

PHILIP MEAD: A CRITICS CREDENTIAL

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A great poet must be a great critic as well, for he must constantly analyze, select and reject. We become conscious of an item or incidence only after they begin to fall into desuetude. As Eliot has said:

We are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn winds begin to blow them off... when they have separately ceased to be vital. Energy may be wasted at that point in a frantic endeavor to collect the leaves as they fell and gum them into branches, but the sound tree will put forth new leaves and the dry trees should be put to axe. We are always in danger, trying to establish relation with the old.¹

This article initially focuses on Philip Mead, one of the long lines of Australian poet – critics which stretches right from Ben Johnson to our day. He is a conscious poet who has thought long and deep about the mysteries of this art. His critical essays, articles, editorial contributions, radio interviews throw a flood of light on his views of poetry.

The article originally concentrates on *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* which is considered as Meads best publications and critical work with John Tranter. It was reprinted in The United Kingdom as *The Blood axe Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (1995). It was valued as a reading and historical account of Australian poetry, which includes the scholarly and critical introduction, continues to define the field of modern Australian poetry, nationally and internationally. Don Anderson, Sydney Morning Herald accepts *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (hereafter referred as *(TPBMAP)* ‘as a major act of criticism, analysis, and study. It is nothing less than a watershed in the history of Australian poetry and Australian criticism in the second half of the twentieth century.’²

This broad selection of Australian poets begins with Kenneth Slessor, and offers a challenging view of ‘early modern poetry’ up until the 1960’s. It also presents the decade of turmoil from 1965 to 1975 in a new light, identifying currents of energy among the young writers and balancing new reputations with old. Tranter and Mead have revealed the year from 1965 to 1990’s as a time of growing vigor and diversity. This writing also reminds us that, an anthology is not just a collection of poems; it is always an act of theory and criticism.³ This anthology is also about the management of cultural space... For example: the very early as well as the James McAuley, all the poems of ‘Ern Malley’ (the hoax figure concocted by the young poets Harold Stewart and James McAuley in 1943), the later poems of Judith Wright, poetry by Francis Webb and Kenneth Mackenzie are represented, Bruce Beavers autobiographical poems,

Joanne Burns' and Ania Walwicz's prose poems, the epigrams of Laurie Duggan, poems by Peter Porter, Philip Hammial's surrealist poems, Lionel Fogarty's 'guerilla' poetry, the narratives of Archie Weller.⁴ This was some of the diverse and literally unruly work Tranter and Mead thought needed to be gathered into a live tradition.

To begin with Kenneth Slessor's "Nuremberg":

And, oh, those thousand towers of Nuremberg flowering like leaden trees outside the panes:
Those gabled roofs with smoking cowls, and those Encrusted spires of stone, those golden vanes
on shining housetops paved with scarlet tiles! And all day nine wrought-pewter mantic ores
Blinked from their spouting faucets, not five steps across the cobbled street, or, peering through
the rounds of glass, espied that sun-flushed room With Dürer graving at intaglios. O happy nine,
spouting your dew all day In green-scaled rows of metal, whilst the town Moves peacefully
below in quiet joy. O happy gargoyles to be gazing down. On Albrecht Dürer and his plates of
iron!⁵

This poem clearly announces the modernist theme of time that persists throughout Slessor's poetry and it does so in conjunction with a representation of an artist. As O'Connor has argued that the most striking preoccupations of modernist and post-modernist aesthetics in literature is the question of time. This poem, from the ordinary point of Slessor's entry into modernism can be read in conjunction with 'Five Bells,' from the other end of that engagement. In Meads view 'Nuremberg' represents 'a still moment beyond time'. But Slessor's other poem 'Five Bells' represents time as 'the flood that does not flow'.⁶ To excerpt:

Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow.
Between the double and the single bell
Of a ships hour, between a round of bells
From the dark warship riding there below,
I have lived many lives, and this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.⁷

It is a poem which suggests that the whole span of a human life can be imagined, and even vicariously experienced, in a flash of thought as brief as the interval between the strokes of a bell. 'Five Belles' can be described as a kind of meditation at night, while looking at Sydney Harbor and hearing the cold fact of time, five bells or half-past ten, running from a ship at its moorings below'. 'The poem therefore is on two planes. First it attempts to epitomize the life of a specific human being, but fundamentally it is an expression of the relativity of time'.⁸ In Meads view "like Bergson (again) Slessor is absolutely modern because he can't help but represent memory, in 'Five Bell's' but in other poems as well as 'succession of films created as they appear (...) rolled up in a store called memory. In this sense, 'Five Bell's' remains a tense and complex expression of modernist subjectivity".⁹

