

Style: often mentioned, less commonly analysed

We've all seen men in pizza restaurants spinning the base of their next pizza high above their shoulders before they flatten it on a bench to ladle on tomato paste. Style, we say, without thinking of the word we're using. Style; it's a word applied to writers all the time, but I have a feeling that it's used to cover many functions and that as often as not the word is used to replace thinking rather than advance it. To say that writing is stylish is what I would call a gestural response, the reader's thoughts being directed without further explanation. 'Stylish' is enough, it seems.

In a book published some years ago (1) I quoted passages from Judith Wright, Morris Lurie, Helen Garner, Olga Masters and Hal Porter by way of showing the different ways these writers used the folding of sheets to establish a variety of points. The sheets were folded five times, in as many different ways, for each of the writers to make a point, or perhaps an impression; the job was done differently each time. How could it be otherwise? Anyone even faintly familiar with these writers would be able to attach their names to the passages quoted. Try yourself out if you doubt me; it'll only take you a moment to find the book on my website, and the quotes are there for you to test yourselves. Easy, you'll say if you do it.

Why's it so easy? Because each of these writers has a distinctive, a personal style. They've shaped the way they write according to the nature of their personalities, and they've learned to use prose, that

thing we share with everyone around us, in a way that's responsive to the peculiar combination of impulses and insights which form their writing personalities. A mother, woken from her sleep by one of her children calling, knows which one it is, and reaches its bed ready to act in an appropriate way – appropriate, that is, to the nature of the child who's called. Children are different, as we all know, and writers are different too.

How do writers form their styles? Is a style a strength, a limitation, or a coupling of the two? Can we name a group of writers, as I did in the paragraph above, and find things they have in common, or things that keep them apart, one from another? Is there anything that a writer can be taught, as part of a development or training process, beside the ways to identify and respond to those forces, inside them and out, which will give rise, eventually, to the style which is to be theirs? These are difficult questions but I shall try to make something of them, if I can; the first difficulty comes with the word 'style', which carries the load of so many meanings attributed to it by so many people. Style? Style? What is it, this thing I've set out to examine?

The first thing about style is that it allows recognition. We look at a piece of writing and we know it's by Hal Porter, or Patrick White, or Billy the Blacksmith. *This* piece is so clumsily written that it must be by Blind Freddy, an old mate. In earlier essays I've admired the style of Hal Porter and grumbled about Patrick White's.

Why? Because the stylistic bravura of the first brings me pleasure, while the latter's diversions from the norm offend my sense that prose belongs to everybody, and therefore a personal style is an accommodation by the writer to those surrounding him/her, and vice versa. Readers have to find a meeting ground with the writers of their choice. Writers, in their turn, have to find that point which they and their readers will agree to call their halfway house. This is where reading and interpretation will take place. Writing is, after all, more than an assertion, though it is that; writing is a mutual activity whereby imaginations can meet and make some sort of music – I speak figuratively – together. Writing tests the willingness of a society to give its writers their heads. Societies with puritanical stresses in them will insist on blocking sexual expression; others will encourage it. And so on. When writers form their styles these styles will certainly be, among other things, responses to the ways by which their societies, surrounding them, exercise their ways of understanding and their willingness to take on new ideas at all.

What is style? I hope that by now I have opened up this question a little, though perhaps I've confused it. Let me go back a little. Style was, I imagined earlier, the peculiar and very personal way that a particular writer dealt with a range of problems, first of which was and always will be the business of finding ways to use words which allow the most highly developed characteristics of the writer's vision, and the quirkiest, to come through language – that common property – to the mind of the reader. Style, I said, was recognisable, so that a reader could glance at one writer's way of mentioning the folding of sheets and know which of our

writers expressed the matter in that particular way. To be able to do this involves a certain sophistication. Readers need to have read enough to be able to recognise those personal habits which mark one writer's approach from another's. Is this only a matter of appearances? The style is the man, runs a saying. Let us add 'woman', at least in our minds. The style is the man. Is the man, therefore, the style also? Presumably. When the two are so closely coagulated that they cannot even be thought of apart, then the fullest, richest expression is possible. The style is more than an individual's way of handling words, it's an agreement that releases writers and readers into each other's arms. Good reading, every bit as much as good expression, becomes possible. That peak which writers and readers are always seeking becomes visible and therefore attainable. Joy!

