

Vol. 77 No. 3988 (18 Jul 1956)

Date : 2/10/21 7:58 AM

<https://nla.gov.au:443/tarkine/nla.obj-677336480>

Copyright Undetermined

Reason for copyright status: Serials have an open range of dates.

Copyright status was determined using the following information:

Material type: Literary Dramatic Musical

Copyright status may not be correct if data in the record is incomplete or inaccurate. For more information regarding Copyright in Library Collections visit <http://copyright.org.au> and <http://www.nla.gov.au/copyright-in-library-collections>

The National Library of Australia supports creativity, innovation and knowledge-exchange but does not endorse any inappropriate or derogatory use. Please respect indigenous cultural and ethical concerns.

RED PAGE

(Continued from page 2)

man and his dog? Wombats? This is the opening page of "The Tree of Life," and it is instantly apparent that Mr. White's picture of Australia is to be only half-convincing.

Mr. White, who is essentially anything but namby-pamby, would possibly defend his style on the grounds that it has rhythm. It has. And on the grounds that, in its obscurity, it helps to create that atmosphere of human bewilderment which his novel tries chiefly to depict. Once again, it does. And there is still nothing in the book which could not better be said plainly. Dealing with simple people, he has not the plot of dark intrigue in convict Tasmania and the darkest recesses of human psychology which to some extent justifies the eccentricities of William Gosse Hay; and even Hay would have done better to have written English.

Mr. White's characters, again—except for the O'Dowds; a most delightful pair of wild Irish whom he runs into farce when the drunken husband chases his wife, and the fowls and the pigs, with the cleaver—are nowhere memorable; Stan and Amy Parker might as well be named A and B for all the individuality they have.

And, finally, his biographical method of construction, following the Parkers step by step from birth to death, of necessity makes the final statement of the novel, rich and varied though it is in its course, not so much a profundity as an enormous commonplace: that men grow old and die. All novels, carried to this length of years, would be the same novel. It is in the isolating of a significant fragment of experience, comic or tragic, that the novelist can best find both dramatic form and something fresh to say.

But Mr. White writes his bad prose so painstakingly, and with such hints of possible excellence, that one has no doubt that he could write well if he chose. His knowledge of human nature in general, though the individual characters are not striking, is everywhere manifest. And, for a novel on so broad a theme as a man's whole life, and the growth of a settlement, "The Tree of Life," for all its length, is remarkably tight, compact and to the point. If he has not written the Great Australian Novel this time, Mr. White may very well write one of our great novels as soon as he stops trying to.

D. S.

The Australian Sonnet

Louis Lavater's The Sonnet in Australia was first published in 1926. He added 43 to the original 225 for a new edition he had ready in 1945, when he was 78, but he died at 86 with the new edition still unpublished, says Frederick T. Macartney in his foreword and enlarged edition, which he has edited, and for which he has put together a 57-page preface made up from Lavater's several writings, most

of which makes an exhaustive discussion of varying sonnet-forms.

Lavater was a shrewd judge; his putting of "The Swimmer" at the head of Gordon's accomplishments must warm any critic or poet towards him; and in his old age he did not carp at newness: there was a "remarkable spate of sonnets in the magazines during the first quarter of this century," he says, but at the end of this period people were saying that poetry would soon be "practically extinct." Lavater didn't believe it, and he felt that his view was

being confirmed by current developments in poetry—the invention of new stanzaic designs; substitution of assonance or dissonance for rhyme; scansion by stress ("speech-rhythm") rather than by syllabic metre; preponderance of intellectual over emotional content; and a more involved mode of expression. These circumstances nevertheless made the search for present-day sonnets more difficult.

Everybody has written a sonnet; one suspects that Mr. Menzies has one hidden away, and that Dr. Ewatt is reserving a 14-line Miltonic diatribe, like a hydrogen-bomb, for an explosion of the last resort upon the head of Mr. Santamaria. Every poet should be able to write one, or a ballade, or a rondeau, a sestina or (says Ezra Pound) a strict Italian canzone; they are the poet's discipline; his studies; his five-finger exercises.

