

**David Malouf, Typewriter Music; David Malouf, Revolving Days.
(Book Review)**

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Reviews

David Malouf, *Typewriter Music*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007, 85 pp, ISBN 9 7807 0223 6310, \$29.95.

David Malouf, *Revolving Days*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008, 198 pp, ISBN 9 7807 0223 6358, \$26.95.

For many years, David Malouf has dwelt with fascination on the startlingly achronological properties of memory — or at least of his memory: the way in which experiences from the past often enter into full awareness, sometimes for the first time, long after the fact. His most recent anthology, *Revolving Days*, inscribes this distinctively Maloufian temporality into the very structure of the collection, with interesting results. As he explains in a short Author's Note, 'the poems ... appear at the point where they were touched off by something seen or felt rather than the time, sometimes years later, when I found words for the experience'. The formulation is a little cryptic. What it means, in practice, is that each of the four sections of the collection contains poems reflecting events and experiences of the same period in the poet's life: childhood and youth in Brisbane during and after World War II; teaching and travelling in England and Europe in the 1960s; life in Sydney in the 1970s; and the subsequent two decades of shuttling annually between Sydney and Tuscany. This apparently simple chronological sequence, however, is deceptive, because in each of these sections we encounter elements of Malouf's poetic sensibility dating from anywhere across the 45-year range from his earliest published volume of poems (1962) to the present day.

This creates an odd and interesting duality, a splitting of the self across intersecting axes: that of an observed object responding differently through time and a subject effectively outside time, observing, interpreting, sometimes re-experiencing the remembered experiences of the object-self. This is to over-schematise the collection: reading straight through the book, one is not aware of the process in quite so geometrical a form — though for the poet to whom 'Reading a view/is seeing where each thing points, irrespective/of the plane it's in, the arc on which it enters', the analogy might not be uncongenial — but there is a persistent, slightly disorienting sense of shifting styles and perspectives, swirling around a remarkably enduring set of themes and tropes.

In a poem describing a journal he kept for twenty years, 'or rather, for nine days running, three times over, between sixteen and thirty', he seems to anticipate the self-regarding self of the present volume — and at a time (1975–76) when

there were still many selves yet to come:

Coming to it
Again, I wipe my warm breath from the pane
To discover, in the room
That lights up in my head, that solitary
Boy, solemn recorder of my life, whose shadow breaks
The lampfall on green baize, or a young man shirtless
In the small grass between lifts, to whom clouds occur
As feelings with the sun
At their edge, translating landscapes out of France

'O saisons ô châteaux'

Into night over a border

Significantly, however, the ultimate focus of his attention is not the recorded but the unrecorded:

It is the white pages now
enlighten me, the number of them! Dazzling
rain, the sweat of dawn, boughs stormy
or still under the moon, all those nights lit with excited
hands, the event itself not worth repeating
on brilliant blank pages. ('White Pages, White Nights')

It is entirely possible to read the poems, and thus to encounter the selves they signify, in the order of the volumes in which they first appeared. I confess I had recourse to this myself, and found that it produced a rather gratifying sense of orderly evolution and coherence. How typical of Malouf that he should facilitate, even invite, this no doubt pedantic imposition — or is it an escape route? — by providing, at the end of the book, a handy list of poems, grouped according to the original volumes and keyed to their page numbers in the present book.

There is much to savour in this collection, including much in that highly distinctive vein of delicate carnality and piercing nostalgia that Malouf has made his own over many years. His reminiscences of childhood, whether of happiness, puzzlement or trauma, are as fresh, startling and unsentimental as any in Australian poetry. (I have to confess, though, that I find his treatment of adult love at times awkwardly guarded and a little uncomfortable.)

Malouf has always been, and continues to be, a more than usually 'philosophical' poet, in the sense that he raises and pursues — sometimes quite persistently — philosophical ideas that interest him, usually ideas about language and reality, memory and consciousness. These give some of his poetry an intellectual — even at times a theoretical — element, which has done his reputation no harm in the contemporary academy: those interests have remained there as enduring preoccupations from the earlier volumes to the later. So too has a certain sophisticated allusiveness, most notably to the great Roman poet Horace, who has inhabited

Malouf's sensibility from *Bicycle* (1970) to *Typewriter Music* (2007), and with whose wry self-mocking worldliness Malouf clearly feels strong affinities.

A more persistent, if less explicitly acknowledged, presence in Malouf's poetry is W.H. Auden, especially in the later volumes, including *Typewriter Music* (2007), which even contains a long prose epistle ('Mozart to da Ponte') reminiscent of Auden's Caliban monologue, 'The Sea and the Mirror'. The two poets share a syncretising impulse to compound the ancient with the up-to-the-minute, the glories and ruins of Rome with the glories and ruins of the modern world, though Malouf lacks — and does not try to emulate — the raffish Byronism that often adheres to that kind of perspective. Malouf's relation to the 'great world' of the Byrons and Audens seems at once more personal and more detached than theirs. The trope of the man 'on the edge' has been there from the beginning — the much-quoted and anthologised poem 'Sheer Edge' was written in 1962 — and the trope is there still, in various muted and displaced forms, at the end.

The juxtaposition with Auden highlights a puzzle about Malouf's later poetry — namely that, for all its manifest brilliance, it seems (to my ear at least) to be slightly unmusical and occasionally obscure; strangely, because Malouf is both a musical connoisseur and a distinguished librettist in his own right, and because much of his early prose (*An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away, Peter* especially) certainly has its own music. But in some of the later poems it is as if a drive towards even greater compression and suggestiveness of language — a desire to load every rift with ore — produces an opacity of meaning and a harshness of movement in the verse. A poem in *Typewriter Music* that acknowledges Auden in its title — 'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen' (the famous maxim from Auden's Yeats elegy, surely one of the most musical poems in the Modernist canon) seems to me to epitomise these tendencies:

Silvery spellbound
trunks. Bark curled
and crisped like dry pork-crackling. Scooped
shadows in glazed snowdrifts. And these
deer knocking their antler-buds on wood, where do they
come in?

Perhaps my own traditionalism gets in the way. In any case, there can be no gainsaying the excellence of the short, exquisite lyrics, exhilarating and deeply satisfying by their precise images, exact word-choices and perfect word-placements, that make up the bulk of this volume.

— Patrick Buckridge