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SPACE AND FLIGHT – THREE NEW COLLECTIONS

David Rowbotham, *Maydays*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$14.95, paper \$7.95. 51pp. David Malouf, *First Things Last*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$10.95, paper \$5.95. 58pp. Judith Rodriguez, *Mudcrabs at Gambaro's*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$10.95, paper \$5.95. 91pp.

These recent collections have in common the hallmark of mature sensibility and art. The poets share also an enthusiasm for life which is sharpened rather than blunted by the scepticism of experience. The knowledge they have won is acutely transmitted:

Reading a view
is seeing where each thing points to, irrespective
of the plane it's in, the arc on which it enters.

Malouf, "Reading a View"

Needing a home to tell you what you're becoming,
you define it too. It has waited like a womb.

Rodriguez, "The Vase Inhabited"

Love could devour the world if it wished.
But what's the best: to be hunted
Or have nothing to turn against?
We are greedy because we are wanted
By the wolf in the gnome in the world of time.

Rowbotham, "Like a Gnome of Grimm"

The impact of the poetry, however, is not confined to epigrammatic snippets, but comes from the total impression of each collection. If one were to say that each poet, in his or her

own way, is endowed with a *romantic* sensibility, it would be to imply two things. Firstly, that each poet apprehends experience through feeling and sight, looking both at and through the immediate object, and transforming it through intellect and words into poetry. Secondly, that with all three poets the possibilities of imaginative vision are literally infinite.

In Malouf's poems, infinity of vision is one of the chief motifs and many of the images arise from it. Christopher McKimmie's cover design shows how tangible this central imagery can be, for it illustrates at least three of the poems— "The Switch", "A Poor Man's Guide to Southern Tuscany" and the title sequence—and is a graphic correspondence to the whole collection. Light, air, space and clouds are the regions of Malouf's vision, but the vision begins in and returns to the plane of earth and trees. This movement is succinct in "Carpenter's Shed", one of the prose poems; and is diffused throughout "Ode One", a remarkably controlled free-flowing poem structured on a series of sustained breath-periods. The following lines from another poem illustrate his use of space and time, and demonstrate the technique of the poem where ideas and sound-structure are both pivoted on the semi-colon:

Though we stand staring
at blank mirrors sheeted with our prayers,
the pollens glow, the avenues lead out
from here; we have only to catch our breath, reversing
the image, reversing time, to walk back into
the room with its open door and the earth unwrapping
gifts out of the mist.

Malouf, "Ode: Schubert, Sonata in B Flat Major,
D. 960"

Rowbotham's poems also move freely through space. As in his earliest poetry, the space is time and history. "Sailing" begins, "A carpenter, of Galilee, walked on the water", then summons up the vessels of Egyptians, Greeks, Vikings, Portuguese, Dutch and so on, to the Korean iron-clads and the beginning of flight. Progress is not derided, but the poem asks what was predicted by "The world's first armour-plated seaboot/Knocking the bare foot for good/From under the Galilean on the water?"

His space, then, is not merely linear time and history, but is defined relatively, as is Malouf's. The regions of Rowbotham's consciousness are pointed by human values, but, like Malouf's, the regions seem infinite. Poems like "Wet Through" – which is, in fact, the title poem—and "The Company Director", provoke reflection at surface level but lead further into their subject than the surface suggests. In this collection, the personal experience is not simply an occasion for comment, evaluation and generalized inference, but is an opening into regions of ethical speculation, where ethics and aesthetics are inseparable. "Shingo and Fujū-San" may be set beside Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli", for example, and each would speak to the other. "Still Life—Next Move" describes the poet's observation of a fruit-bat disturbed by verandah lights while eating a pawpaw. The raised veranda places man and bat on the same level, and the poet too is affixed "To the midnight forms I feed on". "Still Life—Next Move" is like an enlarged detail of the canvas of Yeats's "Among School-children" where Yeats compares the icons, to which his poetry pays homage, to the images of saint and child worshipped by nuns and mothers. Like the enlarged detail of a painting, "Still Life—Next Move" exists for itself and goes beyond the original whole. Where Yeats's poem is stayed in the riddle of form and content, whether to define dancer by dance or dance by the dancer, Rowbotham's is poised for the next movement:

—still
Life, my life —
Hungering to move marble.

