Australian culture today is rich and diverse enough that it can be seen in many different ways, but one of its enduring dialectics is that of the city and the bush. Philip Adams’ “Late Night Live” might reign on ABC Radio in the city but the country tunes into “Macca All Over”; the city tends to be internationalist, the country nationalist; attitudes and voting patterns are vastly different: when John Howard goes campaigning in the Bush he bungs on an akubra hat and tries to look as much like a Nationalist Party politician rather than a Liberal Party politician as possible. This opposition has existed in the culture almost from the beginning of white settlement and shows no sign of disappearing. The opposition, traditional in most cultures, was given a particularly Australian twist by the *Bulletin* magazine and other nationalistic forces in the 1890s to establish what is now known as “The Australian Legend”. The decade is well-recognised as the great period for the establishment of an Australian literary tradition, with “the Bushman’s Bible” publishing Lawson, Paterson and others. The opposition has actually been given the strongest expression by poets—evidenced by Victor Daley’s declaring “spite of all, the town for me”1 as opposed to Banjo Paterson’s wish to escape “the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city” and “change with Clancy”2 or Peter Porter’s Athenian love of “the permanently upright city where / ... plants conceive in pots”3 set in opposition to Les Murray’s Boeotian “frequent image of farms”.4

By contrast with 1890s Bush Realism and Bush Romanticism, Modernism, so much a city-based aesthetic, is usually seen to have had a relatively short and hesitant history in Australia, and to lack any distinctively Australian characteristics. Modernist advocates such as John Tranter have seen it as properly emerging only in the late 1960s and the 1970s5—although I should note that Andrew Taylor
insists that Tranter’s assertions are “historically inaccurate and unprofitable” because he is really talking about Postmodernism. Tranter and others have seen Modernism as a means of getting away from the idea that Australian cultural identity is founded on experience of the Bush. Tranter is an admirer of Kenneth Slessor, both of them known as poets of the city, and particularly of Sydney. I have argued elsewhere that “Slessor’s poetry is historically important in the tradition of Australian poetry because he turned it decisively away from the bush tradition” to “a Modernist emphasis on the interaction between the mind and external reality”.

Critics such as Julian Croft, Philip Mead and Peter Kirkpatrick have also seen Slessor as a Modernist; while Adrian Caesar has argued that “to call Slessor a ‘modernist’ is in some ways misleading”, that he is a late-Romantic; Judith Wright has seen him as ambivalently Romantic and Modernist; while Andrew Taylor claims that he is “the only genuine Modernist poet that Australia has produced” but, oddly, one only “by default”.

I believe that with Christina Stead, Slessor was the major founder of Australian literary Modernism. Slessor had no time for the poetry of the 1890s, arguing that “Henry Lawson was … not a great poet, nor in fact even a minor poet of any noticeable worth, while A. B. Paterson was an accomplished writer of light or sentimental ballads”, and that Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kendall had not “the slightest poetic significance”. Douglas Stewart, Slessor’s friend, reported that Slessor hated the country. Most critics, including Vincent Buckley, have seen Slessor’s early poetry as Romantic, and the view of him as Modernist has largely been based on later poems such as “Out of Time”, “South Country” and “Five Bells”, although Philip Mead argues cogently that “Nuremberg” (written in June 1921) marks “the originary point of Slessor’s entry into modernism”. The great bulk of Slessor’s early poems have been ignored as of doubtful value with their “Romantic zest” and Lindsaysque artificialities.

