

**David Malouf: *Ransom*.** New York: Pantheon, 2009. \$24.00. 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-37877-4. **Reviewed by Nicholas Birns, Eugene Lang College, New York City, the New School.**

**I**n the title story of his most recent short story collection, *Every Move You Make*, David Malouf describes the death of a trendy Sydney architect and designer, whose early death reveals the glory of his life and by inference the era of neoliberalism and bourgeois-bohemian boom it represented, as illusory. In *Ransom*, Malouf deals with a setting—the Trojan War—which literary tradition has endowed with an imperishable glory, but which on its own terms raises the same questions about what is worthwhile in life as does the more contemporary story. Malouf's tale—short, lapidary, intense—focuses on the final scene of the *Iliad*, the brief reconciliation between the Greek hero, Achilles, and King Priam of Troy, the father of the man, Hector, who Achilles has killed in combat. This compassion across enemy lines, this caesura of mercy in the heat of combat, has long been considered the emotional peak of the epic. Malouf, by isolating the encounter, lyricizes it. Indeed, one of the formal achievements of *Ransom* is to reveal how the novel lyricizes the epic, a link that has tended to be sidled by the anti-poetry tradition in theory as seen in Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Longtime readers of Malouf, though, might notice certain moves Malouf does not make. Although the fraternal, even homosocial kinship of Achilles and Patroclus, whose death, partially caused by Achilles's own surliness and self-preoccupation, causes Achilles to kill Hector, the book does not revolve around the charged encounter of two men, as *The Great World* or *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. The novel contains an ordinary, unhistorical figure, a humble carter briefly pressed in; Priam and Achilles are not peers; even had they not been on opposite sides, there would have been an asymmetry in the relationship, to service as Priam's herald,

but the book is not told from his narrative perspective, 'from below', as has become popular in so many rewritings of classics, often with the kind of elegiac stance found in Malouf's first novel, *Johnno*. Instead, the carter's experienced is told from above, in a third-person narrative voice, which empathizes with him as it, to different degrees, does with Priam and Achilles. As one would expect from Malouf, there is a Flaubertian tightness about *Ransom*, but it is a tightness, a tautness, that affords a generous emotional perspective from every angle.

Malouf gives a bravura rendition of the Achilles so many readers of the Iliad have been fascinated by—impetuous, savage, but also strikingly introspective and compassionate. Part of his uncooperativeness in war is that he has the insight to put himself in the other person's shoes. With Priam, though, Malouf gives us a very different character from the magisterial monarch, the stoic front man we tend to picture. Using a relatively obscure mythographic fragment from much later on in antiquity than Homer, Malouf tells how Priam started out life as Podarces, one of the sons of King Laomedon of Troy, but saw his entire world wiped away when Heracles overthrow Troy and cosigned all its elements to slavery. Only the intervention of the young boy's sister, who pleads for his life at the last minute, saves him from an existence of ignominy and slavery. But after this searing ordeal, after this proximity to death, or to lifelong obscurity and humiliation, Podarces can never be the same person. Heracles renames him Priam, 'the price paid', and, even though he becomes king of Troy as he might have anyway he does so as a fundamentally different man, one who no matter what his rank and regality. This Priam is also a seer, gifted with the same second sight as his more erratically percipient daughter, Cassandra. In an astonishingly intimate conversation with his wife, Hecuba, after he conceives the scheme of asking Achilles for his son's remains, Priam speaks of 'the road my other self went down' (68) which he has lived "if only in a ghostly way". Much like in Maurice Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort*, the sense of once having

died, or known defeat and humiliation, if only for a moment, scars Priam for all his life of happiness and accomplishment, re-emerging in bulk after the death of his most famous son. Malouf gives us a vulnerable, three-dimensional Priam such as we have never seen.

