

APPRECIATING DAVID MALOUF AS POET

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David Malouf began life in Brisbane in 1934. It was not long before World War 2 was about to happen. When it did, it brought—for small boys especially—a sense of excitement with the Japanese threatening from the north, American troops and planes arriving en masse and something called ‘the Brisbane line,’ that line drawn from east to west across Australia in Queensland, north of which there was to be no defending the country. Or so the story goes.

Malouf can still resurrect stories of his school days in these colourful terms. He belonged, or part of him belongs, to this provincial part of the old British Empire. It spices up many of his best stories and poems. A certain comic *brio* is close at hand in his recollections. But more importantly he was to find in his Brisbane world much that was valuable, at least in the sense that the memory of it was. The ending of the war and Australia’s steady recovery in the 1950s saw a nation on the cusp of change, and Malouf’s became one voice to express it well.

Much could be said of Queensland in the mid-twentieth century leading, so to speak, from behind—at least in poetry. The young Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Clem Christensen (future editor of *Meanjin*), John Blight (a mentor for Malouf), David Rowbotham and the philosopher Val Vallis had been carrying the torch for poetry across difficult decades. Peter Porter, a future star of the international poetry scene, would leave Brisbane for London in the 1950s not long before Malouf himself would go overseas.

It was nonetheless a circle of younger Queensland poets in *Four Poets* (Cheshire, 1962) who were to announce a new presence in Australian poetry. Alongside *Interiors*, Malouf’s contribution, there was work by Don Maynard (now an ABC FM voice often heard), Judith Green (Rodriguez) a close colleague and a sometimes Malouf ‘muse,’ and Rodney Hall, an English émigré with talent and ambition. It was, however, for them a time for moving out, and the group went different ways. In the 1970s Brisbane recovered with figures such as Thomas Shapcott, Roger McDonald, Rhyll McMaster and above all the University of Queensland Press taking a lead.

I knew David Malouf first as an undergraduate at the University of Queensland. He was a year ahead of me, but in fact, as I have lately learned, one month younger. He had been a brilliant student at Brisbane Grammar (topping the State in History in the Senior Public Exam and winning an Open Scholarship to the University). He seemed, precociously, to be ten years more advanced in his reading of English and European literature than other students. He wrote a thesis on the Jacobean dramatist Thomas Middleton, having come to him by way of mastering T.S. Eliot’s poetry and criticism.

After an Honours degree in English Literature he spent time as a Junior Lecturer, as a clerk for BHP, and as an itinerant tutor for a Brisbane coaching Academy before leaving for England and Europe in 1959. There he worked as a school teacher while in England over the next ten years, but his clear interests lay in travel and experiencing the literature, music and art of Europe, especially of the Byzantine and Baroque cultures.

Malouf's *Interiors*, as his first body of published poetry, immediately suggests a paradox in that they could be called *Exteriors*. The phrasing is terse and analytic. Yet while a personal self and sharp ingenious mind energises the language, the poems have a frontal or surface effect as if Malouf, before he was 30, had taken all he wanted from Larkin and Lowell while holding back strong feelings and intelligence in reserve. A Wallace Stevens in waiting.

In *Interiors*, 'Sheer Edge' (in the 1962 version as distinct from the 1991 text) compares poetry's emergence and presence to the precarious situation of a gull's nest or dry weed on a cliff face. A poem exists dramatically:

though words slide off and fingers
touching, fail to hold,
here also may flower,
precarious as dry
weed or grey gulls' nest,
a gesture, a poem. (*Interiors* 11)

When Malouf returned from England in 1968 to an appointment in English Literature at Sydney University, it was at a very good time for him to be there. The years 1967–1972 saw change emerging in Australia. In politics the conservative era of Menzies was ending. Whitlam and Labor were on the rise. The literary and theatrical cultures were responding to the change. New writers were appearing, and greater financial support for the arts was beginning to have an effect.

Two poetry magazines were flourishing in Sydney at the time. *Poetry Australia* and *Poetry Magazine* were active and making a name for themselves in Australia and overseas. Dr Grace Perry, editor of *Poetry Australia*, pursued mainstream interests, while Robert Adamson, after a takeover of *Poetry Magazine*, the Poetry Society's journal, created in *New Poetry* a radical venue for young writers, particularly for those following the waves of experiment coming from the United States.