The sonnet, because so many practised it, has been also the language of polite poetic conversation; it had the vagueness and generality of strangers meeting at some formal reception and making to each other the same guarded comments and replies as at any other formal reception, on the weather, the flowers, the plays, the people . . . and if there is not still one "language of diplomacy," there is even today a language of sonnets, formed mostly by Shakspeare and partly by Milton, and controlled by the pentameter-rhythm and the unchanging proposal-and-reply of the form which forces a beauty on all proper sonnets and at the same time renders them indistinguishable.

The Australian exceptions are few. At their head one would put a sonnet not printed in this book and one that is. It can never be sufficiently lamented that Leon Gellert is known only as a war-poet, and mostly today as a charming essayist on the home-life. He should also be known for the superb sonnet:—

When I have known you thoroughly through the years
And found each secret atom and
piece of you
And all your laughter has grown stale,
and tears
Too regular, and there is nothing new,
What new surprise will wait behind
the bars . . .

For this same mandarin, before 1920, was the first Australian poet to break the glass that held poetic beauty and goodness together and show the poet as the somewhat doubtful character that everyone knows himself to be. The other great sonnet, printed in this book,

is Slessor's "Thief of the Moon"; in spite of its effort to gain novelty by fluttering the line, it shows how easily the conventional imagery of poetry may be developed into a masterpiece. You begin, it seems, with little more metaphorical originality than a Timpan Alley song:—

Thief of the moon, thou robber of
old delight,
Thy charms have stolen the star-gold,
quenched the moon—
and then you just throw in two lines
of musical genius:—
Cold, cold are the birds that,
bubbling out of night,
Cried once to my ears their
unremembered tune . . .

It is all so easy.
The war-sonnet, "A Night Attack," which is one of Gellert's two pieces in this book, is probably the most "modern" sonnet here, with its suspense and fine use of disjunct lines; but a book which prints so much should surely have included the great sonnet beforementioned, and also one of the two domestic sonnets; that, for instance, beginning:—

Because his soup was cold, he needs
must sulk . . .

Then, even if one felt that Slessor's "Mangroves" sonnet was too like in style to his "Thief of the Moon" sonnet for inclusion, there should have been space for one or all of his little "crown" of three sonnets, "Out of Time"; a very new development:—

Leaning against the golden under-
lay,
Backward, I saw the birds begin to
climb
With bodies hailstone-clear, and
shadows flow,
Fixed in a sweet meniscus, out of
Time,

Out of the torrent, like the fainter
land
Lensed in a bubble's ghostly camera,
The lighted beach, the sharp and
china sand,
Glitters and waters and peninsula . . .

At least three of the other sonnets in this book have achieved international fame, though one never quite felt that Bernard O'Dowd's, "Bulletin" prize sonnet, "Australia," quite lived up to its first magnificent line:—

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor
Time from Space . . .
and would rather give the palm, for
perfection, to his little comic sonnet:—

THE COW

This is a rime I ravelled in the still
Arrogant stare of an Australian
cow—
"These prankt intruders of the
hornless brood,
Puffed up with strange illusions of
their skill
To fence, to milk, to fatten and to
kill,
Once worshipped me with temple,
rite and vow,
Crowned me with stars and made the
milkshin bow
Before what abject guess they called
my will!
Today this flunkey of my midden,
Man,
Throws child - oblations in my
milking-byre,
Stiffles in slums to spare me lordly
fields,

Flatters with spotless consorts my
desire,
And for a pail of cream his birthright
yields,
As once in Egypt, Hellas, Ind,
Iran!"

The second famous sonnet is Bayle-
don's "Marlowe," which marches with
all the splendor both of the sonnet and
of Marlowe to his inglorious death:—
A harlot weeping o'er a corpse
scarce cold,
A scullion fleeing with a bloody
knife.

We gain fame by curious routes:
Leslie Hotson, who discovered once
and for all that Marlowe died in a
tavern brawl, killed by a companion
probably in an argument over who
should pay the bill, included the fleeing
scullion of Bayle don in his list of the
incorrect theories his world-surprising
discovery had destroyed.

The third famous sonnet is Bartlett
Adamson's "Adventure," with its often-
quoted opening:—

The world is charted out from pole
to pole,
Measured and docketed and filed
away . . .

It was praised in terms one forgets by
the American Vincent Starrett, well
known as a detective-story writer, and
of sufficient standing as a critic to make
Bartlett's name in that one sonnet; and
rightly so, though perhaps the sestet
lacks a little the thought that death is
the last adventure—a matter on which
ole Bart is now a better authority than
the present reviewer. He died after
complaining of faintness on the plat-
form of a Leftist meeting at Sydney
Domain; that was his "Panorama from
the peaks of Death."

And for those who knew that ancient
and mordant wit, that undismayed and
unquenchable old journalist, Adam
McCay, how enchanting to come upon
a sonnet of his youth, and to consider
how it must have shocked the readers
of those earlier days:—

Your sweet girl's body is a bowl of
wine,
Brimming with all delight; it is,
moreover,
Scented as is the blossom of cool
clover;

It is as dazzling as a star divine,
Not hung in heaven for ever to shine
But trembling earthward to a happy
lover . . .

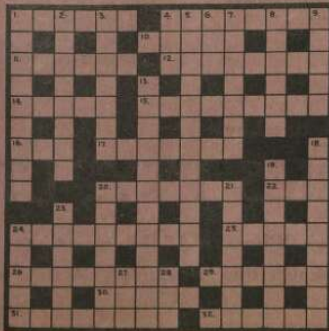
For the rest, one is unwilling to
differentiate. There are celebrations of
months and seasons, women, music,
night, day, cemeteries, stars, wattle,
cats, driftwood, ships, shores, ice, heat
(Chris Brennan), the soul imprisoned
in the vile body (Edgar Holt), poppies
—by Everyone: Barros Field, Sir
Henry Parkes, Hugh McCrae, Arthur
H. Adams, Zora Cross, Irma Murdoch,
S. Elliott Napier, William Baybridge,
James Devaney, David McKee Wright,
Macartney and Lavater themselves,
Marie E. J. Pitt, Fumley Maurice,
Charles Harpur, Archibald T. Strong,
Vance Palmer, Dora Wilcox, Dowell
O'Reilly, Mary Gilmore, Victor Daley,
Will Ogilvie . . .

It's quite a roll-call; but there must
be many left out: Kenneth Mackenzie,
for one; Robert D. FitzGerald for
another; both of whom have worked
with outstanding freshness in this
ancient field.

Ronald McCaig.

"THE BULLETIN" CROSSWORD No. 391

- Across
1-Not home to produce an egg expenditure. (6)
4-Who likes everything to be perfect in a catalogue of notions? (8)
10-Far from active when battling against royalty before tea. (5)
11-Modern newspapermen pay much attention to this arrangement of faceross. (5-7)
12-Swear the source of caviate is an Arab philosopher and medical authority. (8)
14-X's? (5)
15-Every section of it is an oval Spanish article and a piece to kiss with love before I would finish. (9)
16-A very long time to make one. (3)
17-Figure this is happening in a steam-yacht (7)
20-Drastically censure a parent's badgear. (7)
22-Modification of the fat behind. (3)
24-The French sea cleric to treat with quicksilver. (9)
25-Subject to the French one against the German. (5)
26-Australian State to peg back the ear worker on salary. (4-4)
29-A reputable woman in a



- steamer begins the holy faculty. (6)
30-Eastlake is weird. (5)
31-Don't perform the Wagnerian tetralogy for a while, according to a racketeer's order. (6)
32-A heavy scoring bat is a provoker of Venus. (6)
Down
1-Lone rook's modified spectators. (9)
2-Attempt to bite when meeting a sweetheart. (8)
3-An astringent daylight upset the student or old-boy of a college. (7)
4-Girl like Beethoven's 7th symphony. (3)
5-13 seasons and broils an anaesthetist. (6, 6)
6-Before a palindrome. (3)
7-A sword for succeeding education. (7)
8-Yours Truly does \$0 on the object of pagan worship. (6)
9-Tensed preposition with a sedan unloading its article. (5)
13-Some tennis act at the Tivoli is meeting the immediate purpose. (7, 1, 4)
18-Give a ironic interpretation of rested flowers. (9)
19-Study about a tree playright of Spain. (8)
20-Fruit by the fatter fatterer. (7)

- 21-Short did spectacular show-off acts. (7)
23-G, and S, craft in first a great English bowler. (6)
24-To be indebted heart of Mr. S. Cutler. (5)
27-Hawaito garland. (3)
28-The Governor-General surrounds one conveyance. (3)

Solution to Crossword No. 390

