making or someone else's. But while Slessor, in his later work, substitutes this early passion for a love of the dreams and legends spun by ordinary people about their own lives, Dobson turns not only to the ordinary people of her own time for inspiration, but to the bewildered peasants, curious wide-eyed boys and innocent young maidens who crowd the canvases of works from centuries past.

On the surface of it, time seems less a burden than an intrigue for the poet - a game to be played with those endless possibilities for creative interpretation and

story-telling which exist within every painting. Dobson is fascinated not only with the immortality of what the artist paints but with the curious relationship between time past and time present which the painting sets up: her insatiable intellectual curiosity allows her to see not only a frozen gesture or movement in time but the continuance of that moment through the present and into the future. The poet's determination to understand completely that precise second "out of time" in which the artist magically commits reality to paint, effectively brings it to life. Less tormented than Slessor by the inevitable passage of the days and years, Dobson is more often given to a mood of wonder in her most memorable pieces on time. In "Paintings", for example, the poet celebrates the mystical power of art "present in the order of eternity":

> And you, grave Florentine, who turn
> And look at me with eyes that burn,
> I hear you asking - "What is Time
> Since Art has conquered it? I speak
> Five hundred years ago. You hear.
> My words beat still upon your ear". (3.1-6)

Despite the reference to "conquered", there is a strong sense in "Paintings" that art is less a conqueror of time than an entrepeneurial partner, enabling us to speak through the centuries with men and women long forgotten or dead. There is an easy flow between past and present in Dobson's mature work which suggests that she is more at ease than Slessor and Keats with the notion of time suspended in art. While the latter poets initially see art as a means of transcending, avoiding or even changing reality, the

younger Dobson seems to see art from a dual perspective - one which allows her to look at a painting as a means of escape or as something which can be cruel in its refusal to allow the passage of time to proceed. In "The Devil and the Angel", Dobson views "The Dutch Tavern Portrait" with apparent distaste:

> Here was this fellow caught upon the canvas
> Between the floor and ceiling, Heaven and Hell,
> Whilst all day long the idle and the curious
> Stabbed him with glances in his Purgatory,
> Sharp like the vultures tearing at Prometheus. (2.4-8)

There is a subtle, but nonetheless similar, sense of cruelty in "Child with a Cockatoo". In this poem, Dobson sees the little girl in the portrait as being cut off from the joys and vibrancy of life through the mere act of sitting for the painter:

> And, who knows why, perhaps my lady wept
> To stand so long and watch the painter's brush
> Flicker between the palette and the cloth
> While from the sun-drenched orchard all the day
> She heard her sisters calling ... (9-13)

As Dobson's poetry has matured, the bulk of her work has been focused away from painting. Just as Slessor discarded his youthful obsession with the past - and with the time-conquering power of art - to face his own mortality, so does Dobson turn

increasingly to the lives of the people she knows and loves for her inspiration. In doing so, however, the poet does not quit the canvas with a sigh of regret, stepping backwards through the frame into the reality she had left behind. As curious as ever about the looking-glass world of the imagination, Dobson moves forward through the reflected landscapes of painting and into a reality illuminated by her intimate knowledge and understanding of art.

The Painterly Poet

The key to Dobson's poetry lies not in her choice of painting as a predominant theme, but in her ability to look at verse from a painter's perspective. It is not merely Dobson's enormous capacity for empathy which enables her to penetrate the artistic psyche in poems such as "In a Cafe" or "Wildwood". Able to describe with eerie plausibility that moment of inspiration which gave Botticelli's Birth of Venus its genesis, the poet seems as knowledgeable about the impulse to paint as she is about the urge to create poetry. A former teacher of art theory and pupil of Thea Proctor, one of Australia's best-known artists, Dobson endows her work with all the benefits of a painter's skill and imagination. In the same way that Slessor responds to the visual stimulus of drawings by Lindsay, devoting himself to the expression of "concrete images" in his more mature work, Dobson applies the principles of painting to her own poetry. Succeeding to an astonishing degree in conveying those exact qualities which make a painting both beautiful and memorable, the poet uses words as artists might use paint. Admitting that she often thinks "of the technique of poetry in terms of the technique of painting", Dobson brings to her work the finely tuned sense of balance, proportion and

harmony which distinguishes those masterpieces she admires. [18] Whether exploring the life of a painting or painting pictures from life, it is this characteristic, perhaps more than any other, which gives Rosemary Dobson's poetry its extraordinary degree of technical accomplishment and sensitivity.

The most obvious result of this influence (and one which she shares with Kenneth Slessor) is a predilection for concrete images. In an early poem, "Summer's End", Dobson paints a startling picture of that exact moment in which the seasons merge and "the first wave of winter"

> Sweeps in a flood the sun-hats and the surfboards,
> The spotted scarves and the sunshades striped like candy,
> The children screaming at the water's edge with the seagulls
> And the indolent sleepers on the sand -
> Carries them in with a curl and a crash to the tramline
> To the dignified bus like a rock to rebuff the confusion
> And the foam and splash of departure. (3-9)

The beauty of this poem is that it "reads" like a narrative mural. Moving from the momentarily sun-drenched beach through the wind-buffeted confusion of crowds making for the safety of a tram, "Summer's End" is a perfect example of the poet's rare ability to make a story, virtually without commentary, from a string of images. This talent for the

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[18] Rosemary Dobson, interview with John Thompson, "Poetry in Australia: Rosemary Dobson" Southerly 28.3 (1968): 204.

telling of a strong pictorial tale pervades virtually all of Dobson's poetry. Whether painting a simple picture of "a child with a jug held carefully,/The cat with its back arched to a query, and the knocker/A little too high for her hand" ("One Section" 1.1-3) or luxuriating in the vibrancy of "the ghost of that gold-crested bird/Who lit the morning sky with flame" ("Fire" 2.2-3), Dobson's natural impulse is toward the strikingly visual - an impulse almost certainly encouraged by her painting studies.

Dobson's obsessive interest in painting, however, has contributed far more to her poetry than the preference for strong visual images which Slessor inherited from his association with Lindsay. The poet considers her practical knowledge of painting as being essential not only to a deep understanding and appreciation of the visual works she explores, but to the honing of her poetic skills. Having stated her conviction that "of all the arts, poetry and painting are most closely related", Dobson remarks in "Poetry and Painting: A Personal View", that the arts have much to give each other: [19]

> Because I believe that the practice of one art can greatly contribute to achievements in another I continue to take lessons in painting intermittently, and to maintain a certain level of skill ... Over and above an absorbed interest in painting my preoccupation is with poetry and the writing of poetry, and I concentrate therefore on the poet's exploration of painting, rather than the reverse. [20]

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[19] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 68.