The carter is Malouf's other innovation. Named, in his real life, Somax, he is asked by Priam to assume the name Idaeus, the name borne by all of Priam's heralds. This is one of several generic identities that stand between Priam, for all his insight and ordinary experience. He cannot tell the difference between most of his many sons, all his servants have the same name. The carter, whether he be called Somax or Idaeus, also, like Priam, has known tragedy. Indeed even more so, as all his sons have been killed. But, in contrast to the king, the carter is able to radically focus on specific relationships: to his beloved mule Beauty, to his only kin, his daughter-in-law and granddaughter, who he cares for lovingly and altruistically. Indeed in a book about male bonding, about warriors and adversaries, fathers and sons, this regard and caring for the feminine is notable. Anyone who has encountered Homer in an introductory humanities course is told about the role of the similes and their role on the epic; to bring ordinary life into the landscape of war, to tell the everyday stories that war, in its permanent 'state of exception', would otherwise foreclose. Malouf conveys this sense, but goes further to convey a radiant sense of the ordinary as, for all its privations, sorrows, limitations, having a more radiant, capacious affective and moral expanse than the courts of Troy or the warrior camps of the Greeks. Particularly resonant is the carter's account of the griddlecakes his daughter-in-law has learned to cook: "A stack of little griddlecakes of a kind Priam had never seen before, of a golden yellow colour and about the size of a medallion" (118) of which the carter says:

... the lightness comes from the way the cook flips them over. Very near and quick you have to be. The daughter-in-law, she's a good girl, uses her fingers—it's a trick you have to learn—and if she happens to hurt them she pops them into her mouth quick smart, like this. (119).

Priam is walled off from this kind of particularity. His status has kept him confined within the net of the general. Priam's self-control and gravitas prevent him from being hungry for the griddlecakes. But he recognizes they represent a dimension of experience on which he has missed out.

But the book is just as little about the bilateral relationship of Priam and the carter as it is about that between Achilles and Patroclus, or even Achilles and Priam. Readers of Malouf will have to suspend their trained tendency to see his books as about two people who are 'sharers', perhaps aspects of one self, in favor of a more fragile and multiple sense of the brevity of life and the countervailing sparks of momentary interpersonal encounters which provide meaning for, or 'ransom', the losses and ravages of a world that, unlike the contemporary Sydney of 'Every Move You Make', is rough even for the privileged. The appreciation of the ordinary as seen in the person of the carter is very Australian: he is a digger, a drover, a battler, an ordinary bloke, and what he retains as valuable amidst damage and ephemerality is the quantity to which the novel finally pledges its troth, as fascinated as it is by the narratives of the great and mighty.

While not drawing direct parallels to his own times—for instance, the book, though antiwar in its marrow, as any book about war has, at least on one level, to be, is not polemically antiwar—Malouf does not seek absolute anachronism here. This is the story of Troy for us, not for its own sake. Those later influences that lie between us and the material are admitted, starting with the later story of Priam's origin, and, as Malouf states in his note on sources—*itself a prose poem*, not the anxious litany of citationality it is in so many dreary post-modern rewrites—many of our most iconic images of the Trojan war, such as the story of the Trojan horse, come from Vergil, not Homer. Malouf describes Troy in ways that owe much to the subsequent Western tradition. When Priam is "obliged, in his role as

king, to think of the king's sacred body" (43), this language is filtered through Shakespeare and even the twentieth-century political theory of Ernst Kantorowicz. Malouf speaks unnecessarily of "an ivory footstool from Punt" (73), Punt being the Egyptian name for what is now Somalia or Aden, a word probably not known to the Greeks until Herodotus. 'Unnecessarily', though, does not here mean 'gratuitously'—Malouf lets in the Egyptian term to show that other pasts, and our discoveries of them, mediate between us and Homer. Similarly, no modern reader can hear of Hecuba, or read Malouf's deliberately abstract and suggestive portrait of the final revenge of Achilles's son, Neoptolemus (Pyrrhus), without thinking of the roles these characters possess in the play-within-a-play scene in *Hamlet*. Indeed, Neoptolemus's sense of having botched the balance of roles—as warrior and man of compassion—his father had handed down to him shows that Hamlet might have been a role model for Pyrrhus, and not, as the Shakespeare character at one point feels, the other way around. Like the carter's mule, Beauty, who becomes an index for the book's values by the end, Malouf's sense of the past is hybrid, stitched together, both ordinary and great.

Malouf has always been able to create dramatic, vivid psychological situations, and he has always been able to write—no writer in English has been better on the sentence-to-sentence level in the past forty years. But sometimes his penchant for evocation rather than wholesale description has left the reader stranded among his buoyant phrasing.

Here, though, Malouf offers a more multidimensional fabric. He retells an old story in a way not only distinctive and original but incontestably moving. *Ransom* is replete, not with the consolation of sadness, but the more stark and difficult sadness of consolation.