Campbell's World of Children

Next in the row is David Campbell. He talks of the carefree world of children in his poem 'Here, under Pear-trees'. To quote:

Here, under pear-trees, on the broad verandahs,
Children like sleeping gods play games;
Supervised, awake in picture frames,

Leaving a stuffed grouse, debts, and ten thousand acres.
An ancestral trick of speech or way of standing.
Their ponies with skinned-back lips devour
The black boys, stolen in an hour
Time slept through, drugged by birds in the summer garden.¹⁰
Campbell died, rather young, almost three decades ago, but he left a rich harvest; it's still coming
in. The poem 'Listen to Under Wattles' proves the point:

Now, here and there, against the cold,
The hillsides smoulder into gold
And the stockman riding by
Lifts to the trees a yellow eye.
It's here the couples from the farms
Play in one another's arms
At yes and no -- you'd think the trees
Sprang from their felicities.
So may our children grow up strong,
Got while the thrush drew out his song,
And love like you and I when we
Lie beneath the wattle tree.¹¹

Mead puts it well: 'David Campbell is a poet of the lyric encounter. Almost every poem he wrote has the energy, surprise and immediacy of an encounter with some aspect of the natural or human world'.¹² For Mead and presumably for the readers he hopes to turn towards Campbell, the Vietnam War era was 'a crucial period of change in modern Australia'. He makes much of Campbell leaving his pastoral property, moving closer to town and mingling with younger poets such as Michael Dransfield and Martin Johnston, who were giving expression 'to a new version of Australian modernity'.

Mead suggests that, 'nothing in Campbell's earlier poetry could have prepared readers for his 'shocking poem of protest' against the 1968 "My Lai massacre in Vietnam". By shocking, Mead means shockingly good, I guess'.¹³

Here's the opening stanza:

I was milking the cow when a row of tall bamboo
was mowed by rifle fire
with my wife and child in the one harvest,
and the blue milk spilt and ruined.¹⁴

It is a powerful poem, but why be surprised that Campbell, a person of feeling, could identify with a fellow farmer and his family in this way?

Judith Wright

(A) Irrevocable Nature of Death

Next is, 'Night after Bushfire', a poem composed by Judith Wright throws light on the ultimate fate that every man attains at the end. To cite:

There is no more silence on the plains of the moon
and time is no more alien there, than here.
Sun thrust his warm hand down at the high noon,
But all that stirred was the faint dust of fear.

Charred death upon the rock lenses his charred bones
and stares at death from sockets black with flame.
Man, if he come to brave that glance alone,
must leave behind his human home and name.¹⁵

Thus, here the universality of death is emphasized, without any ray of comfort or hope being visible. Wright is a realist who focuses attention on evil and suffering. But she implies a good look at the worst. To her, the essential truth about human existence must be faced and understood, for such understanding is essential for any improvement and reform. She is fully aware that modern zeitgeist is filled with a spirit of doom and depression. Life is a puzzle a person passes particular duration of time and then vanishes, but Judith Wright has interpreted it in a very simple manner. According to me we should value time otherwise it can act as a fatal weapon, which if not properly used can throw us in the dark hole of death.

(B) Experience of Love

Wright's another poem, 'Woman to Man' is perceived as a poem about a woman's experience of love and childbirth. This poem gives a voice to aspects of human experience which have hitherto been unexpressed. To quote:

The eyeless labourer in the night,
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,
builds for its resurrection day-
silent and swift and deep from sight
foresees the unimagined light.¹⁶

As we go through Judith Wright's poems we come across not as an Australian woman but as someone who shares with all the woman of the world, the traits, joys, travails and apprehensions of being a woman.

Judith Wright was recognized as a major poet in the mainstream Australian tradition from her first publications in the 1940s and would probably still is regarded as 'conservative' in her poetics. 'She is a powerful voice of settler memory in Australia'.¹⁷

Philips distress can be felt in the following lines:

I happened to visit the library Book Shop, in the foyer, and noticed that the only Wright publication it carried was a re-issued edition of her 1962 collection "Birds"... I couldn't help thinking what a fractional cultural space 'Judith Wright' had been reduced to. Perhaps her bird poems were destined to be her most popular writing but this repackaging of Wright as a strictly delimited 'poet of nature' seemed like a woeful reduction of the scope and influence of her work. My starting point is the view that Judith Wright's career' as a writer is one of the most significant stories twentieth-century Australian culture has to offer, an intense, contradictory matrix of poetics, aesthetic theory, historicist critique, and the political, with its origins in a European-derived crisis of Romantic humanism of the 1940's and it tells in a global zing, late-capitalist Australia of the 1980's and 90's. As the story of a 'poetic self' it is homologous in telling ways with the story of Australian culture itself over the same span of time.¹⁸