[20] Dobson, "Poetry and Painting" 68.

Given this conviction, it is not surprising that Dobson cites the years spent studying design under Thea Proctor as being among the most valuable of her learning experiences as a poet. Again stressing her belief that the arts can have a cross-fertilising effect on each other, not only in terms of inspiration, but increased skill and insight, Dobson writes

> From Thea Proctor (admirably disciplined artist) I learnt discipline of line, which contributed greatly to whatever technical skill I have in poetry. I believe that a competence in one art can greatly assist a competence in another. I had no doubt as to which art - poetry or painting - I wished principally to pursue, but I believe one throws light on the other, and both engage my interest. [21]

Interestingly, Dobson has attributed whatever aesthetic "taste" she may have to her association with Thea Proctor and, it is presumed, to the lessons of line, balance, symmetry and harmony learned under the artist's tuition (fig. 7.5) - lessons which linger on in her own work. Paying special tribute to the "instinctive rightness" with which Dobson arranges "visual" objects in "verbal" space - an ability shown to full advantage in "Still Life" - James McAuley notes of her poetry that

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[21] Rosemary Dobson, "A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting of the 1940s" Southerly 33.4 (1973): 366. For a detailed analysis of Thea Proctor's impact on Dobson's poetry see Robyn S. Heales, "Art Builds on Art: Rosemary Dobson and Thea Proctor" Australian Literary Studies 7.1 (1975): 64-71.



Fig. 7.5. Thea Proctor, Souvenirs. 1927. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

> Things or impressions are placed with effortless rightness within the logical-grammatical space framed by the verse: there is room enough around them but not too much. The first line presents three objects, the second one, the third two. One might think there is nothing in this: after all if one is naming objects they have to occur in some order or phrasing. But one has only to look at the work of someone who lacks an instinctive sense of how to dispose things in verbal space to see that a special faculty is involved. [22]

Significantly, Dobson often expresses her thoughts on poetic form and technique in terms of painting composition. Demonstrating a strong sense of pictorial organisation, the poet refers to the genre of poems written in a series as providing "an opportunity to arrange ideas in relation to one another, as one might arrange objects in space to construct a harmony, each expressing something by itself and something else in relation to other objects". [23] In an otherwise disparaging review of Dobson's work, published in Meanjin in 1951, Patricia Excell also identifies the poet's remarkable ability to impart the quality of still-life in her poems. Referring to "The Devil and the Angel", a largely humorous dialogue on the choice between heaven and hell, Excell writes

> Max Friedlander's comments on the Dutch still-life painters of the 17th century seem to apply to Rosemary Dobson: 'No people and no period have represented everything visible with so uniform and

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[22] McAuley 4.

[23] Rosemary Dobson, "Preface" to Selected Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973) xii.

> loving a sympathy as the Dutch of the 17th century; with so objective, almost scientific, an accuracy of perception; without asking about the spiritual significance and valuing the thing accordingly.' [24]

While Excell is wide of the mark in assuming a lack of spiritual depth in Dobson's work, she is right in acknowledging that her poetry is stamped with all the assurance of the master painter. Even those poems not specifically dedicated to painting display a sensitive awareness of the parallels between making poetic images for the gratification of the mind's eye and the conjuring of pictures for the enjoyment of the physical eye. Fence posts are "pricked and patterned with frost" ("Moving in a Mist" 2), ivy tendrils are "latticed with sun" ("Country Press" 13) and flowers are described as "field-embroidering" ("Landscape in Italy" 2.4). Using words like paint daubs to fix a mood or character, the poet builds up layer after layer of visual detail - a technique used to capture the texture and variation of landscape in "Australian Holiday, 1940". [25] The poem's opening is almost painterly in its appeal, a quality derived from the measured

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[24] Jones 94.

[25] Robyn S. Heales writes in "Rosemary Dobson: The Influence of Art", published in Australian Literary Studies 6.3 (1974): 253:

> Owing to the monosyllabic clusters which emphasize the telling images, words in 'The Mirror' resemble brushstrokes, all deliberately placed, some more emphasised than others, until a texture of light and dark is not only strongly visualised but mirrored in diction; significant words are highlighted against their darker web with the peculiar quality of light-reflecting raised surfaces of oil-paint. In this way the poem is infused with subtle light reminiscent of Vermeer's diffuse glow.

pace of the rising, falling metre and the sparseness with which Dobson distributes her adjectives:

> We have passed between the steep, scarped sides of the valley
> And emerge with the fields which slope to the gradual shore,
> They are golden and ripe for the harvest, falling
> In an ordered sequence of contour; behind them
> The wooded land leans to the broad back of the hill. (1-5)

Fittingly, this strong sense of design reaches its finest expression in the poem, "Still Life", from Dobson's second published collection, The Ship of Ice. The poet heaps up image after image in the first stanza to evoke the richness and reality of those objects in the painting which, even now, she reaches out hungrily to grasp:

> Tall glass, round loaf and tumbled cloth
> And leaning flask of smokey brown,
> The guttered candle and the cask;
> And Time and Silence flowing down,
>
> Welling against the canvas, held
> By stroke and feather-touch of paint
> As one might build a weir to hold
> Some spreading pool of sweet restraint. (v.1-2)

"Still Life" has a wonderful tactile quality, particularly in the first four lines, which succeeds in giving the objects a reality outside the painting and in duplicating the very "feel" and richness of paint (fig. 7.6). The painter's brushstroke, with all its sensuous, spontaneous precision, also fascinates the poet. In "The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian", Dobson captures her own lingering absorption in the painterly texture of the work - and the multitude of perfect details which combine to form an exquisite painting:

> My scarlet cloak lies on the ground,
> You note the texture of the fur,
> What miracles of art, you say,
> Those Flemish painters could command,
> Each brush-stroke like a single hair. (1.1-5)

In her careful crafting of pictures with words Dobson also achieves a special quality in her poetry - one which is rare even in the work of distinguished exponents of the genre such as Auden and Browning. This quality, which Robyn Heales has called "the nexus between creative literature and painting" is the very silence which has provoked the poet to a deeper exploration of art. [26] There is a dual sense in Dobson's poetry that she is eager to express this silence - and to overcome it. This observation is equally true of her work on themes drawn directly from life. Whether having learned the lesson from art - or perhaps recognising in painting a quality in keeping with her own poetic style - Dobson attaches more significance to the power of that which has been left unsaid than to

[26] Robyn S. Heales, "Art Builds on Art: Rosemary Dobson and Thea Proctor" Australian Literary Studies 7.1 (1955): 65.