It would seem, then, that we are ready to take our next step. In what direction? I think that we should look at the idea that a style, once developed, is somehow set: inescapable. Readers are probably responsible for this idea, which is a lazy one; writers are more likely to be aware that their style may change, and is probably changing according to the dictates of that part of their thinking that is not consciously controlled.

I've already mentioned Hal Porter, perhaps the most stylish of Australian writers; let me now bring forward his friend, the poet Kenneth Slessor. Slessor is much admired for his poem 'Five Bells', in which he reconciles himself as best he can to the death by drowning of Joe Lynch. Two biographers of Slessor (2 & 3) have reproduced pages of his sketches for this famous poem, and a study

of these pages is most instructive. Let us first remind ourselves how the poem, as we now have it, begins:

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 ship's 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.

We may treat this as an introduction, I think; then the poem proper begins:

Deep and dissolving verticals of light
Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells
Coldly rung out ...

Deep and dissolving verticals of *light*; Slessor's sketch lists, one under the other, and very neatly, no less than fourteen alternatives to 'light'. And 'light', the word eventually used, is not among the fourteen words considered. What about the second line? Slessor's sketch is different from the line we have today, but he appears to have needed, early on, to continue his thought with a strong, a noticeable verb. Today – and forever, now – it's 'ferry', but this choice wasn't easily made. Slessor's sketch lists twenty four alternatives. Twenty four words, a selection he set out for himself before he changed the line so that none of them were used. 'Ferry' it became, and down came the falls of moonshine with the word; it's not hard to see why the choice fell on 'ferry', because Joe died by falling from a ferry into the waters of Sydney's harbour, but this is something the reader is

expected to know, and isn't directly told, so that the word 'ferry', used as a verb to bring the moonshine down – in other sketches it's 'moonlight' – is the only mention, however indirect, of the situation of Joe's death. He fell from a ferry and drowned, but ferries aren't mentioned in this quintessentially Sydney harbour poem except as a verb, not a noun, in the second line of the poem-proper, and 'ferry', obvious as it seems to us today, was not even included in the first twenty four words Slessor considered!

It's worth mentioning that even so sonorous a thing as the poem's title – Five Bells – wasn't easily arrived at. Slessor's sketches have the refrain of the poem as 'Four bells' and elsewhere as 'Six bells'; it's strange to see these abandoned and to us almost improper words in the fastidious poet's hand. Four bells? Six? We've accepted five, now, and the matter's gone beyond whatever hesitation and testing took place before the choice was made for five, five, Five Bells! Look at the poem's ending and see if you can imagine that the number could ever have been anything but five?

... 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.

Slessor was one of the most exact of our poets and it's fascinating to watch him searching for the words that would give his poem that precision which we generally attribute to him as an inevitable part of his style. But there's something automatic about our concept of style, something necessary, as if the poet could hardly help himself

writing in the way he did, when the truth is much more uncertain. The famous precision of Slessor's style had to be searched for, tried and tested, and the words that would eventually embody what we think of as Slessor's style were endlessly considered and reconsidered before being granted their place in the overall design. This suggests to me that style can only be considered after the hard work – the really hard work – of writing has been done.

Let us look into this a little further. I've already mentioned the alternatives Slessor wrote down for 'light'. The line, let's not forget, started like this:

Deep and dissolving verticals of

Of what? Here are the words Slessor listed: stars; ice; air; brine (?); smoke; crystal; azure; foam; blue; dew; mist; glass; gauze; ether. And of course, light, the word he eventually chose, which isn't there! If we, continuing our search for meanings of the word style, consider these words, is there anything we can see? I think there is, not so much in the words themselves as in the reasoning that led Slessor to list them. Each of them – not separately, perhaps, but when placed together by Slessor in a list – possesses or appears to possess – possesses briefly, let us say – an element of sensuality which I think was the characteristic that Slessor wanted most. The word had to be compatible with 'deep and dissolving verticals', and with 'ferry', when that word had been chosen; the word Slessor was looking for was not so much vital in its own right as a suitable response to, or embodiment of, the ideas on either side. It was a sort of mirror-word, a chevalier word, as Slessor might have said, handsome enough in itself but able to set off its position, as an

ensign's uniform might set off the beautiful woman he's escorting. (Slessor might have approved of that – or he might have thought it corny!)

This brings us back to Slessor's choice of the word 'ferry'. It's natural for the ordinary reader to misjudge this business of choosing a word. Most readers do only a limited amount of writing, and their struggles can usually be expressed by that question which so many of us have uttered into the air of an unsympathetic room: 'What do I want to say?' Implicit in that question is the idea – fallacious, in a discussion of style – that saying is a matter of choosing the right words. The fallacious idea that many readers have is that writers are forever searching for *le mot juste* – the one word that's right. It's true that writers are happy when *un mot juste* arrives, but the search for it is only occasional. A happy choice of words is hardly more than a happy birthday, fine in itself but what about all the other days in the year? Having a good year is better than having a good day, is it not? Having a good year can be compared, for a writer, with having a good answer to the question forming in his/her mind – what am I going to write about? What is that impulse, lurking down there like a creature that feeds on the sea-bed and hides among the rocks? Can I get a good enough view of this thing to let me know what it is?

Let us take a further step. Let us say we've identified the lurking sea-beast, that is, we know what it is we want to do. How do we begin? This is both easy, and immensely hard. I have an answer which will satisfy nobody. We must begin at a point that allows us to move with the simplest possible logic to the end. That

is to say, we must begin in such a way that the end of our journey is implicit in the way we began it. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It is simple, and therefore it's hard. Simplicity is one of the hardest things to achieve. The German pianist Artur Schnabel once said of the music of Mozart that it was too easy for a child to learn on and too hard for a concert pianist to perform. Do you see what he means? Simplicity is the hardest taskmaster for anyone striving for perfection. If we're struggling with something complex, people will admire us for doing a difficult job well, but if we're struggling to present something simple with the perfection it calls for, and we can't do it, people wonder what's wrong with us, that we can't properly do something that – they say, they think – anyone could do!

The first step in writing is to identify what it is we want to do. The second step is to identify where we need to start, and that implies, as I've just said, that we will be able to find an easy – a simple – path from beginning to end. That further implies that it's our job, as writer, to give our readers not only an interesting and at least partially enjoyable journey if they travel with us, but that the journey, when ended, should seem to have been simple.

This means, or I think it means, that the writer should sense, before s/he begins, the dimensions of the whole undertaking, being ready to follow it in all its excursions and side tracks, in the certainty that all will help the reader to that satisfactory ending where all that can be explained is explained, and the inevitable mysteries are at least identified for further thought. A writer can't do much more than that. Notice that my ideas, as presented thus far, aren't about

the choice of words at all; those problems, if they are problems, lie ahead. In my experience, choosing words isn't very hard once these underlying problems have been solved. Slessor, in my view, wasn't choosing between fourteen or twenty four alternatives for one little spot in a longish poem, he was trying to find his way, and I think we can think of those lists of alternative words not so much as synonyms, nor even as competitors, or alternatives for each other, but as signposts pointing in a variety of directions. If he'd chosen this word here, he'd have had to choose other words there, because the direction of the poem would have changed. Its identity too would have changed because with a different endpoint it would have been a different poem.

So our questions are, first, what do we want to do, and second, how and where do we start/end? As questions, they're simple enough, though fiendish too. We've not yet reached, I hasten to point out, the question of style, though everything we are doing has a bearing on the nature of the style we'll need to employ. Let us imagine, and I'm smiling at this, that we've answered these questions and we're ready to start. We have now to proceed with the fewest number of bumps, distractions or puzzles for the uncertain reader. That is to say that our readers should feel no moments along the way when they feel lost and suspect that their guide is as lost as they are. If this happens, they will lose confidence, and if that happens the journey is doomed to end in some frustrating place far from its intended conclusion. This must not happen! Our forward journey needs to be carried out with confidence. We know why we're travelling, we know where we want to get to, the broad

aspects of our travel plan have been decided, we've chosen our vehicle, we've thought ahead, we're carrying spares, we've money and access to more, all we've got to do is drive! If we are writers, we travellers, we are now at the point where we can think about how we drive, or to vary the expression, the style we'll use to carry out our intentions. Style is the how of writing, not the where or why, though all these questions touch each other.

It will not have escaped the reader that, having raised the question of style, I've finally answered it with a metaphor: style is like – I'm into similes now, having reduced my claim slightly from its ambit – style is like driving once the destination and overall route have been chosen. That's what style is like (simile), that's what style is (metaphor). Let's explore this idea of driving for a moment. Most of us can drive, most of us have been driven, and we have our preferences, don't we? There are drivers I find reassuring, others that are good enough for me not to worry about, and there are others that make me feel vulnerable, a feeling I'd rather be without. There are a few drivers I wouldn't get into a car with and sensible drivers know they fall into this last category if they've been drinking. What's the similarity between driving and a writer's style? It's this: a different driver makes the journey different, and a different writer makes the experience of reading different, even when the topic under discussion is near enough to being the same. Writers have in common that hugest of subjects, the life around them, the life they've led, the lives they know. These things are so large they can only be talked about by making a choice, and the choice of subject, as I was trying to establish earlier, is not a matter

of style but a decision, or perhaps a choice, of the writer before s/he can exercise the skills of style. And yet the two are connected. The writer's personality is involved in the choice of subject matter, the way of opening it and the way of ending. This we already know; the style is in the way of doing. Let's take some examples to give us a chance to look, close-up, at these things. I mentioned Hal Porter and Patrick White a little earlier, so let's begin with them.

An intervention first. In the series of essays of which this is a part, I've made it my business to quote writers frequently, because it's my wish that readers should come away knowing what it is about each of the writers that led to their inclusion. As a critic I may say what I like but as a presenter it's my duty to let the writers speak for themselves; this means, dear reader, that you have, whether you've noticed or not, been presented endlessly with examples of each writer's style.

Back to Porter and White. Hal first (4):

Once upon a time, it seems, but in reality on or about the day King Edward VII died, these two corpses have been young, agile and lustful enough to mortise themselves together to make me. Since the dead wear no ears that hear and have no tongues to inform, there can now be no answer, should the question be asked, as to where the mating takes place, how zestfully or grotesquely, under which ceiling, on which kapok mattress – no answer, anywhere, ever.

I am exactly one week old when the first aeroplane ever to do so flies over my birthplace. On aesthetic grounds or for superstitious reasons I am unvaccinated; I am superstitiously and fashionably uncircumcised, plump, blue-eyed and

white-haired. I have a silver rattle, Hindu, in the shape of a rococo elephant hung on a bone ring. I crawl. *The Titanic* sinks. I stand. The Archduke is assassinated at Sarajevo, and I walk at last into my own memories.

And now, before we undertake any discussion of the methods employed in the above lines, a reminder of Patrick too (5).

In spite of her exhausted blood and torn feet, everything in fact which might have disposed her to melancholy, she was throbbing with a silent cheerfulness; until, from somewhere in the distant sunlight, an actual bird announced his presence in a dry, cynical crackle such as she associated with the country to which she and the convict were condemned.