Rowbotham, "Still Life—Next Move"

The paradox of man's concept of "still life", and the aesthetic questions it raises, are thrown into perspective by the sixty million years of the fruit-bat's existence.

Rodriguez' collection does not depend on the moment of equilibrium that the nature of their reflection allows to Malouf and Rowbotham, but although her poems vibrate with unresolved tensions, they are quite within the control of the poet. Rodriguez' linocuts complement this tension, with an exciting and

balanced composition of swirling and clear straight lines, quite free from fuss. Her poems are chiefly concerned with the infinite experience possible in human relationships, that is, the infinity inherent in any one relationship. "The Mudcrab Eaters" summarizes this in twelve dextrous lines, beginning

Nothing lovers in their forties do together
that they don't, you'd say, repeat

and ending

and though
they night and morning years-long sat down to mudcrab,
they have never eaten mudcrab before.

Rodriguez, "The Mudcrab-Eaters"

But this is a prosaic treatment of the infinity of space that a relationship inhabits, compared with her treatment of the experience related in the finely-constructed poem, "Legends of the Nevado":

Wind, whiteness, what more to say, the Nevado
is there still, blue scarved round its snow-shoulders;
my mountain too. Met without collision,
nodded each other's air, and correspond
in Andean space the soul remembers.

Rodriguez, "Legends of the Nevado"

All three poets write about Brisbane, where each has lived for some time at a period of life, and a remarkably just sense of place is established by mention of houses, streets, flora and fauna. It is, of course, in the manner of *mentioning* that poets succeed in evoking anything at all, and these three poets are masterly in selecting precisely the number and precisely which words are to be mentioned. Malouf and Rodriguez take the Brisbane mudcrab as a central image—perhaps only a Brisbanite can appreciate exactly how right this is. Not only is the mudcrab a gourmet delicacy, and a staple catch of all kinds of Moreton Bay fishermen, but its habitat, and the concept of mudcrabness in all its unrefined and inescapable *mudcrabness*, with the delicacy of its "Doulton claws/that could snap off a thumb", its simple continent that can be entered and stripped, as Malouf writes, is the very image of the city that breathes heavy and humid on the

shores of the bay. The mudcrab is not in popular concept a noble beastie, but it is genuinely mudcrab. Malouf accepts it totally as only cannibal poets accept life:

No I am not ashamed
of our likeness, of what is in it that betrays me,
a smell of salt
backwaters, a native
grasp on the gist
of things, our local patch
of not-quite-solid earth from which the vast swing of the sky
is trackable.

Malouf, "The Crab Feast"

That there has been effort and experience in accepting is apparent: one does not assert lack of shame in claiming likeness to a lion or an eagle.

The maturity of the poets' sensibilities is responsible for the acceptance of their experience—where so much poetry, often very good poetry, is bent on rejecting, questioning or transforming experience. They can accept, it seems, because experience does not stand still for them, or replay itself obsessively. The poets turn each experience around in their hands, examining it as Rodriguez examines the gift *art nouveau* vase:

Poor little shared vase! trusted to embody
what's close, contingent, vulnerable, scarred,
gracious and desperate — its conflagration barred
with bronze to a line, the flask terse, fragile, cloudy.
Shattering, and the hold of time cool to its flaring,
are energies of glass. Let the vase be our sharing.

Rodriguez, "The Vase Shared"

The complete acceptance of the past, as in Rowbotham's "Wet Through" or the more complex "Lebensraum" and "Los Alamos: Manhattan", and in Malouf's "Deception Bay", does not mean resignation or condoning pain and stupidity. What the poems show, and show partly through their unerring seizure of word and image, is that the poets have conquered the past and are not afraid of it. They are curious and unafraid in their exploration of the subconscious. If these poems are representative of some of the best writing elsewhere, another chapter could be

added to F.L. Lucas's indictment of romanticism in *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*.

As a footnote, it is worth the reader's while to consider for a moment how much Australian poetry owes to the provisions of the Literature Board. Each of the poets has travelled abroad on grants, and travel obviously accounts for some of the insight and perspective in their work. The poet is fortunate who can see the world, and grasp both the reality and the meaning behind the reality, and express what he has seen in clear images:

A city
wades out of the dark
towards us. Our boat
falls still, steadies a moment,
then rides
in among the watery monuments.

Malouf, "Ode: Stravinsky's Grave"