Fig. 7.6. Jan Vermeer, Girl Asleep at a Table (still life detail), Metropolitan Museum, New York. Plate 23 of Johannes Vermeer: The Paintings. By Ludwig Goldscheider. 1958. London: Phaidon, 1967.

that which can be too easily expressed. As Leonie Kramer contends, the poet's strength "... lies not in her articulation of ideas, but in her definition of feeling. She is at her best when, instead of making statements about experience, she tries to convey its exact quality." [27]

The point made by Kramer is an important one, given that some critics have associated the poet's supposed lack of passion with her early preference for painting. While the intensity of her poetry has often been overlooked, belonging as it does "in the silence", it is just as evident - and just as critical - in her later poems about motherhood as in her celebration of an Annunciation by Crivelli. [28] That "doomed but urgent wish to express the inexpressible" which is inextricably linked with painting becomes, in Dobson's mature work, an attempt to give voice to that eloquent intensity of feeling which can only be described rather than explained. [29]

Into the Silence

Having approached poetry from the perspective of the painter - and painting from the perspective of the poet - Dobson succeeds in capturing that elusive quality which makes a painting so provocatively beautiful and mysterious. A. D. Hope, a poet who understands this extraordinary ability better than any of Dobson's critics, has described

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[27] Leonie Kramer, "The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson" Poetry Magazine No.2 (1968): 3.

[28] David Campbell, "Time and the Mirror" Southerly 17.1 (1965): 44.

[29] Dobson, Selected Poems xii.

the quality which distinguishes her poetry as one of "passionate serenity". [30] Referring to his mildly unfavourable review of Child with a Cockatoo, written almost 20 years before, Hope writes,

> It is a quality which I must admit to have turned the tables on me finally, since it is the one which distinguishes the great quattrocento and high Renaissance paintings up to that point in time where Mannerism introduced a busyness and agitation that gave painting so many new resources and at the same time removed its crowning glory. For the great achievement of all the great schools of painting which was then lost, was the kind of vision which is able to show the transitory, the mortal, the practical or the mundane, in a serene, contemplative stasis illuminated by the gaze of eternity. [31]

Qualifying his previous opinion that a poet who too often turns to the subject of painting "is in danger of diminishing his original vision and losing himself in facile and meaningless exercises", Hope reflects on the strengths which the genre has brought to Dobson's poetry - and Dobson's poetry to the genre. [32] Most particularly, he pays homage to that "quality of time presented in the order of eternity" which distinguishes

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[30] Hope 11.

[31] Hope 11.

[32] Hope 10.

both her poetry and the paintings which absorb her. [33] The poet somehow succeeds in voicing the silence which separates the viewer from the painting (a silence which also has the power to enthrall) without detracting from the work's magic. Endowed with a powerful sense of mystery, Dobson is more deeply interested in capturing that elusive quality of timelessness which so intrigues her in painting than in merely describing its formal parts. As Hope says, her poetry is not just given to "a celebration of the observed, the perceived, the actual" but to "the listening, the receptive but unfilled sense of something lying just beyond the frontiers of perception". [34]

Dobson's poem, "The Bystander", evokes both the stillness and the tragedy of failed aspiration in Peter Brueghel's painting, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. As the dramatic monologue, spoken by the peasant in the painting's foreground, unfolds, Dobson opens the reader's eyes with the same strange sense of calmness and even humour in the face of death and human failing which imbues Brueghel's work:

> I am the silly soul who looks too late,
> The dullard dreaming, second from the right.
> I hang upon the crowd, but do not mark
> (Cap over eyes) the slaughtered Innocents,
> Or Icarus, his downward-plunging flight. (3.1-5)

[33] Hope 11.

[34] Hope 14.

The strange conflict between detachment and involvement which this poem produces replicates the painting's effect on those who respond to its deep irony. Oblivious to the incongruous fall of Icarus (a man who thought he had discovered the secret of human flight) through the tranquil, almost dream-like world of the painting's background scenery, the peasant marches on with his laden barrow, preoccupied only with the testing business of day-to-day living. Aware of the conflict aroused by this uneasy contrast, Dobson manages to convey the paradoxical eloquence and aloofness which permeates the painting. David Campbell identifies Dobson's ability to capture, in the silence of the paintings she loves and the poetry she writes, the subtleties of unspoken feeling. Referring to her third publication, Child with a Cockatoo, Campbell recognises this quality as being typical also of painting:

> ...the best poems in Child with a Cockatoo have the aloofness of fine art; they are as immaculate as the paintings from which so many of them spring. And because they neither labour nor insist, they turn the scalpel of analysis. They are, you might say, in the silence. [35]

It is this refusal to "labour and insist" which many critics have mistaken for a lack of emotion in Dobson's work. Content to paint her picture and let the reader interpret the meaning, the poet infuses her work with a calmness and peace which echoes the very silence and stillness of the painting - a quality best described by the mysterious

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[35] Campbell 44.

introspection of Jan Vermeer's Maidservant Pouring Milk (fig. 7.7). "In a Cafe", one of the poet's earliest and most successful tributes to "silence and slow time", celebrates the imagined moment of Botticelli's inspiration for the Birth of Venus. [36] Using only visual images to describe that moment of artistic awareness in which time itself slows down, becoming still and silent under the painter's brush, Dobson effectively creates her own picture - one which she knows speaks ably for itself:

> She clasps the cup with both her hands,
> Over the rim her glance compels;
> (A man forgets his hat, returns,
> The waitress leans against the shelves).
>
> And Botticelli, painting in the corner,
> Glances absorbed across a half-turned shoulder
> Thinking of lilies springing where she walks
> As now she rises, moves across the room,
> (The yawning waitress gathers up the stalks,
> The ash, the butt-ends and the dregs of tea).
> Pausing between the gesture and the motion,
> Lifting her hand to brush away her hair,
> He limns her in an instant, always there
> Between the doorway and the emphatic till
> With waves and angels, balanced on a shell. (1-15)

[36] John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1.2).



Fig. 7.7. Jan Vermeer, Maidservant Pouring Milk, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. 1660. Plate 9 of Johannes Vermeer.

By conjuring images which could themselves have come from a painting - "She clasps the cup with both her hands" (1), "the waitress leans against the shelves" (4) - Dobson signals that some kind of dramatic event is imminent without actually saying so. Seeming to recognise her cue in the intensity of Dobson's focus on the scene, the coffee-drinking Venus "rises, moves across the room" (4) and, "Pausing between the gesture and the motion" (11), takes her rightful place among the waves and angels of Botticelli's masterpiece. At precisely this moment, the poet's and the painter's pictures become one. Dobson does not have to enunciate the wonder of such a thing happening, any more than a painting or photograph does. The intensity of verbs such as "compels" (2) and "clasps" (1) and the gentle surprise of phrases such as "thinking of lilies springing where she walks" (7) betray the wordless intensity of the scene. Because Dobson has shared in the experience of creating a masterpiece with Botticelli, she has also shared explicitly in his perception. Having committed her feelings about this mystical interlude to painting of a kind, there is simply nothing more to be said.