Both quotations are short, but if we look at them closely we should be able to see a thing or two. Porter first. The corpses he mentions are those of his mother and his father, the only two corpses, he tells us, he's ever seen. The first, his mother, causes him to shed floods of tears; the second, his father, none at all. This distinction is made at the book's opening but why this should be so, it will take us the whole book to find out. Hal loved his mother as he loved no one else, and Mother loved her first-born in a way that couldn't be, and wasn't, repeated. Each was special to the other. Nonetheless, and be that as it may, a story has to be told, and the form is an autobiography, so its central figure has to be brought on – and is! He has a rattle, this baby, he crawls, he stands, he walks. Simple? Inevitable. It's everyone's history, unless they're crippled, and this child isn't. The trick is the spacing of these steps to maturity, and the interspersal between them of things that tell us of the world the child is entering – the rattle is silver, and Hindu; the *Titanic* sinks;

World War 1 starts; and the world's memories are ... not replaced ... added to by the memories of the writer – 'my own'. This simple, dichotomous presentation of the child and the world into which it is arriving is as masterful a piece of writing as one could wish to find, masterful because Porter's presentation – his realisation – of himself will be, as he must know, even at this early stage, as personal as it's possible to be, while the world can be brought forward with a few reminders of things well known to any half-literate reader. *The Titanic* and the assassination at Sarajevo. The child, Mother's first-born, is given a place in the world. The world is given a place surrounding the child. Its child? The question is implied. Does the world belong to us, as individuals, and do we belong to it? I think the answer to both questions is inescapably yes. We can't be separated from our time. Thus Hal's use of language, at the start of his greatest book, shows that his style is more than arbitrary, it's the embodiment of his way of looking at, of living in, the world. There's a highly individualised person shown in theatrical contrast with the wider world surrounding. If we go to the end of *The Extra* (6), his third and final vol of autobiography, we find the individual coming home after a journey to countries far away. The contrast, this time, is between the traveller returning to the room he vacated months before, and the clocks – the clocks! – which had to fill in time while he was away: either that, or stop, as Tam-Tam the German clock has done, needing, now that Hal's home, to be wound again. Tam-Tam has to be brought back to life, as its owner was once brought to life, decades before.

And now to Patrick White. The passage I've chosen to represent him – and I think his work probably contains a greater variety of styles than Porter's – seems unremarkable in its way of speaking, until you look more closely at what's being said, and how it expresses White's own position in life, and in particular his position in the land to which he returned in mid life. Ellen Gluyas, having been shipwrecked, has been taken in by a group of blacks; Ellen lives with them, then escapes with one of their number who is not what he first appears, but an escaped convict. They travel through the bush together, these two, making for 'civilisation', and, as I've described in an earlier essay, they reach its boundaries, at which point Ellen, but not her companion, leaves wandering behind. But is civilisation as good as the hopes Ellen ascribed to it, when rescue was uppermost in her mind? Civilisation as she's experienced it is English, and more recently the colonial form of English to be found in Tasmania, in convict-ridden Sydney, and in the lives of ship-board men. If she's to give up the native life she's been reduced to – or we might say discovered – she would like it to be for something better than she's likely to get in the tiny settlement existing at Brisbane. The country's empty of civilisation, or at least its more satisfying forms, and the dry cynical crackle which White presents is as much the sound of the whole country as it's the sound of a bird. This is no accidental coinciding of meanings, it's the very heart of the ambivalence White felt once he opted to resume existence in his homeland. His homeland? Sometimes he felt so, and sometimes he didn't. The key word is 'condemned'; it's obviously the word for the convict, but it's applied to Ellen too; she

too is condemned to be where she is and one of the things that gives *A Fringe of Leaves* its greatness is that Ellen and her guide, escaping, if that's the word, from the blacks, are not necessarily directed towards something better. They may be and they may not; that's the question White, ever so boldly, leaves open. In calling the bird's sound a dry cynical crackle White has affixed to the bird a trove of associations, many of them critical, or unpleasant, which he's collected in his years away and his later years of return. The bird which the escapees hear is speaking with a huge amount to say; this peculiar way White has of placing loads, caches, of meanings in unexpected places, disconcerting and sometimes alarming places, is the cause, I think, of most of the difficulties readers have in dealing with him – accepting his style, I think I mean to say. It's not easy to be comfortable with him because he's frequently uncomfortable with himself.

This discomfort is not a reduction in his quality as a writer, however, and many of his readers, as we know, find it to be the other way around. He's all the more willingly accepted by readers who feel the same discomfort with aspects of Australian life that he kept away from as best he could.