Malouf did not identify fully with either group, but shared with Phillip Roberts and myself a project from within the English Department of open poetry workshops in the Student Union rooms on Parramatta Road. These sessions generated much interest among new writers—Vicki Viidikas and J.S. Harry were in the group—and the student scene was alive with new talent. John Tranter and John Forbes were writing, while Michael Dransfield was seen as something of a star performer. At a remove from this scene Les Murray, Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray were achieving prominence through publications. They carried on the traditional line of older poets such as Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart and also David Campbell who, with Rosemary Dobson in Canberra, was a focus for young writers there such as Geoff Page and Kevin Hart among others. James McAuley, Vincent Buckley and Bruce Beaver were using the 'life studies' genre of Robert Lowell to good effect, while Chris Wallace-Crabbe won a poetry prize for his work on the Vietnam War.

David Malouf felt at home in the Sydney of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Union workshops triggered off in him his gift for 'translating' traditional texts, especially Latin poetry, into contemporary statement. These free 'imitations' were exercises he excelled in. A line from Horace 'me tuo longas pereunte noctes / Lydia, dormis' became in his version 'Hey Linda, open / up! It's killing me.' It was to be a gift that followed Malouf throughout his career. Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* and Homer in *Ransom* are the most famous examples of

classical authors inspiring his Australian talent. Malouf's 'Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian' is a more recent example of his fast, vivacious wit at work in these transformations of tradition into the voice and manner of today.

Two other points come up from Malouf's early years in Sydney. One was his practical instinct for publishing. It was out of the ferment of Sydney's exciting environment in the 1968–1972 years that Malouf saw an opportunity for poetry publishing, and approached the University of Queensland Press with the idea of paperback publications. It was the right move for the time. A series of low-priced paperback volumes appeared in 1970 with Malouf, Rodney Hall and Michael Dransfield leading off.

The other point was the way Malouf took to Sydney itself. He puts it well in the poem 'Out of Sight' from *Typewriter Music*:

Painting the walls yellow was one way
of arriving in Sydney. I did it
via Brisbane and Birkenhead in '68, and the walls of
that room, stoked like the sun, were for two years my Harbour view,
their surrogate
hum, the way the light bounced off them
like water or water music more an extended
mood than a space to work in,
a place where I forgot
to be happy because I was. (*Typewriter Music* 2)

It seems fair to say that David Malouf has been painting the walls of our minds yellow ever since these Darlington and Student Union days. His writing is full of light, mostly sunshine.

Bicycle (1970), Malouf's UQP paperback, offered a poetry that was at the same time relaxed and intense, occasional and nervously analytical. As in the popular lines of 'The Year of the Foxes':

I slept across the hall, at night hearing
their thin cold cry. I dreamed the dangerous spark
of their eyes, brushes aflame
in our fur-hung, nomadic
tent in the suburbs, the dark fox-stink of them
cornered in their holes
and turning. . . (*Bicycle* 3)

Verbs and nouns have a sharpness as if poetry is demanding dramatic attention for things of the world at every point. When Malouf's next volume of verse appeared, *Neighbours in a Thicket* (1974), it had a greater richness of subject matter, drawing upon his European experience and the contrasts with Australia. It won for him several prestigious awards such as the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, The Grace Leven Poetry Prize and the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Award. This was a foretaste of the prizes that were to come to Malouf in later years both in Australia and from overseas.

The mid-seventies saw a shift in Malouf's writing from poetry to prose. In many ways it seems a logical shift. Internally, much poetry had come to concentrate on personal life

experience ever since Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959. Externally, poets had to make a living. Malouf was not alone in this. Rodney Hall and Roger McDonald were to follow similar paths in moving from poetry to novel. But what is important to note in Malouf's case is the influence that his poetry had on his prose. His subsequent career after 1975 when his novel *Johnno* appeared has seen a steady pattern of books of poetry interspersed among his novels. Malouf has also broadened his writing further by his prose writing for theatre and opera.

What is poetic in Malouf's prose are two things. One is his exploration of dramatic monologue. The other is his instinctive commitment to the essay and the reflective mind. In some respects these could be said to be contradictory tendencies. The genre of the dramatic monologue has been since the Romantics the central way of presenting and projecting human experience. That is to say, instead of an author standing off and being all-wise and controlling, poets have found a way of creating a character within the poem through whom they project their voice. Usually, the character is opposed to another character or to some strong situation. The opposition carries conflict, yet is objective and seen at a distance. There have been many variations in this pattern and structure, from Wordsworth to Browning to T.S. Eliot to Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath. Contemporary presentations today have made use of the actual biographical character of the author himself or herself as one of the characters in a quasi-confessional manner.