The Quality of "Unspokenness"

As Stuart Lee observes, Dobson's poems "are often communions rather than communications" - a quality evident in all her poems, regardless of their subject matter. [37] Her delightful "The Conversation", for example, celebrates the silence of ordinary people who may have all the feelings of the poet, but none of her expressive power. The

[37] Lee 57.

beauty of this work lies in its gentle, sympathetic humour and in Dobson's realisation that poets give voice to the thoughts and dreams of people other than themselves:

His old fist like a knotted branch
He punched into his cap
Meaning, "This is a morning! -
The mist like white scoured wool
Is teased and spread about the hills,
The valleys' bales are full."

I nodded in agreement
And likewise punched my hat
Seeming to say, "At noonday
The wind will comb and spin
That fleece of mist to thread of cloud
And night will wind it in." (1-12)

This poem is significant, threading links, as it does, to an Australian tradition of submerged "yearnings and pain". [38] In an interview with David Malouf, published in GH in 1989, Margaret Jones speaks of the writer's attempt in his novel, The Great World, to tell the story "of the inner life of ordinary people" - an inner life "which Australians, perhaps more than any other nationality (bred as we are in a laconical and

[38] Margaret Jones, "David Malouf: The Sound of Inner Voices" GH April, 1990: 94.

stoic tradition), find virtually impossible to express in words". [39] Interestingly, David Malouf is also drawn toward painting - and to the power of poetry which speaks for "the movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our other history". [40] Speaking of his intentions in writing The Great World, Malouf remarks that he is

> ... mainly interested in the point at which people make contact, but not entirely in words. Australians are people for whom unspokenness is an important quality. I'm interested in what is being conveyed under the action rather than what is played out through the action. [41]

Given that Malouf's comment calls to mind the verbally powerless characters drawn by Patrick White (another writer interested both in the processes of painting and the psyche of the painter) - as well as Dobson's own absorptions in the workings of silence - Malouf's assessment of the Australian tendency to an eloquent kind of wordlessness is fascinating. Considered in this context, Dobson's movement into the silences pervading both art and life may be less a function of her obsession with painting than an urge to express certain aspects of her nationality.

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[39] Jones 94.

[40] Quoted from The Great World in Jones 94.

[41] Quoted in Jones 96.

As in so much of her poetry, Dobson is inclined to say less than more about the workings of the heart. Tending to paint her emotions rather than spell them out, the poet often uses the deflected medium of the canvas to work out her own concerns and insecurities. There is in her early poetry, however, a quiet struggle between the forces of passion and the anti-forces of detachment. As Vivian Smith points out in a 1955 edition of The Bulletin, some of her poems "implicitly or explicitly lament a certain lack of intensity and daring", leaning instead toward "the passing but sometimes insistent temptation to leave things behind and escape from it all". [42] "Disconnected", a poem dealing with the dissolution of creativity, illustrates the frightening sense of detachment plagueing some of her early poetry. Finding a voice for the emptiness which grips her soul, Dobson speaks of a strange unwillingness to be connected with the reality around her:

Like spider webs the telephone wires,
Spun out in strands from pole to pole,
Link up the length from light to dark;
But something disconnects my soul.

Not dead or live I view detached
Trees like cut paper, or observe
Skywards and with a faint distaste
The moon, whose beckoning, rising curve

Compels me to no mute delight,

[42] Smith 53.

No quickening passion, grief or shame:

A million years ago she rose,

This evening is it not the same? (v.1-3)

The young poet uses art, however, to fill the void left by her shifting sense of dislocation from the world of feeling and experience. In poems such as "Letter to a Friend", the poet explores the same temptations which confront the artist in Tennyson's "Lady of Shallot". Writing from some tall "ivory tower" (46), Dobson is seduced by the unreality - and immortality - of her own poetic art. Weaving this theme about the legend of the sleeping beauty, Dobson writes of her momentary yearning to experience that abstract state of separation from the world which a complete absorption in art can bring:

So shall I prick my finger deep

And plunge the whole world into sleep

Until the sound of hooves below? ...

Or shall I overturn the wheel,

Escaping from the ivory tower

To pass old Time, not let him pass. (42-47)

As the last four lines of the poem reveal, however, the poet suddenly resists the urge to plunge into a world of unreality:

Banish the tempter and her cat,

Sharp eyed beneath the crooked hat

Agree though her devices fail,

She taught me how to spin a tale. (48-51)

While the poet's sojourn in the fantasy realms of the imagination has been fraught with the dangers which beset Keats in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", she has returned from her reveries with the ability to "spin a tale". In the same way, art provides Dobson with a means of mending the broken cords between herself and reality. Far from using painting as a means of escape from a life of feeling, Dobson immerses herself in it therapeutically, becoming, in effect, one with the work. All her passions seem suspended and illuminated in paint as she empathises with the reflected lives and feelings on the canvas: the poet not only picks about the gravel with real sparrows but with those who sing, seldom noticed, in the mirror world of the painting.

Not coincidentally, "Letter to a Friend" likens the poet to the sleeping princess who, as everyone knows, eventually wakes up to reality: despite initial difficulties in bringing about their union, art and the real world are destined to live happily ever after. Ultimately, Dobson's sojourn in the fairytale worlds of dreams, myths and paintings will, as they once did for Keats, lead her on to a better understanding of the world in which she lives and writes. As poet Douglas Stewart remarks of the more "tangible" and "durable" works which characterise her poetic maturity, "she has come out of fairytale into life". [43]

[43] Douglas Stewart, review of Child with a Cockatoo Red Page The Bulletin 1 June 1955: 2.

Painters, as well as poets, might agree with Dobson's claim that a competence in one art can greatly assist a competence in another. Just as an expanded visual awareness can broaden poetry's mainly verbal dimensions, so can a love of, or a leaning toward, literature give painting a lyricism and layering of meaning it otherwise might have lacked. Sidney Nolan is an obvious Australian example of those painters who have expressed an ongoing interest in the poetic process. An ardent admirer of French Symbolist poetry, the painter was himself a serious poet in his early twenties, remaining undecided for some years as to which artistic path he would eventually pursue. Dobson, too, was torn between the verbal and visual arts. As the poet wrote as late as 1973, "My education had equipped me with an eagerness to continue being educated, and to write - if not to write and paint." [44] Comparisons between the two are interesting given that each is drawn to the other's art. Painter and poet are roughly the same age and both have sought in some measure to satisfy their unrequited passion for words or paint by incorporating that passion in their work.