Ern Malley: Hoax Poetry

Ern Malley's hoax poetry also found place in this anthology. What Mc Auley and Stewart meant by a serious literary experience, in this sense, was that 'the hoax was genuine hoax and not an unconsciously or randomly produced genuine instance of Surrealist art work'.¹⁹ The hoax began in 1944 when Max Harris, a 22-year-old avant garde poet and critic in Adelaide, who in 1940 had started a modernist magazine called 'Angry Penguins', received a letter purported to be from Ethel, asking for his opinion of her late brother's work. There were 17 poems, none longer than a page, and all intended to be read in sequence under the title "The Darkening Ecliptic". This was the total Malley oeuvre, but it was destined to cause a revolution in Australian cultural life. The first poem in the sequence was called 'Durer: Innsbruck, 1495'.²⁰ To quote:

I had often, cowered in the slumberous heavy air,
closed my inanimate lids to find it real,
as I knew it would be, the colourful spires
and painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the back,
all reversed in the quite reflecting waters-
not knowing then that Durer perceived it too.
Now I find that once more I have shrunk
to an interloper, robbed of dead men's dreams,
I had read in books that art is not easy
but no one warned that the mind repeats
in its ignorance the vision of others. I am still
the black swan of trespass on alien waters.²¹

'The Malley trial is the only instance in Australian history (so far) of the legal prosecution of poetry, under the pretext of a trial for obscene publication'.²²

Mead writes everything in its actual contents although at times it can be very much unpoetic or unappealing for the so called literary man of taste. Mead has stated:

I just wanted to add a note here that might interest non-Australian listeners, about the question of authenticity in relation to indigenous cultural production. There is a great deal of heat at the moment in the various institutions of art in this country over the 'authenticity' of some works of Aboriginal art. Rumors about fake paintings by Aboriginal artists like Ginger Riley, Rover Thomas, Kathleen Petyarre, Turkey Tolson, Tjupurrula and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (and others) have been reported in the press and investigated on television. These are all complex stories, and are mediated by a sensation-hungry media, but one example: an Adelaide art dealer was charged by police late last year on 19 counts of criminal deception in relation to Aboriginal paintings. He pleaded not guilty and the case won't be heard until later this year.²³

Peter Porter

Peter Porter comes next in the row. He recollects in his lyric 'On This Day I Completed My Fortieth Year'. To cite:

To have a weatherboard house and a white

paling fence and poinsettias and palm nuts
instead of Newstead Abbey and owls and graves
and not even a club foot;
above all to miss the European gloom
in the endless eleven o'clock heat among
the lightweight suits and wrapped verandahs,
an apprenticeship, not a pilgrimage...
well at forty, the grievances lie around
like terminal moraine and they mean
nothing unless you pay a man in Frognaal
to categorize them for you
but there are two sorts of detritus, one a pile
of moon-ore, the working of the astonished
mole who breathes through your journalism
'the air of another planet'.²⁴

The lines above portray the turmoil, the frustration and disillusionment that Porter is struggling with at the age of forty. It is a self-referencing piece. The insight conveys a carefully observed picture of the inequality that the poet sees around him.

John Tranter

In John Tranters collection we find poems preoccupied with restless city-life, travel, unexpected social encounters, parties, drinks, repeated images of sex accompanied with images of flight, war etc. To quote:

I know you'd like a stiff rum and coke and ten minutes
alone on the patio to think it over, but
the G-men in the back room are getting anxious;
the Mickey Finn's invented, the hand that
feeds you's quicker than the eye, and in a wink
the powder is in the drink! Our Leaders dozing
in a tank and in his memory we labour mightily.
Are you a German Jew?²⁵

His poem 'Backyard' is an ideal example of city culture. To quote:
Turn now to God of this tattered arena
Watching over the rites
Of passage-marriage, separation; adolescence
and troubled maturity:
having served under that bright sky you may look up
but don't ask too much:
some cold beer, a few old friends in the afternoon,
a Southerly Buster at dusk.²⁶