In later years Slessor himself liked to forget most of his early work. He was first published in the Bulletin, in 1917, twice, with a poem, “Goin’”, spoken by a dying digger (the military version of the bushman) to a nurse, and “Southern Song”, which declares a preference for
“the beat of a brumbie's heels”, “the boom of the surf on Australian shores” and “the rustle of leaves” on a gum tree to the songs of minstrels about knights and ladies.20 This was quite an achievement for a sixteen-year-old but, like Slessor's other very early work, the poems contained no hint of Modernism. Slessor's first book was published in 1924, and included no poem like these two. However, the book's very title, “Thief of the Moon”, indicates that it is hardly Modernist in inclination or intention. The title, which sounds sentimental-Romantic, comes from a sonnet of that title, in which the speaker laments the loss of love. It is a literary, archaic poem with its “thous” and “dosts” but it does convey the theme of the speaker's separateness and alienation from at least some aspects of the world, which is to recur in Slessor's work right down to “Five Bells”. “Thief of the Moon” also includes negative images of nature, in fact of orange trees, which might make it seem a counterweight to Shaw Neilson's incomparably better poem. Slessor's is a poem in which all the mysterious attractiveness of nature has been stolen away, and in retrospect this seems a first, uncertain step on the road from “Tintern Abbey” to “The Waste Land”, but it is clear that loss of love is the reason. Still, the idea that the moon and all its traditional small “r” romantic connotations have been taken from the poets of the early 1920s is clearly present. The poem was actually written in 1922, the annus mirabilis of Modernism, the year of publication of Ulysses and “The Waste Land”. This is also the year in which Slessor met Jack and Norman Lindsay, and Australian literary criticism includes a lot of muddled writing about the Lindsays' anti-Modernism and Norman's anti-Modernist influence on Slessor. This is partly because Norman Lindsay was a much more complex figure than he is given credit for these days, when his name is completely mud in both literary and visual arts circles. It is worth remembering that Lindsay immediately praised “Five Bells” when Slessor wrote it, and Eliot's “The Waste Land” when Slessor discussed it with him in the late 1920s.21 Also, Slessor wrote “Pan at Lane Cove”, included in Thief of the Moon and criticised by Vincent Buckley and others for Norman Lindsay's “mock-heroically officiating”22 over it, in 1920, before he ever met Lindsay.
Buckley, in a statement accepted by many later critics, declared that Slessor’s “early poems are in a very real sense Romantic—showing the strong attraction felt by their author towards the grotesque and exaggerated elements of experience, and towards a raffish sensuousness”.

In fact, Slessor’s poetry in *Thief of the Moon* is far more various than this suggests. A good deal of attention has been given to “Nuremberg”, culminating in Philip Mead’s excellent analysis in introducing his book, *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings*. The poem, drawing on Slessor’s German heritage, presents the artist-hero Albrecht Durer in the German city, and, as Mead says, “announces the modernist theme of time that persists throughout Slessor’s poetry”. To the end of his life Slessor thought it one of his best poems, even though it was written as early as June 1921.

“Nuremberg”, however, is unusual in *Thief of the Moon* in being set in the city. Most of the poems have nature as their setting and employ nature imagery. This is a more obvious link to Romanticism than the elements nominated by Buckley. “Nuremberg” was the second poem in the book; the first was “Incongruity”, in which the poet is taunted by the bush and the sky, when night “takes flight / Up creeks to steaming mountain-towers”, in an “hour of sinister dismay”. The stars are, melodramatically, “Frigid with hate and old malevolence”, and even a nightjar sings “a cruel song”. As in “Thief of the Moon”, with which it shares some imagery, the poem is late-Victorian in style and mixes imagery with too much outright statement, but its alienation from nature is anti-Romantic. Again and again this note is struck in *Thief of the Moon*; when the bush is not the site—it is never the source—of some transcendent vision (as it is in “Secret Pastures” and “Pan at Lane Cove”), it is likely to appear “poisonous” and maleficent, as in “Two Nocturnes” (which I am here quoting), “Mangroves”, and “Threatenings”. “Old delight” in nature is no longer possible. Night is a kind of “chemistry” in which “climb / Cold tides of dread” while the stars “dance terribly in far, malevolent mirth”. The melodrama of the poems is not just a function of exaggerated adverbs but the fact that no cause is offered for this situation and no possibility for reasoning about it; it is just an existential given. In this metaphysical setting even the windowpanes of Sydney seem a “pasteboard
setting for a puppet-show”, prefiguring the imagery of “Last Trams”. In the book there is just one poem which uses the repeated imagery of sunlight-night-trees-mist-birds in a more sophisticated way, and points towards Slessor’s later Modernist embodiment of meaning in images. This is a poem written as early as 1921, simply titled “April 25”:

Morning. But does the daystar weep,
   Do the trees weep for the dead?
O false! The lights of sunrise leap
   Through ivory skies instead.

Night smokes afar, the mist-maids cling,
   The world spins on its way;
Only the birds remember, and sing
   What men can never say.

Is it a bird which fills the air
   Over Australia flying?
Somehow it sounds as if somewhere
   A soul is crying.30

The poem was published in the Sydney Sun newspaper on Anzac Day 1921, and perhaps the fact of writing about Anzac made Slessor cut away the adjectival and adverbial excesses. The poem includes the archaism “O false!” but it does have some genuine content and relies on imagery to express it. The poem warns against the pathetic fallacy, an inversion of which has figured in the other early poems; nature “spins on its way” indifferent to human concerns, but a sense of inexpressible sorrow fills the air in Australia and is imputed to birdsong. This is Slessor’s first strong poetic statement about the limitations of language, a Modernist rather than a Romantic theme, and it points the way forward.