In light of their disparate approaches to tradition and experiment, Nolan and Dobson are, of course, an incongruous pairing - a point highlighted in comparisons between the detailed realism of "The Bystander" and the abstracted heroics of Nolan's Icare (fig. 7.8). Given, however, that painter and poet are so different in their responses, the question of why they chose their respective fields during a period of heightened

[44] Dobson, "A World of Difference" 365.



Fig. 7.8. Sidney Nolan, Icarus, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1943. Page 48 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

interaction between the arts is irresistible. Did Dobson's natural leaning toward discipline, together with her preference for classical forms in poetry and painting, steer her towards literature in the artistically experimental climate of the 1940s? As Dobson remarks, her largely traditional education - at Frensham college and, later, on an informal basis at Sydney University - also equipped her with the desire to write. Given the continuing tendency toward a pro-European conservatism in Australian literature at the time, particularly in Sydney, Dobson may well have found herself gravitating naturally toward the precision and restraint of words, rather than to the unpredictable fluidity of paint. Did Nolan, by the same token, reject the formalism of literature, turning instead to the expressive freedom offered by painting in the heady atmosphere of Melbourne during the war? Nolan's determination to be unfettered by formal constraints in his visual work is certainly well documented. While it would be far too simplistic to speak of regionalism - or even education - as being dominating forces in the evolution of Australian art and literature, the parallels to be drawn between painter and poet are, in this sense, fascinating.

Noted within the context of what Richard Haese has said about the atmosphere of cultural change which permeated Australia in the 1940s, the tendency of poet and painter to find their inspiration in other arts is particularly interesting. Although the most radical manifestations of this new artistic climate were to be found in Melbourne, it is nonetheless significant that Dobson began writing her poems on painting during a period in which conventional notions about poetry and painting were being challenged. The connection may not be such a tenuous one given that Dobson vividly remembers the

turmoil of that "stimulating and interesting" period in her 1973 article, "A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting in the 1940s" - and even recalls purchasing the notorious 1944 edition of Angry Penguins "with its Nolan cover". Although the poet protests that she was only "mildly interested" in the Ern Malley poems, feeling that she could be no more "committed" to the Angry Penguins than she was to the Jindyworobaks, it should be remembered that Dobson was writing within a strong, Sydney-based tradition established by Slessor, Lindsay and McCrae during the preceding three decades and that this was where her sympathies undoubtedly lay. [45] In the article already quoted, the poet speaks of the enormous debt she owes to Slessor's poetry ("the publication of One Hundred Poems in 1944 was surely the major event of the decade," she writes) - and of her personal contact with Norman Lindsay (fig. 7.9): [46]

> Norman Lindsay came occasionally to A & R, as did Percy Lindsay, painter, a most delightful visitor. More often I recall seeing Norman at the studio in Bridge Street, or on occasions at Springwood. At one stage, Norman became interested in painting and drawing portraits of poets - FitzGerald, Stewart, David Campbell. I sat for two portraits in oil and one drawing, and was fascinated with the experience of watching Norman at work.

[45] Dobson, "A World of Difference" 379.

[46] Dobson, "A World of Difference" 382. Lindsay sketched Dobson in the early 1940s and also painted a portrait now held in the Australian National Library.



Fig. 7.9. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Rosemary Dobson, National Library, Canberra.

> Sometimes Hugh McCrae came in and talked while Norman worked and I listened ... [47]

Although Dobson worked largely in isolation during the 1940s, it is more than likely that the dominating presence of artists such as Lindsay fuelled her interest in painting as both a theme and a source of poetic technique. There is no doubt, however, that her natural leaning towards painting made art an inevitable choice of subject matter not just in the Angry Penguins years, but in the decades to follow. While Dobson's absorption in painting began at a time when inter-artistic experiment was altering the course of Australian art and literature, both here and overseas (though in a manner which sits uneasily with that peculiar set of conditions which shaped Slessor's relationship with Lindsay or fuelled Nolan's attraction for Symbolist literature) she is both an exception and a rule in the theory that the inter-relations between the arts owes its impetus to the prevailing *zeitgeist*. Given that she was non-political in outlook, content to work in comparative isolation and ambivalent in her attitudes to modernism, Dobson seems to disprove the contention that revolution and inter-artistic experiment go hand in hand. In her urge to express the inexpressible through the "sublime eloquence" of poetry, however, she not only challenges that ancient system of differentiation between the arts in which space and time both have their proper spheres, but concurs with a uniquely Australian impulse to explain a strange and primitive world - and the silent contemplation it encourages - with images, symbols and pictures. [48]

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[47] Dobson, "A World of Difference" 376.

[48] Mitchell 110.

Conclusion

Since the writing of Slessor's first poems to Lindsay, Australian poets have written many celebratory pieces in honour of local painters and their work, a tradition continuing in recent years with Margaret Diesendorf's tributes to Brett Whitely and Vivian Smith's ruminations on Edith Holmes' paintings. Patrick White and David Malouf are just two prominent writers who have celebrated artists - both real and imagined - in their novels: The Vivisector, Riders in the Chariot and Harland's Half-acre all have painters as their protagonists, each of whom is able to articulate in images "truths" and even realities beyond the scope of words. While there is an obvious irony at work here (given that all three "painters" are, in fact, the creations of writers) it is interesting to note that David Malouf has spoken often of the silence implicit in the Australian use of language and Rosemary Dobson written poems which convey the importance of image and gesture in ordinary local speech. White's complex layering of images can also be seen as denoting or compensating for the verbal impotence of his distinctively "Australian" characters.

Australian painting, by the same token, has tended towards story-telling and symbolism. Even such apparently straightforward images as Streeton's noon-day landscapes or McCubbin's shearers speak coded volumes about the sense of national white identity which dominated the country during the 1890s. By crystallising their own poetic views of the bush, painters gave Australians a vision of themselves - a point no doubt accounting for the tremendous popularity of Drysdale's stark outback images during the drought which devestated Australia in the 1940s (fig. i).

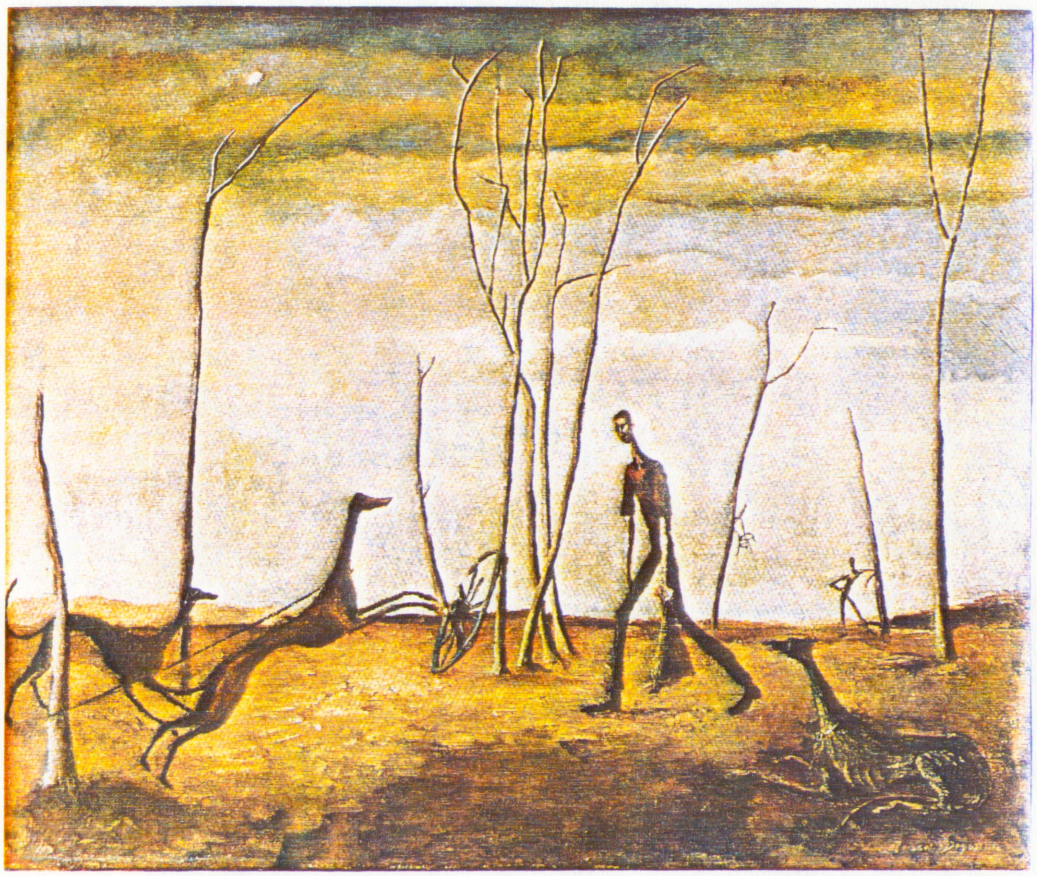

Fig. i. Russell Drysdale, Man Feeding His Dogs, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. 1941. Page 181 of Creating Australia.

It is perhaps simplistic, but nonetheless true, that, in its search for a fitting expression of the national character and landscape - an expression not easily described by the language of a transplanted culture - poetry has tended towards the graphic, the descriptive and the sensual, while painting has turned in its course to the visual metaphor. There are a variety of reasons for this seemingly natural empathy between the visual and the poetic in Australian art and literature, not the least being the strangeness of the bush and desert landscape to European eyes. Confronted with an exotic and (to some eyes) ugly spectacle of foreign flora and fauna, the first transplanted Australians struggled with visual images which had no roots in their English landscape tradition and, in many cases, no familiar or identifiable names. Describing this landscape objectively with European oils or watercolours - and an already biased visual vocabulary - was difficult enough without having to resort to an even more ill-equipped literary vocabulary. A new country, a new terrain, a new world filled with plants and animals previously unseen by European eyes required a new vocabulary - one which could not be fully satisfied even by Aboriginal expressions or explanations.

The loneliness and, in many cases, incredible hardness of bush life during the nineteenth century also encouraged the telling of tales and fables - "yarns" which had their power in images and actions rather than in words. Expressing the seemingly inexpressible on behalf of a largely uneducated and inarticulate population, these stories provided the beginnings of a literary tradition with a strong visual strain. Interestingly, the basis of any new language (particularly in primitive circumstances or even in a primitive landscape) is the symbol - and the basis of the symbol is the image which it

denotes or conjures. The first step towards developing a new system of verbal explanation or depiction is the drawing of pictures which capture that uniqueness. Nolan used the simplification of Ned Kelly's armour as a symbol of the loneliness of one man against the landscape and the society he had defied. Kelly was an alien in both worlds - as the blackness and hard-edged mystery of his helmet makes plain. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the reputations of Albert Tucker (Images of Modern Evil), Sidney Nolan (Ned Kelly) and Arthur Boyd (Life and Death of a Half-Caste) were all made by paintings conceived as a story-telling series.

For Melbourne painters of the 1940s in particular, the poetic experience was an essential part of the creative process. While it is doubtful that any one of these painters was fully conscious of the broader implications of their collective search for a style of painting capable of expressing the uniqueness of the time and place in which they lived, there is no doubt that their actions form part of a pattern which Lessing recognised more than a century before. Eager to leave behind the restraints of nationalism and academicism, the narrowness of representational painting and the shallowness of technique over content, painters such as Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan and Joy Hester turned to poetry, to the exploration of an internalised visual world in which anything could be considered possible. The romanticism of their approach, the acute strain of rebellion and alienation in works which border on the surreal, was not only part of their desire to be modern but to be intrinsically, instinctively Australian.

Perhaps this growing sympathy between the two arts (or the realisation that

images, where a highly developed vernacular is lacking, can carry the weight, or even take the place, of words) resulted in poetry and painting crossing paths at a natural evolutionary point in Australian art and literature. Or perhaps Australian poetry and painting merely followed the rest of the world by fraternising in, as Carole Ann Taylor remarks in her book, A Poetics of Seeing: The Implications of Visual Form in Modern Poetry, the most "visual" century in the history of western art and literature. [1]

Both points are valid - but the unusual number of poet-painters in the local tradition is enough to suggest a special rapport between the two arts in Australia. Even Patrick White has cited the sudden emergence of Australian painters at the end of World War Two as sufficient reason for his return home from Europe in search of a revitalised national culture. White was obsessed with painting and painters, long wishing that he, too, could have been a visual rather than a verbal artist. There is no doubt, however, that the strong prevalence of poet-painters in Australian art and literature of the period - and of dominating figures such as Lindsay - contributed greatly to the interaction between poetry and painting. Slessor and Dobson might well have remained untouched by Rubens or Renaissance painting (or, for that matter, even by Lindsay) had there not been a deep appreciation of, or natural attraction to, painting in their respective artistic make-ups. Nor is it likely that Sidney Nolan would have pursued the visual metaphors of his Ned Kelly series without the benefit of some practiced poetic ability.

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[1] Carole Ann Taylor, A Poetics of Seeing: The Implications of Visual Form in Modern Poetry. Garland publications in comparative literature. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985) 3.

Certainly, there is no single determining factor which explains the complex relationship between Australian poetry and painting during this period. From one angle, the mysterious network of criss-crossed friendships and web-like influences among Australian poets and painters may seem little more than a demonstration of the closely woven fabric of associations which typified the era and the place. From a broader historical perspective, it could seem that the ancient relations between poetry and painting erupted like the proverbial volcano under the pressures of geographic isolation, cultural youth and provincialism to create a wholly new style of Australian art and literature - just as it had in pre-industrial Europe (for vastly differing reasons) less than two centuries before. From still another perspective, it might seem that the natural receptivity of local art to metaphor, or literature to visual imagery, was enough to presuppose a special empathy between the written and the painted image in the works of poets and painters of the period. Each of these perspectives on what was an essentially complex and contradictory period has some merit - and none can be discarded. Perhaps, in the words of Jung, they are the product of "meaningful coincidence", of "causally unrelated events which have the same or a similar meaning". [2] Regardless of which is the "correct" answer, they all point to the fact that Australian poetry and painting during the '20s, '30s and '40s enjoyed a period of mutual influence which was as much a product of the era as a manifestation of the truth that of all the arts, poetry and painting are the closest of the creative sisters.

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[2] C. G. Jung Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle (1955; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1987) 14.

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1.1. Sidney Nolan, First-Class Marksman, private collection. 1946. Page 77 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends. By Jane Clark. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Fig. 1.2. Sidney Nolan, Icare. 1941. From Sidney Nolan: Such is Life. By Brian Adams. Melbourne: Century Hutchinson, 1987. N.pag.

Fig. 1.3. Roy de Maistre, The Boatsheds, in Violet Red Key, Clarice Thomas. 1919. Page 150 of Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art, 1788-1988. Ed. Daniel Thomas. Adelaide: International Cultural Corporation of Australia Limited in association with the Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1988.

Fig. 1.4. William Dobell, The Dead Landlord. Cover of Collected Plays, Volume 1. By Patrick White. Sydney: Currency Press, 1985.

Fig. 1.5. Claude Lorrain, Psyche in Front of the Palace of Amor (The Enchanted Castle), National Gallery, London. 1664. From the Larousse Dictionary of Painters. Ed. by Alistair Smith. 1976. London: Hamlyn, 1989. N.pag.

Fig. 1.6. Nicholas Poussin, Les Bergers d'Arcadie (The Shepherds of Arcady), Louvre,

Paris. 1650-55. Page 191 of La vie et l'oeuvre de Nicolas Poussin. By Jean-Jacques Lévêque. Paris: ACR Êdition Internationale, 1988.

Fig. 1.7. Hieronymous Bosch, The Ship of Fools, Louvre, Paris. 1490-1500. Plate 9 of Hieronymous Bosch. By Gregory Martin. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.

Fig. 1.8. Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. 1485. Colour Colour plate 20 of Handbook of Art. By Graham Hopwood. 1971. Melbourne: Graham Hopwood, 1974.

Fig. 1.9. William Turner, Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey, National Gallery, London. 1829. Page 97 of Turner: the Masterworks. By Eric Shanes. London: Studio Editions, 1990.

Fig. 1.10. Odilon Redon, The Sleep of Caliban, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Plate 191 of Post-Impressionists. By Guy Cogeval. 1986. Trans. Dan Simon and Carol Volk. New York: Tabard Press, 1988.

Fig. 1.11. William Blake, Milton's *Il Penseroso*: Milton and the Spirit of Plato, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1816. Plate 57 of William Blake. By Morton D. Paley. New York: Phaidon Press, 1978.

Fig. 1.12. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Blessed Damozel, Fogg Art Museum,

Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1871-7. Plate 44 of The Pre-Raphaelites. By Andrea Rose. 1977. Oxford: Phaidon, 1981.

Fig. 1.13. Apollinaire, "La Colombe Poignardée et le Jet D'eau". Page 213 of Oeuvres Poétiques. By Apollinaire. N.p.: Editions Gallimard, 1959.

Fig. 1.14. Pablo Picasso, Guernica, Prado, Madrid. 1937. Plate 47 of Joy Hester. By Janine Burke. 1983. Melbourne: Greenhouse, 1989.

Fig. 1.15. Salvador Dali, Soft Alarm Clock (detail), Perls Gallery, New York. 1933. Plate 74 of Dali. By Max Gérard. 1968. Trans. Eleanor R. Morese. New York: Abrams, 1986.

Fig. 1.16. Giovanni Bernini, The Ecstasy of St Theresa, St. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. 1646. Plate 260 of Handbook of Art.

Fig. 1.17. Agesander, Polydorus and Athanadorus, Laocoön and His Sons, Vatican Museum, Rome. 40 BC. Plate 245 of Handbook of Art.

Fig. 2.1. Tom Roberts, A Break Away!, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 1891. Page 121 of Creating Australia.

Fig. 2.2. Margaret Preston, Aboriginal Landscape, Art Gallery of New South Wales,

Adelaide. 1941. Page 143 of Creating Australia.

Fig. 2.3. Margaret Preston, A Translation from Picasso. 1933. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 2.4. Max Meldrum, Chinoiseries, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. 1928. Page 171 of Creating Australia.

Fig. 2.5. Norman Lindsay, The Gods on Earth. 1924. Page 7 of The World of Norman Lindsay.

Fig. 2.6. Norman Lindsay, The Crucified Venus. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 2.7. Max Ernst, All Friends Together. 1922. Page 36 of Surrealists and Surrealism: 1919-1939. By Gaetan Picon. 1977. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.

Fig. 2.8. Marcel Duchamp, L H O O Q (detail). 1919. Page 18 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

Fig. 2.9. Max Ernst, Of This Men Shall Know Nothing. 1923. Page 82 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

Fig. 2.10. Andre Masson, Signe - Il singe. 1925. Page 83 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

Fig. 2.11. Norman Lindsay, illustration for Vision, No. 1. May 1923.

Fig. 2.12. Norman Lindsay, Where War Ends. 1924. Colour plate 2 of The World of Norman Lindsay.

Fig. 3.1. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Douglas Stewart. Margaret Coen, Sydney.

Fig. 3.2. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Douglas Stewart. Margaret Coen, Sydney.

Fig. 3.3. Norman Lindsay, In Homage to the Poetry of Leon Gellert. 1914. Page 78 of The World of Norman Lindsay.

Fig. 3.4. Norman Lindsay, Self Portrait. Plate 1 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings. Ed. Daniel Thomas. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977.

Fig. 3.5. Giorgio de Chirico, The Poet's Dream. 1914. Page 13 of Surrealists and Surrealism.

Fig. 3.6. Norman Lindsay, Decoy. 1924. Plate 42 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Fig. 3.7. Norman Lindsay, Frontispiece for Five Bells by Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Frank C. Johnson, 1939.

