

First Things Last

David Malouf
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Reviewed by Don McLennan

The point of emergence of Malouf's poetry seems to me to be personal and philosophical. The poems are not about injustice, politics, race conflict or nuclear fall-out: they are lyrics exploring self, memory, music, places, creatures and moods or intimations.

In *First Things Last* there is no satire, no bitter thrust at institutions, no guilt, no alienation. Read in a South African context they could, no doubt, seem escapist because they are not talking about or even presuming uncomfortable socio-political issues: they do not build on the costive guilt, self-denigration, anger or despair that South African writers evoke as a necessary (and sometimes sufficient) condition for poetry.

A handful of these eighteen poems are very fine, though the rest may seem to a hard-liner to be exercises in conspicuous sensibility. So it is better to speak of the fine poems than to apologise for those which, to our tormented readership, may appear less worthy.

To read the finest of these poems is to enter the known yet unknown world. The unknown is the specific texture of another person's experience in Australia and Tuscany: the known is the assurance that others have trod these paths before:

It would depend on how
you see it whether
this path leads to the world
or back from it; earth
does not run to distinctions.

The world is a good place to be, and Malouf's statements come out reassuringly with a touch of Rilke and a hint of Seferis:

The dead are buried in us. We dream them
as they dreamed us and woke and found us
flesh. Their bones rise through us. These
are your eyes: you will see a new world through
them. This is your tongue speaking.

The best poems are personal, like "Elegy". They often begin with a David Hockney - like clarity:

The world is as if
after rain. Things wear their
instant original sheen

before thumb print
or boot. Roof tiles laid
at a keen diagonal

define a perfect wedge
of air that clouds move into,
a bird flies out of;

and may finish, like "Deception Bay," with quiet discovery:

Back down there
we go on into
a new light not looking
ourselves, and neither forward now
nor back.

"First Things Last" is the central poem in terms of what Malouf is discovering, which is how autobiography cedes itself to the demands of letting self fall away, and that we come almost too late to the most obvious and most refreshing. But the finest poem is "The Crab Feast". By eating the crab he becomes the crab and explores a whole world of self as crab and crab as self:

There is no getting closer
than this. My tongue slips into
the furthest, sweetest corner
of you. I know all

now all your secrets.
When the shell
cracked there was nothing
between us. I taste moonlight

transformed into flesh ...

He discovers in the end that:

You were
myself in another species, brute
blue, a bolt of lightning, maybe God.

... a love feast. You lie open
before me. I am ready.
Begin.

The prose poems, and the poems with heavier forms are not so successful. Yet even here, in "Ode: Stravinsky's Grave" there are wonderful surprises, evidence of an alertness to miraculous fidelity:

we put out crumbs to catch
birds and such scraps
of sky as are filled with
a singing