In a conversation with Ankur Saha, John Tranter disclosed about *TPBMAP* that- The book was commissioned by Susan Ryan at Penguin Australia; they gave us carte blanche and a page limit of 300 pages. It took two years, reading through hundreds of books of poetry, and we (Philip Mead and John Tranter) ended up handing them a manuscript of 480 pages, which they very graciously accepted. I don't recall that we looked at any anthologies; we both

know most of them anyway. We started with Kenneth Slessor, born in 1901, and we aimed for a wide-ranging, inclusive collection of poems that focused on a modernist approach rather than a traditionalist approach. We included all of ‘Ern Malley’, for example; you can’t get more modernist than that. I don’t recall that we had any strong disagreements. The book has been very well received. You can teach from it in dozens of different ways: young women poets, old male poets, prose poems, rhyming poems, poems about the Australian countryside, and poems about the city.²⁷

Lionel Fogarty: The Aboriginal Voice

Lionel Fogarty’s gorilla poetry also found place in this anthology. To cite from one of his poems “No Grudge”:

Let’s radio opinions, koorie side effects in death
Commercial educationalists to draw
intwined listeners is what brother about.
Craze sensationalism they scraped
him individual
respective broadcasting.
The overstressed question was impartial
But we demand our radio persuasive
black free editors.²⁸

The pain that the aboriginal feel about being displaced, brings in the need to find their rightful place and make their voice heard. The nearly annihilated aboriginal people had to reclaim their land, their rights and had to recreate their own space.²⁹

Aboriginal people did, as they still do, develop their own multiple and hybrid linguistic orders as a defense against white depredations speaking the pidgin of interaction with the invading whites as well as their own indigenous languages.³⁰ Language continues to disfigure their culture. Mainstream contemporary Australian culture remains riddled with the linguistic inheritance of its originary double-speak, the language- massacring and ‘ethnocidal legacy of colonization’ and federation. And it is little wonder that the repression of this aspect of colonization continues to trouble contemporary discourses of nation. There is an Aboriginal English expression, to ‘grow up in the ashes’, which means having ‘a traditional Aboriginal upbringing, centered on the family camp fire’.³¹

Mead’s poems related to city culture are cited in this collection. To quote:

At the crossroads there was light but no sign, and the invitation
had never arrived in the mail. Like everything, the road was taking
us away and down to the house we saw, as the purpose of the night
was nowhere sure; and at this darkest point there is fear like the other
times. This is not the house we saw from the road.³²

The poem ‘There’ is good partly because it is short-it contains nothing superfluous; and partly because it is perfectly objective. It contains no moralizing; the reader is left to extract the meaning for him. Moreover, the language and imagery are clear, vivid and telling. It is in every way a masterly poem.

Geoff Page of Canberra Times has this comment for Mead ‘...an intelligent challenging and yet satisfying selection from a substantial number of very diverse poets...’³³

In John Tranter and Philip Meads’ view: ‘This book answers the need for a widely representative and credible anthology of a modern Australian poetry, as seen from the last

decade of the twentieth century'. The emphasis is on enjoyment. In our experience, 'poets don't write poems merely to be graded, studied or analyzed; they write them, above all, to create for readers the enjoyment of a complex and intense aesthetic experience. In collecting these poems, we've kept that simple fact firmly in mind'.³⁴

This selection is a pluralist reading of modernity and post modernity in Australian poetry. These poems offer an abundance of textual pleasure; 'they are evidence of the power of poetic utterance both as seductive language and as disenchantment. These poems also speak of the significance of poetic writing in the formation of our selves, whether inter- personal, political or cultural'.³⁵

Mead's Classic Works

1. Mead's another important work is *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Reading*. This extensive collection of critical readings of Kenneth Slessors work includes much of the "classic" work on Slessor as well as new essays that bring fresh perspectives to his poetry. It is the definitive, contemporary collection of Slessors criticism. Philip Mead's comments in this reference:

Self assured and successful as a young man, Slessor seems to move straight into adulthood as if it was his rightful inheritance, oblivious to the psychological and interpersonal carnage that awaits him. His other life was a poet, probably the most talented one to have written in Australia, and the first renovator of twentieth- century Australian poetry. Slessors career as a poet ran in tandem with his life as a hard working journalist. He seems to have been able to turn off the raucous babble of everyday Sydney, like a radio, and to produce the piercing, rinsed- clean order of words that characterizes his best poetry.

From his early twenties, though, Slessor increasingly kept these two selves separate, and by the late 1940s one of them, the poet, had entirely atrophied... It is a narrative of strange resonance with and against the history of modern Australia. It is a story of hybrid origins, great energy and optimism, the global reorientations of World War II and intertwined failures of public and private lives in the 1950's. In the long decline, all this is repressed and subsumed into a hollow kind of male camaraderie and national service in the conservative culture industries. There are some outstanding successes too, but ones, somehow, unable to redeem the wastage of life and work.³⁶

Philip Mead edited this collection and commented that,

Slessor was probably the most talented one to have written in Australia, and the first renovator of twentieth-century Australian poetry. Slessor's career as a poet ran in tandem with his life as a hard-working journalist. He seems to have been able to turn off the raucous babble of everyday Sydney, like a radio, and to produce the piercing, rinsed-clean order of words that characterizes his best poetry.³⁷

Philip Mead's introductory essay uncovers some of the tensions of ancestry and language in early Slessor that have been overlooked in critics' over-emphasis on the late poetry.³⁸

2. *Kenneth Slessor: A Lyric Poet in the Era of Modernity* was first published as the introduction to *Kenneth Slessors: Critical Readings*. This chapter is a critical survey of Slessors criticism from the beginning to the present. It is also offering influential readings of some early Slessor poems. Philip's introductory essay looks at Slessors' poem 'Nuremberg' published in the winter year for literature, 1922, the year the poet became an adult, and links it to Slessors German background. To quote:

So quite it was in that high, sun steeped room,
Warm and still, that sometimes with the light
Through the great windows, bright with bottle –panes,
There'd float a chime from clock –jacks out of sight,
Clapping iron mallets on green copper gongs.
But only in brown copper music from the towns
Quaint horologe could Time intrude...you'd say
Clocks had been bolted out, the flux of years
Defied, and that high chamber sealed away
From earthly change by some old alchemist³⁹

This poem clearly announced the modernist theme of time that persists throughout Slessors poetry and it does so in conjunction with a representation of an artist.

3. Philip in his distinguished work *David Campbell: Hardening of the Light Selected Poems* has portrayed:

David Campbell is one of the finest lyric poets in English language and in this book Philip has chosen from across the entire range of the poetry. Here are the meditative ballads, the Hesoid-like calendars, and the narrative play drawn from pastoral life on the Monaro. Here also are poems of urgent love (“From Anabase”), images of war (“Men in Green” and “The Walting Collection”), shrewd natural observation (like: ‘Stones’, ‘Frogs’) and cultural illumination. It also includes poet’s translations from Russian poetry and those poems from his last dozen years where, unsettled by change in Australian society and the world, he sought from his restive reading of American, British, European and Asian poetry to renew the strength of his own vibrant lyric gift...⁴⁰

Another important genre on which Mead worked during this period was a ‘new poetry’ i.e. the publication of women’s poetry. Poet as Catherine Bateson, Melissa Curran, Judith Wright, Judith Beveridges were all working with voices that were energetic and new.

4. *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women’s Poetry* is the first major study of women’s poetic careers in early twentieth-century Australia. This was a particularly prolific period for women poets as a rapidly changing social climate generated new, identities around gender, race, class, and nation. Negotiating the ‘modern’ landscape and the ‘modern’ psyche through the complex effects of World War I, increasing industrialization and urbanization, and advances in technology necessitated innovations in poetic form and a rethinking of authorship. This exciting study examines the increasing visibility and popularity of women as poets, their shaping of literary tastes through editing and criticism, their cross-influence and friendships, and the resulting backlash within Australian literary circles. Furthermore, it traces how these writers mediated their experiences of travel, expatriation, and transnationalism against the desire to produce a literature of difference, that is, poetry that was regionally or culturally distinct. Using extensive archival material, “Stressing the Modern” offers a new understanding of the emergence of literary modernism in Australia. ‘It demonstrates the significance of poetry as both a popular and a radical site for articulating ‘modern’ lives and their concerns’.⁴¹

Here I would like to add an unpublished endorsement of Philip Mead concerning *Stressing the Modern*,

This study is also an outstanding instance of contemporary criticism, a brilliant blend of original archival research, in-depth contextualization of the poetry, and authoritative biographical

framing of these women's lives as writers, feminists, intellectuals, lawyers, political activists, publishers and journalists. It will focus international critical and scholarly attention on the many defining contributions these women poets have made to modernism.⁴²

To conclude it will not be wrong to say that language is the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' becomes established. One of the most striking features of Meads work is its enormous variety. He has given us poems on art and music, glimpses of the colonial life as well as the modern world. He is a prolific writer and the volume and variety of his work are its most obvious features. The musical sweetness of his versification, the happiness of expression and the ability shown in the construction of his work, combine to give Mead a high position among Australian poets.

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