All but ten of the poems in Thief of the Moon were republished in London in 1926 with eleven new poems, under the title Earth-Visitors.
It is in six of these new poems that we can see a dramatic change, in poems written between June 1924 and March 1926 and that, in the terms of contemporary criticism, might almost be taken as the Modernist moment, or moments, in Australian literature. The six poems, in order of composition, are: “Stars”, “Winter Dawn”, “The Night-Ride”, “Music”, “A Sunset”, and “City Nightfall”. Not surprisingly, these poems, with the exception of “A Sunset”, have received more attention from critics than Slessor’s Thief of the Moon poems, “Nuremberg” aside. The critics, however, have not noticed their importance in the development of Slessorian and Australian Modernism, except Greg Badcock. Badcock notes:

As a rule, those critics who have mentioned the new Earth-Visitors poems have emphasised their similarities to, rather than their differences from, the poems of Thief of the Moon, commenting, as Adrian Caesar has done, that, “there was no great stylistic or thematic difference between them”.31

Badcock argues that the change, which unquestionably is there, derived largely from Slessor’s removal to Melbourne in 1924–1925, which got him away from the Lindsays. There is much of value in Badcock’s article but I don’t believe that the Melbourne argument can be sustained.32 “Stars”, “Winter Dawn” and “The Night-Ride” were written in June, July and August respectively, before Slessor went to Melbourne in September or October. “Music”, “A Sunset” and “City Nightfall” were completed in February, February, and March 1926, when he was back in Sydney. The same point holds for the other Earth-Visitors poems. It is possible that Slessor began working on the poems completed in 1926 when in Melbourne—we know completion dates but not starting dates—but at this stage of his career he usually worked on poems quickly and not a single poem was completed in 1925. I suspect that his time in Melbourne was pretty barren, poetically, and that may have been the main reason he hated the place.

Many of the six poems I have nominated have, as mentioned, received some detailed critical analysis as individual poems. Andrew Taylor notes of “The Night-Ride”, which portrays a train stop at a country town and then on again into the bush, that the speaker is
similar to “T S Eliot’s figure in ‘The Waste Land’ in declaring “I can connect / Nothing with nothing”.33 “Winter Dawn” and “City Night-fall” are both set in the city and express a Baudelairean alienation from the city’s life as well as from nature, a “Waste Land” angst felt below “the quiet noise of planets feeding”.34 The two poems of the six which have been least discussed are “A Sunset” and “Music”. “A Sunset” pulls into service yet again the imagery of sunlight, bubbles, smoke, and darkness but with a new sense of realism.

The old Quarry, Sun, with bleeding scales,
Flaps up the gullies, wets their crystal pebbles,
Floating with waters of gold, darkness exhales
Brutishly in the valley, smoke rises in bubbles;
Suddenly we stop at the meeting of two trails.
“Do you remember?”
“But now everything is changed –
Trees ringed with death, the creek with its bells clanking
Dried like white bone.” Even our voices are estranged.
Darkness chokes the river; so nearly what I am thinking
It echoes, the whole thing might have been arranged!”

It is extremely rare for Slessor to have two people in a poem rather than a solitary speaker, but here they are, stopped in their tracks “at the meeting of two trails”, asking “Do you remember?”, only to find a sense of alienation that T S Eliot would have understood if he could have gone bush.35 “Even our voices are estranged”, from each other and from the bush landscape. The poem is succinct enough that this seems a discovery, and has dramatic force. The desolateness of nature, “Trees ringed with death, the creek with its bells clanking / Dried like white bone”, seems a refutation of Kendall’s bellbird romanticisation of the Australian bush; it has some of the hard-bitten quality of Lawson’s stories. The sense of malevolence is there—desolate Australian nature “echoes” the desolation of the mind so well that the whole circumstance might seem “arranged”, presumably by a Hardyesque malevolent deity, but Slessor can only dare say this because the poem itself seems less “arranged”, less willed and predetermined than his earlier work. This is clearly the poet who later wrote “Talbingo”, “Crow Country”,

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The twelve-part poem “Music” was completed in the same month as “A Sunset”, February 1926, and it is highly variable in style, tone and quality, perhaps partly because of the different composers whose music Slessor used as starting points. Part IV, whose musical inspiration Slessor said was Beethoven, which seems incomprehensible to me, also presents a country made desolate. Slessor said that he sought to express “the loneliness of a stream . . . running through flat, empty, manless, noiseless, enormous plains”. The word “loneliness” might suggest Romanticism, but the poem actually resists personification of the river. The stress in the poem is on absence: “the sky lies empty” and “there is nothing, / Wind gone and men gone, only the water / Stumbling over the stones in silence”, and even the river’s time is limited, for “droughts will come”. This is the Waste Land, a bare depiction of a bare landscape—and perfect material for Andrew Taylor and Paul Kane’s arguments that Australian poetry experienced Romanticism only as an absence, a shadowing negativity.