In his novels from *Johnno* in 1975 to *Ransom* in 2009, Malouf has this pattern of opposed characters at the forefront of his novels: Johnno and Dante (in *Johnno*), Achilles and Priam (in *Ransom*), Ovid and the Wolf Boy (in *An Imaginary Life*), Mick and Digger (in *The Great World*), Jim Saddler and Ashley Crowther (in *Fly Away Peter*)—and there are other more complex variations as in *Child's Play*, *Harland's Half Acre*, and *12 Edmondstone Street*. It is a strong pattern allowing for debate on issues from radically opposed vantage points.

What makes the debate congenial is somehow a third voice—that of a reflective narrator—subtly intertwining itself either through one or both of the opposed characters or by itself. Rarely does a moment pass in Malouf's writing without the felt presence of this authorial voice. And Malouf's tone and style here have a conversational appeal arising from his poetry. It is the style and tone of wisdom. It gives buoyancy to the narration and to the descriptions of character and situation. It embraces everything.

We recognise Malouf's voice and his presence as that of an essayist. Historically, the essay is the alter ego of the drama from the time of Shakespeare onwards. Malouf holds these two tendencies together, drama and essay. It may diminish the pure fictionality of his novels, but it allows his reader time and space to think along with what is being presented. Few modern authors are as gifted as Malouf in this regard.

How this came about in Malouf's development as a novelist may in part come from the struggle he experienced in the 1970s in coming to terms with the radical changes taking place in modern poetry, philosophy and politics. The popularity of abstract expressionism in painting, French theorising in literature, the sexual revolutions for both male and female, and the aftermath of Vietnam—all left a legacy where the poet was left alone with his thoughts. This seems especially true of Malouf. The Whitlam Government was dismissed at the 1975 Election and a clearly conservative one put in its place. The intellectual climate in the humanities was shifting towards 'theory,' challenging Malouf's dramatising focus. The visit of American poets such as Robert Duncan pointed up a new discursiveness and freedom that Malouf clearly responded to.

Beside these changes, Malouf had found success as a novelist. *Johnno* (1975) and *An Imaginary Life* (1978) made his name well known in Australia and overseas. He followed this success with several novels in the 1980s as well as venturing into theatre and opera with works such as *Voss* (1986) and *Mer de Glace* (1991). It was, indeed, a decade of triumphs with literary awards and public honours. Where his poetry held its place within this context of fame is an interesting issue.

‘First Things Last’ and ‘The Crab Feast’ stand out for the way they make a study of consciousness itself. They offer a way of dramatising the process of ‘being aware.’ Malouf in ‘First Things Last’ is presenting an operation in a hospital, tangentially. The patient loses awareness under anaesthesia, and then gradually regains consciousness. The process is observed or imagined as a metaphor of the mind’s structure and of the mind’s way of re-achieving knowledge and sense of values. Malouf shows empathy and imagination in presenting this state of loss and recovery. Senses and judgment disappear, only then to re-create themselves awkwardly after the event. The concluding poem in the sequence delivers a startling, challenging effect:

Laying the small bones out
in rows for the moon
to suck. We call this *Living*
from One Day to the Next.

To lie tight-wrapped in butcher’s
paper and bleed
events: you all know this one:
it’s *Learning from History.*

You mount a bicycle
without wheels. What falls away
as you pedal uphill?
The Joys of the Flesh

The styles are as many as
the players. Strict rules
apply but can be broken.
Nobody wins. (*First Things Last* 39-40)

It is an ingenious presentation on how moral and social values come to be, and how society generally comes to find and hold these values. In these final stanzas Malouf takes simple images from dreams or newspapers and juxtaposes them against giant clichés or proverbs. It is implied that this is the way society stumbles on its values. There is irony and even comedy here of a rare and strangely dignified kind. The wit in the title ‘First Things Last’ has been pointing in several directions. It suggests we live in either unfinished times or deep down in times of innocence. The cryptic point made in the final verse (above) is for Malouf a serious statement. Styles, players and rules are for real, yet relative and provisional. ‘They can be broken.’ Social contracts come and go. ‘Nobody wins.’ There is a poised and stoical respect, here, for social order and the way it comes into being. It is a wisdom that edges its way out of Malouf’s deft and droll journey into the unconscious.

‘The Crab Feast’ is a more personal and positive journey into the underworld. Enjoying a feast of crab at a restaurant brings on a meditation as between Nature and Human Nature. There are in this sequence of poems many evocations of Australian bays and inlets where crabs are found. But in actual fact ‘the Place’ could also be universal.

Steadily, a confrontation of poet and crab build up one of Malouf’s favoured patterns of opposition. The poem fills nine pages of verse with mainly short three line stanzas that etch in a mysterious experience of reciprocal awareness between human subject and animal subject. A third presence with poet’s authority shares in each identity and captures a tone of intimacy and reverence. The speaker observes the crab:

I watch at a distance
of centuries, in the morning
light of another planet
or the earliest gloom

of this one, your backward
submarine retreat,
as hovering across
the seabed – courtly,

elate, iron-plated –
you practice the Dance.
I watch and am shut out.
The terrible privacies!

The climax comes with his eating the crab, the human way of fulfilling the relationship.

. . . I play
my part. Bent over you I dip my hand

in the bowl, I shake my cuffs, out in the open
and lost. Deep down
I am with you in the dark. The secret flesh of
my tongue enters a claw.

Because you are so open. Because you are. (*First Things Last* 31-35)

It is as if a kind of compact is reached in eucharistic terms. But it is not to raise the creaturely to religious levels; it is rather to relocate the religious in the midst of creaturely concerns. Intense meditation, dark journeying, passivity and gentleness, an ecological sense of thankfulness for all things: these dimensions of what is real are revealed in ‘The Crab Feast’ as a rare achievement in modern poetry.

David Malouf has since 2007 published three books of verse: *Typewriter Music* (2007), *Sky News* (2013) and *Earth Hour* (2014). They have a philosophic calm to them, a sense of wisdom and slight weariness. They are pared back to the essentials of verbal music in their phrasing. Yet there is a leaping intelligence that gives pleasure to those readers with an ear to hear and a mind willing to be stretched.

‘Typewriter Music,’ the title poem, has the rhythm and sound qualities of its subject matter, but offers more than this with Malouf’s imagination opening up a sense of ritual and ecstasy beyond the literal:

Hinged grasshopper legs kick
back. So
quick off the mark, so
spritely. They set
the mood, the mode, the call
to light-fingered highjinks.

A meadow dance
on the keyboard,
in breathless, out-of-bounds
take-offs into
flight and giddy joyflight without
stint . . . (*Typewriter Music* 12)

It reminds readers of one of Malouf’s earliest poems, ‘The Music Lesson,’ his ear for the inner life of both poetry and music clearly showing.

Earth Hour, published by the University of Queensland Press in similar fine format and design to *Typewriter Music*—both of them joys to hold and to read—is a book of crystalline poetic essays. They offer short, intensely sensuous and thoughtful reflections arising from an intelligence and an awareness of life everywhere around us.

Two poems have already been anthologised, and rightly so. The title poem, ‘Earth Hour,’ is a humane and playful reflection on the hour chosen by a city or society to be spent in darkness; it is a discipline against the wasteful consumption of power and energy in modern life. The poem moves through a wry noting of this affluent ritual (for one hour!), then becomes a deeper meditation on mortality. It goes back to the origin of things, then neatly watches how human progress has thought to stave off real darkness—death—surrounding our life. Malouf keeps his pitch and tone high, retaining equilibrium to the end, indeed celebrating gratefully ‘the extended cry of our first coming / to this ambulant, airy / *Schatzkammer* and midden, our green accommodating tomb.’

Finally, it is good to see as the last poem a love poem, ‘for Carlo Olivieri,’ entitled ‘At Lerici.’ It could be an early experience, looking out over the Ligurian Sea of Northern Italy, yet the poem is timeless. ‘History is made up / of nights such as this when little happens.’ The peace Malouf captures in depicting ocean traffic is a model of his present mind:

We sit in the warm dark watching
container-ships ride
on blue-black moonlit glitters.

After long
journeying arrived at the high tide
of silence, after talk.

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