I hope to say more of this in a later essay on Shirley Hazzard, so will leave the matter there.

Before closing this essay on style I would like to make a few remarks about my own stylistic searches. They will be no more than personal but other writers and a few readers may find them interesting. For what they are worth they are offered here.

As a boy at school, I read widely. There were books we had to study but we were advised to read more broadly, and I did. I found reassurance when I discovered the Prefaces of George Bernard Shaw. Each of his plays was published with a discussion of the issues it raised, and these were written in an argumentative, expository way I found ... essential. I was at the stage of searching for values myself, so I didn't care for works of literature that offered glimpses and glances without any hints as to the preferred or even correct interpretation. I am describing the state of being young, when one wants to know, to be informed, and never, please God, to be caught out looking silly because wrong. Bernard Shaw was always right, or he could argue so well that he seemed able to demolish the arguments put up to counter him, and this I felt was marvellous. He could do what I as a young man in search of a path through life couldn't do.

Years passed, I decided I would write about Gippsland, the place where I'd been working for twelve years, and it seemed to me, since I was an outsider, that is, not a Gippslander myself, that my writing style would have to be expository. I would be outlining my discoveries, and showing what I'd discovered to people who were even more outsiders than I was. I did not imagine myself as addressing my writing to those who lived in Gippsland itself. I rather doubted if they'd want to read what I had to say because I'd done what a native-born Gippslander wouldn't do – I'd packed my bags and left. How to write? My years of teaching had affected me. I'd learned always to step toward the audience and never away. Make bold statements then show what you mean by them.

If you have doubts, work them out in private and don't let the reader see you in any semblance of confusion. Bernard Shaw was my model in assertive self-confidence; his sentences were shapely and his vocabulary large. His longest sentences were arguments in themselves, while his short sentences – when they came! – were pithy. The man had wit. I had Shaw behind my shoulder as I set off on that first great prose undertaking, for which, of course, I wasn't really ready. Nobody is. It's only when you've written a few books that you're ready to think about the writing of books, because you don't know what you're doing until you've done it, silly as that may seem, and is.

Looking back on that first book now, there are places where I'm happy with the concordance of style and subject, but other places where they don't seem a very good fit. There's nothing to be done about this. Every painter, composer, choreographer has to do a first work, and will be lucky if that firstness doesn't show, at least in places. The greater test of a style is when a change is needed, and has to be found. This came, for me, when I was preparing my fifth book, *The Garden Gate*. This was a novel with a large cast of characters, and although one of them was central, being the link that held the others in the book's story, none of the characters' way of seeing, and living in, the world could be allowed dominance over the others. I needed an approach to my writing which allowed any of these characters in and out of the spotlight at any suitable moment. The personality of one character mustn't prejudice the arrival or departure of others. I wanted the reader to assume that even while his/her attention was focussed on one person, all the

others were proceeding with their lives, out of sight. The prose that I needed to write my book needed to convey this generality of focus to my readers.

How to do it? I didn't know and I didn't know anybody who could tell me. What I did know was that my style had to change. It had to alter itself so that it suited the new task I was intent on setting myself. I've described elsewhere (7) what I did; I dug out a recording I'd bought years earlier, and been puzzled by, of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. I began to play this recording, over and over, asking myself what it was about Debussy that I wanted not so much to learn as to absorb. I absorbed, as best I could, for two years, until I thought I was ready. My prose, when I started to write the book, was different. It was more mobile and it was ready to jump in any direction at any moment. That felt right! I was pleased. What else? I began to think about prose, what it could and couldn't do. I became envious of musicians, because music could speak simply, or with great complexity. It could use contrasting themes at one and the same time. It could be loud or soft, fast or slow. It could use huge forces and then reduce them, or vice versa. It seemed able to do a great deal that prose couldn't do – or so I told myself.