“Talbingo” and “Crow Country”, almost adjoining poems in Cuckooz Contrey, present the landscape when the drought has come. Judith Wright notes that “Crow Country” is “one of the first and most memorable attempts to use a drought-stricken Australian landscape as a symbol of the desert of the modern mind.” “Stabbed by the needles of the mind”, people in this Australian landscape are “Beds of dried-up passions”. “Cock-Crow”, written six years after “Crow Country” and published in the volume Five Bells, adds to these simultaneously inner and outer landscapes a sense that language can at best provide “A mess of songs / And broken sense” and “snapped-off thoughts”. This decidedly Modernist theme of course gains more substantial expression in “Five Bells”.

In Slessor’s work nature is never green to the very door, much less the nurse, the guide to all his moral being or the breath of Autumn’s being. He did write of the Australian bush in a new and increasingly sophisticated way, his images hinting at complex meanings and measuring the inner life. There are various elements of his work which mark its introduction of Modernism into Australian poetry, in particular:
a largely impersonal “I”, which is allied to a sense that the world is indifferent to the human. This is at a far remove from the beliefs of Romanticism.

an existential sense of humans as inevitably separated even from each other. “Even our voices are estranged”.

a sense of the autonomy of the work of art. The critic Astredur Eysteinnon describes the Modernist poem as “supposedly a salvation from the shattered world of modern reality”. Slessor said that “what makes a line of poetry memorable” is “nothing else but music and magic”; it “carries 'no message' and proclaims no dogma”.

interest in technical experiment, which is linked to an acute awareness of the knit between form and content. This is present in Romanticism but in Modernism it is allied to a sense of the limitations of language. It is worth remembering that Wittgenstein’s Tractatus was also published in 1922. Adrian Caesar has criticised Slessor for the limitations on his technical experimentation and it is clearly not as extensive as Eliot’s or Pound’s but it is as extensive as that of Yeats, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens.

a privileging of inner reality over external reality. It is this above everything else which sets Slessor apart from the writers of the 1890s, and his deep interest in time is an aspect of it. The interest is also strong in Romanticism, but in Modernism it is linked to a Nietzschean perspectivism—a sense of the uncertainty and relativism of truth. Slessor has, I think, a Symboliste and Yeatsian sense that meaning and truth might be captured in the magical qualities of images but not in any consciously known way. His poetry differs from Pound’s and Eliot’s in the limited number of propositional truth statements, a feature we can see intensifying as his work develops.

allied to this image-meaning, an aspiration to transcendence which is not fulfilled, and with the uncertainties about truth, an uncertainty as to whether human life has any purpose. The city in “Winter Dawn” is “Empty, without purpose” and the poem ends with an appeal to the dawn for meaning: “Waken me with old earth...” These are themes which will be restated more forcefully in “Five Bells”.

It might legitimately be asked, what is the point of all this? Ey steinn has written that "the concept 'modernism' may seem intolerably vague", Peter Nicholls that “the beginnings of modernism, like its endings, are largely indeterminate”, and it is true that our breaking literary, or artistic history more generally, into the -isms of different periods is very approximate. One period shades into another, rather than abruptly ending, and many scholars, including Andrew Taylor, have pointed out that elements of Romanticism continue into Modernism—even though Modernism was, for theorists such as Eliot, a consciously anti-Romantic movement. Our classifications are merely conveniences, a way of getting some sort of grip on the philosophical and aesthetic tendencies of writers or artists during a certain period of time, while placing an underlying bet that they are the antennae of the race. The importance of the category “Modernism” has been well put by Michael Levenson:

The influence of the first thirty years of the [twentieth] century over the next fifty was so great that the achievement of a distance from Modernism remains an event in contemporary culture. We are still learning how not to be Modernist, which is reason all the more to see what such an ambition could mean.