Fig. 3.8. Norman Lindsay, cover of Vision No.4. February, 1924.

Fig. 3.9. Norman Lindsay, Pegasus. Plate 74 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Fig. 4.1. Norman Lindsay, Illustration for Thief of the Moon. From Thief of the Moon. By Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Privately printed, 1924.

Fig. 4.2. Norman Lindsay, illustration for Five Bells. From Five Bells. By Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Frank C. Johnson, 1939.

Fig. 4.3. Norman Lindsay, C Sharp Minor Quartette. 1927. Page 19 of The World of Norman Lindsay. By Lin Bloomfield. 1979. South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1983.

Fig. 4.4. Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin (detail), Buckingham Palace, London. 1611-15. Colour Plate 7 of Peter Paul Rubens. By Jennifer Fletcher. London: Phaidon, 1986.

Fig. 4.5. Norman Lindsay, Illustration for Thief of the Moon. From Thief of the Moon. By Kenneth Slessor. Sydney: Privately printed, 1924.

Fig. 4.6. Norman Lindsay, Thieves' Kitchen. Plate 26 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Fig. 4.7. Norman Lindsay, The Bauble. 1924. Plate 94 of Norman Lindsay: Favourite Etchings.

Fig. 4.8. John Olsen, Salute to Five Bells (detail), Sydney Opera House. 1972-3. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 4.9. William Turner, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On (detail), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Page 122 of Turner: the Masterworks.

Fig. 4.10. Pablo Picasso, Femme nue se coiffant, huile (Woman Doing Her Hair), private collection, New York. Page 65 of Picasso: Métemorphoses et unité. By Jean Laymarie. Geneva: Editions d'Art, 1971.

Fig. 4.11. Kenneth Slessor, Illustration for Pi Magazine, Sydney Church of England Grammar School Library. From Kenneth Slessor: A Biography. By Geoffrey Dutton. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1991. N.pag.

Fig. 4.12. John Everett Millais, Ophelia, Tate Gallery, London. 1852. Page 281 of English Painting: From Hogarth to the Pre-Raphaelites. By Jean-Jacques Mayoux. 1975.

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Fig. 5.2. Albert Tucker, Psycho, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1942. Page 84 of Albert Tucker. By James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982.

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Fig. 5.4. Sidney Nolan, Head of Soldier, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1942. Page 46 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 5.5. Joy Hester, Screaming Man, Albert Tucker, Melbourne. 1945. Plate 36 of Joy Hester.

Fig. 5.6. Albert Tucker, Victory Girls, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. Page 91 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 5.7. Sidney Nolan, Cover for Angry Penguins. Autumn, 1944.

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Fig. 6.2. Sidney Nolan, Ned Kelly, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1946-7. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 6.3. Sidney Nolan, Rimbaud Royalty, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1942. Page 49 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.4. Sidney Nolan, Le Desespoir A Des Ailes (Despair Has Wings), Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1943. Page 55 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.5. Sidney Nolan, The Sole Arabian Tree, private collection, Melbourne. 1943. Page 56 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.6. Sidney Nolan, Pretty Polly Mine, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. 1948. Colour Plate 49 of Handbook of Art.

Fig. 6.7. Sidney Nolan, Ern Malley, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. 1973. Page 202 of Creating Australia.

Fig. 6.8. Sidney Nolan, Portrait of Barrett Reid, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. 1947. Page 68 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.9. Arthur Rimbaud (photograph), State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. Page 38 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.10. Sidney Nolan, Ned Kelly, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1946. Page 74 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.11. Sidney Nolan, The Trial, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1947. Page 88 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 6.12. Albert Tucker, We Are the Dead Men, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1940. Plate 3A of Albert Tucker by Uhl.

Fig. 6.13. Albert Tucker, The Futile City, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1940. Page 78 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 6.14. Albert Tucker, The Waste Land, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1941. Page 79 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 6.15. Albert Tucker, Pick up, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1941. Page 88 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 6.16. Albert Tucker, Portrait of Adrian Lawlor, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1939. Plate 1 of Albert Tucker. By Christopher Uhl. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1969.

Fig. 6.17. Albert Tucker, Image of Modern Evil # 24, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1945. Page 95 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 6.18. Albert Tucker, Image of Modern Evil # 14, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1945. Page 93 of Albert Tucker by Mollison and Bonham.

Fig. 6.19. Joy Hester, Mad Girl, Reed Estate, Melbourne. 1942-3. Colour Plate 5 of

Joy Hester.

Fig. 6.20. Joy Hester, Boy with Bird, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1957. Plate 78 of Joy Hester.

Fig. 6.21. Joy Hester, Girl with Hen, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1956. Colour Plate 13 of Joy Hester.

Fig. 6.22. Joy Hester, Gethsemane V, Barrett Reid, Melbourne. 1946-7. Plate 52 of Joy Hester.

Fig. 6.23. Joy Hester, Face I, private collection, Melbourne. 1947-8. Plate 53 of Joy Hester.

Fig. 6.24. James Gleeson, The Sower, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. 1944. Page 194 of Creating Australia.

Fig. 6.25. William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1790-3. Plate 8 of William Blake. By Morton D. Paley. New York: Phaidon Press, 1978.

Fig. 6.26. James Gleeson, Untitled Poem-Drawing, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1938-39. Page 230 of "The Body of the Text: James Gleeson's Poem-

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Fig. 6.27. James Gleeson, Poem-Drawing: The Often Awake Monument, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. 1939. Page 233 of "The Body of the Text".

Fig. 7.1. Pieter Brueghel, Hunters in the Snow, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. 1565. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 7.2. Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife, National Gallery, London. 1434. Page 121 of the Larousse Dictionary of Painters.

Fig. 7.3. Sandro Botticelli, Primavera (detail), Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 7.4. Pieter Brueghel, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels. Page 25 of Pieter Bruegel The Elder. By Wolfgang Stechow. New York: Abrams, n.d.

Fig. 7.5. Thea Proctor, Souvenirs. 1927. Power Slide Library, University of Sydney.

Fig. 7.6. Jan Vermeer, Girl Asleep at a Table (still life detail), Metropolitan Museum, New York. Plate 23 of Johannes Vermeer: The Paintings. By Ludwig Goldscheider. 1958. London: Phaidon, 1967.

Fig. 7.7. Jan Vermeer, Maidservant Pouring Milk, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. 1660. Plate 9 of Johannes Vermeer.

Fig. 7.8. Sidney Nolan, Icarus, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. 1943. Page 48 of Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends.

Fig. 7.9. Norman Lindsay, Portrait of Rosemary Dobson, National Library, Canberra.

Fig. i. Russell Drysdale, Man Feeding His Dogs, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. 1941. Page 181 of Creating Australia.

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