This was a challenge. Perhaps prose could do these things that music did, but writers hadn't striven to achieve them yet. I decided to work towards making my prose musical, that is to say, that it should possess the attributes I admired in music. I worked on with *The Garden Gate* and when I finished the book I assumed that my writing style would revert to something like it had been before. But it didn't. The business of turning prose into music, or

making the one resemble the other, continued in an underground way. I'd changed my style forever, or rather, I'd handed control of any choices of style I might make to the demands of whatever I might decide to write next. I realised, after a while, that much as I loved and admired the music of Claude-Achille Debussy, I loved and admired – I was in touch with – W.A.Mozart more. I wanted to write prose as Mozart wrote music, and I was conscious that it simply couldn't be done. The composer was too good for anyone to follow, or try to imitate, and he'd written at a certain time in history that had passed. European history – world history – had darkened since the Enlightenment! Nonetheless, I knew what I wanted. I had an ideal, I was prepared to pursue it, it might not be achievable but it could be an influence, pressing in from time to time.

I won't say that I changed my style but I certainly allowed it to change. I welcomed what was happening. Eventually I wrote a little memoir called *Mozart*, trying to find that exhilarating sprightliness and lift which is in his music. It's time, though, to put aside the names of famous composers and ask what I was doing, or allowing to happen to, my style. The famous names are indicative, they point the mind in certain directions, but it's prose that we're talking about and it's hard to hold prose pure because it has so many different jobs to do, some of them earthy, some sublime, some matter of fact and day to day, some of them matters of inquiry into things we struggle to understand. In a way, we make it harder and harder to answer questions about our writing styles as we go further with our development because, as stated earlier, the style is the man/woman, it must respond as the writer develops, matures, and the writer can't, simply can't, know everything about him/

herself because the writer uses writing to catch up with his/her development, not to define it. The writer who's too absorbed in himself isn't absorbed enough in what else is going on. The writer needs to be unselfconscious about style in order to let style do what it's supposed to do – that is, act as the pipe that brings the waters of experience and meaning to those who need a drink. We may say that a certain writer's style is static, or in transition, according to whether or not the writer's mind is static or in transition. Is the writer's personality absorbing new experience, and being modified? If so, the style of expression will be changing too, if only subtly. No? Then the style can stay still, for a while. In this sense style is a barometer displaying many facets of the person who's in charge of the writing, always assuming - as for the most part I don't – that the writer is in charge of what's being written, rather than the books themselves being in charge (my general view). A barometer: a measure: a method of calculation but not the substance being measured, which is personality, after all, another concept that's mysteriously difficult to define.

The style is the personality's way of expressing itself. We haven't got any further, have we, than 'The style is the man'? No further at all. Perhaps the problem's with the nature of the question we put to ourselves. Perhaps we can't get a firm answer at all, but there's no doubt that style exists.

I have a silver rattle, Hindu, in the shape of a rococo elephant hung on a bone ring. I crawl. The *Titanic* sinks. I stand. The Archduke is assassinated at Sarajevo, and I walk at last into my own memories.

I crawl, I stand, I walk, says Hal, and what does Patrick say?

... she was throbbing with a silent cheerfulness; until, from somewhere in the distant sunlight, an actual bird announced his presence in a dry, cynical crackle such as she associated with the country to which she and the convict were condemned.

Let's look at them again:

... I walk at last into my own memories ...

And:

... the country to which she and the convict were condemned ...

The style is the man, and there's certainly a difference, isn't there?

1. *Oztralia*, Chester Eagle, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 2005. Immediate reference is to the chapter called 'The Land (4)', pages 50 – 58, but see also chapter called 'Owning Ourselves', pages 107 – 121 for further quotations from Australian writers. The book can be located at the trojanpress.com.au website, under the menu item 'Our Books'.
2. *Kenneth Slessor: a biography*, Geoffrey Dutton, Penguin, Melbourne, 1991
3. *A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor*, Douglas Stewart, Nelson, Melbourne, 1977
4. *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony*, Hal Porter, Faber & Faber, London 1963
5. *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White, Jonathon Cape, London, 1976
6. *The Extra*, Hal Porter, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975
7. See my trojanpress.com.au website, go to 'Our Books', scroll down to *The Garden Gate*, then click on 'About the Writing of this Book'.