Our current Postmodern situation, if it can still be called that, is partly a function of Modernism—a situation of uncertainties and an accompanying plurality of beliefs. One difference might be that Modernists felt an anxiety about this situation—Slessor certainly did—while Postmodernists feel comfortable with it ... well, perhaps a bit less anxious. The gamut of contemporary responses ranges from Rorty’s Wittgensteinian acceptance of the limitations of philosophical thought—there is much of which we cannot speak—and Lyotard’s similar scepticism about metanarratives, to Derrida’s deconstruction of any and all meaning, to Habermas’ defence of the point of large philosophical explanations, universal truths, and “the unifying power of communicative reason”—all the fundamentals of the Enlightenment. Habermas declares that while “it is ... a characteristic of modernity that we have grown accustomed to living with dissent in
the realm of questions that admit of ‘truth’ ... we maintain ... the distinctions ... between good arguments and those which are merely successful for a certain audience at a certain time”. The effect of Postmodernity to localise and relativise truth—to see all truths as contingent and never absolute—comes directly from Modernism. Michael Bell, writing of Kafka as a Modernist, says that “the anguish of Kafka’s fiction ... comes from a desire still to find, rather than create, a meaning”. These points make me think that the Modernists were right, at least about meaning outside the physical sciences, to think that art, and especially literature, provides the best means not just to express truth, but to discover it. However, Bell’s perception seems to me to provide the differentiating point—and just about the only one but it is a significant one—between Modernism and Postmodernism: the ‘moment’ of acceptance that meaning must be humanly created, that meaning is not to be found but made, is the Postmodern moment.

But it is Modernism that led us there. Slessor is not a Postmodernist; he is not one to accept the human making of meaning. As “Five Bells” makes clear, he shares Kafka’s anguish, but that anguish is apparent even in these early poems. Lyotard sees Postmodernism as supporting an aesthetic of the “sublime”—“the unpresentable” that nevertheless “exists”—as opposed to an aesthetic of beauty. Slessor attempts the sublime through images which have their own laws, as his comments on magic indicate, but he also sees poetry as having a “lawless beauty”. One feature of Modernism is its recognition of the self’s inescapable involvement in the uncertainties of the age, expressed in Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” or Slessor’s “Cock-Crow”. Slessor’s poetry helps show how we got to where we are, and the shifts in his early poems show this “Man of Sydney” feeling his way towards Modernism and the writing of classic Australian poems such as “South Country” and “Five Bells”, not by turning his back on the bush but by gradually coming to write about it in an entirely new way.
REFERENCES

8 Haskell, p. xvi.
11 Mead, p. 139.
12 Mead, p. 155.
13 Haskell, p. 113.
14 Kenneth Slessor, notes for talk given to the English Association, 1944, p. 8; Robert Guy Howarth papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.
16 See, for example, the essays by Buckley, Wright and Taylor in Mead.
17 Mead, p. 20.
18 Vincent Buckley, Mead, p. 46.
19 See, for example, Judith Wright, Mead, pp. 64–65.
21 See Haskell, p. 265.
DENNIS HASKELL

22 Vincent Buckley, Mead, p. 43.
23 Vincent Buckley, Mead, p. 44.
24 Mead, p. 19.
26 Haskell and Dutton, p. 2.
27 “Thief of the Moon”.
28 “Threatenings”.
29 “Two Nocturnes”.
30 Haskell and Dutton, p. 27.
32 I am nevertheless grateful to Badcock for pointing out the first publication of four of the new Earth-Visitors poems in Melbourne Punch, something Geoff Dutton and I missed in preparing our edition of Slessor’s Collected Poems.
33 Andrew Taylor, Mead, p. 150.
34 “City Nightfall”, Haskell and Dutton, p. 150.
35 Haskell and Dutton, p. 62.
36 Adrian Caesar claims of “A Sunset” and the earlier poem “Mangroves” that “In both poems nature is imaged as a malevolent force in strange association with women”. Since “A Sunset” makes no mention of women and “Mangroves” only the vaguest one, this seems to me a wildly inaccurate reading.
37 See Haskell and Dutton, p. 350.
38 Haskell and Dutton, p. 351.
39 Haskell and Dutton, pp. 82 and 83.
40 Judith Wright, Mead, p. 67.
41 “Crow Country”.
42 “Talbingo”.
43 Haskell and Dutton, p. 133.
46 I have argued this a little more fully in my Introduction to my UQP edition of Slessor’s work, p. xxvii.
47 Haskell and Dutton, p. 48.
48 See also my “Kenneth Slessor and the Orchestration of Dog-Speech”, Mead, pp. 228–30.
49 Eysteinsson, p. 1.
54 Habermas, Bernstein, p. 194.
58 The title Douglas Stewart gave to his reminiscences of Slessor—A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor.