

**Yvonne Smith. *David Malouf and the Poetic: His Earlier Writings*.
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‘Malouf’s abiding curiosity is an essential element in any narrative of his writing life: his work is, at heart, a way of wondering.’

So begins Chapter One of Yvonne Smith’s *David Malouf and the Poetic*, and there can have been few simpler, clearer or truer observations about the work of this always elegant and intriguing writer. The rest of the book complicates matters a lot, but at its core there is always that astute and precious insight into what it is that gives his writing its distinctive appeal.

Malouf has received considerable critical attention in recent years—no more, and perhaps somewhat less than he deserves, considering his international acclaim and the virtually uncontested excellence of his writing. There have been four critical monographs, by Philip Neilsen (1990, 1996), Karin Hansson (1991), Ivor Indyk (1993), and Don Randall (2007), as well as a ‘reader’s guide’ to four novels by Amanda Nettelbeck (1995), and numerous chapters and articles. The first three monographs have, of necessity, had nothing to say about the last 20 years of Malouf’s writing, a period that saw the publication of five works of prose fiction, three books of poetry, and much else. And even the last monograph preceded Malouf’s last novel, *Ransom*, and his last three volumes of poetry.

This surely suggests that the time is ripe for a new monograph dealing with Malouf’s whole *oeuvre*, as the author, now 86, has publicly ‘retired’ from further writing. But Smith’s book, deals only with works up to and including *Harland’s Half-Acre* (1984); later works are discussed only in passing comments and comparisons, and in a two-page Epilogue. It is hard not to see this as something of a missed opportunity.

The book is a revised version of Smith’s doctoral thesis, the chronological limits of which—1960 to 1982—are even narrower; and the book’s limited coverage may also have been rationalised with reference to Malouf’s own conception of his literary career as the ‘growth of a poet’s mind,’ almost as self-conscious and elevated in its way, and as deliberately staged and practised, as Virgil’s, Milton’s or Wordsworth’s. If taken seriously such a conception might indeed tend to direct more attention to the author’s younger writings simply because they are assumed to contain the seeds of an organic growth to poetic maturity: the later flowerings, on this view, are always implicit in the seeds and saplings of the early work and require less detailed attention. In any case, Smith certainly establishes from Malouf’s own reflections, in diaries and letters, that he regarded his writing as a serious lifelong vocation, a role almost as public, in its way, as that of a Poet Laureate, but fleshed-out in terms of private experience and personal memory. The complicated, contradictory relationship between public and private is one of the central paradoxes of Malouf’s career, and the book rightly foregrounds it as an issue.

The central idea that defines Smith’s reading of Malouf—and which unites, or at least connects, the private and public dimensions of his writing in interesting ways—is ‘redress.’ Smith adopts the term from Seamus Heaney’s lecture ‘The Redress of Poetry,’ published as an essay in 1995 in which Heaney celebrates the special ability of poetry ‘to redress spiritual balance and to function as a counterweight to hostile and oppressive forces in the world.’ Smith offers several variants of this through the book and is clearly determined to show that it sheds a valuable light

not only on how Malouf conceives of the place of ‘the poetic’ in the world—redressing its shortcomings, in effect, through imagination—but also on his evolving practice as a poet and a novelist, creating—in both modes alike—revelations and resolutions that surprise and inspire readers by inviting them to share the personal memories and experiences of the subject-author.

In order to demonstrate this process in detail, Smith discusses Malouf’s works chronologically ‘in relation to the context in which they arose.’ This means that each work, from the early poetry volumes through *Johnno*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Child’s Play*, *Fly Away Peter*, *Antipodes*, *12 Edmondstone Street*, and *Harland’s Half-Acre*, is surrounded by a cloud of personal and cultural factors, its evolution and meaning traced in his current reading, his continuous conversations by letter with friends (especially Judith Rodriguez), and his diaries. There is a risk at times that Malouf’s own commentary will overwhelm the text to which they refer. To her credit Smith does not often let this happen, ensuring that in general Malouf’s writing is allowed to work its miracles; and indeed there are places where Smith might have given herself space to explicate more fully some of his more compressed and elliptical poems.

The book as a whole conveys a rich and satisfying sense of Malouf’s poetic use of language as the foundation of his canonical place in Australian literature, and the chapters on *An Imaginary Life*, *Fly Away Peter*, and *Harland’s Half-Acre* are among the best things written on those novels. The faults of the book have to do, I think, with a less than entirely successful transition from thesis to monograph. The tedious comparison of three successive draft versions of a page in *Child’s Play* should not have survived the transition, and mars what is otherwise an interesting reading of that strange novella. Conversely, the drastic trimming of a fifty-page Introduction in the thesis down to five pages in the monograph has meant not only the removal of some dispensable theoretical perspectives altogether (e.g. David Kolb on learning styles), but also severely curtailed explanations and exemplifications of key concepts, most notably ‘redress’ and ‘the poetic.’ This was no doubt done with the aim of simplification, but the effect is rather to make the reader—this reader, at least—wish for the fuller treatment given in the thesis.

The book is nonetheless a worthwhile addition to the growing shelf of Malouf monographs. In time no doubt some of Smith’s insights will be applied to the major works comprising the second half of his *oeuvre*, and that will constitute a welcome supplement. It does seem a pity, though, that for whatever reason Smith decided not to undertake that work in this book.

Patrick Buckridge