Robert McLean

Launch Speech for ‘Rāwaho: The Completed Poems’

(First given September 29, 2022 at Scorpio Books Christchurch.)

This book of David Howard’s poetry has great muchness about it: volubility, depth, reach, and richness. But it is also exacting, pithy, and piquant; at once tender and decisive; it condemns and praises, often in the same poem. In this book one encounters language doing unexpected things; not least of all, it makes strange music that jolts us into seeing people and things and ourselves differently than we are used to doing. It begins in unknowables, incomprehension, misapprehensions, and in silence; and—as the poet Laura Riding put it—*It takes us on, and on, to hope of something.*

What is the hoped for something this poetry takes us on towards? I think it is a person or different people. But who? It is always hard to say. Besides, articulating another human being in all their complexity and changeability is never easy for writer and reader alike. It is much harder than getting across ideas, which tend to do what we make them do. People are difficult, mercurial, and frequently inscrutable. They are easily misunderstood. Poems that honestly attempt to requicken such people into living language also share these qualities. And this is undoubtedly true of some of the poems in this book. But they reward the effort required to attend to their complex always rearranging partiality and inconclusiveness.

People have secrets, too. A preoccupation of these poems is the tension between the public and the private: between the order of civilisation, which is artificial and a matter of discipline and generalised imperfection, and the disorder of the personal, which is natural but prey to circumstance and particularities of impulse. These realms are connected by custom and politics; and, indeed, by language; and, in this book, by poetry acutely attenuated to the energies sparked when disjunctive realms come into contact. Much of Howard’s work, like the great German modernist Herman Broch’s novels, explores the intersections between sex and politics or power and art. Many of the erotic lyrics explore a kind of characteristically Roman relationship, which one also finds in the lyrics of Catullus or Martial, in which bodies seemingly defy some convention or another but which a countervailing potent gaze reasserts. The eroticisation of risk arising from transgressive difference or sameness—whether of class, ethnicity, age, or gender—frequently depends on politics for its sharpness and Howard’s poems explore the manifestations of this piquancy in subtle but potent ways. This nexus also seems to concern the poet/patron relationship. It is surely a privilege to be patronised, one which comes with obligations, whether physical or otherwise. We encounter in Howard’s work similar creating and complaining personas, often at highly charged moments of self-awareness, most marvellously Robert Louis Stevenson as the ghosts admit him to their company in the poem The Speak House, which I would not hesitate to hold up with the great modernist streams of consciousness: Moly Bloom in *Ulysses*, Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, and especially the dying poet Virgil in Broch’s great novel.

This poetry is also notable for its revisiting and unsettling of sites of encounter and colonialisation. It compassionately but justly accounts for misapprehensions and conflict and in doing so it reopens

linguistic spaces in which mutual apprehension is made possible. Many of these poems concern historical people who allowed their undoubtedly good intentions to blind themselves to their flaws. By re-examining these good intentions and flaws, David's poems tacitly insist that each generation will need to ask and find their own answers to perennial questions about what here and there, then and now, and us and them might mean. In the meantime, we encounter people from divergent histories and cultures come together on provisionally common ground: Dalmatian, Irish, English, Chinese, Scots, and Māori are drawn together by love, war, economics, and other forces. And even when this happens when and where the worst of us is in ascendance—say, in Stalinist Russia or during the Yugoslav Wars—despite it all, life goes on. David's poems tenderly evoke the sadness and richness and heart-breaking vulnerability and necessity of people insisting on living and loving in imposed states of privation and cruelty.

Such sympathy and respect require a rare kind of grounded cosmopolitanism. Like Simone Weil, it voices the need for roots and the equally strong need for freedom, especially the freedom to see the world as if one were not there. All this might sound somewhat forbiddingly intellectual. But David's poetry more often than not is earthy and direct. It reminds me of Milton's descriptors borrowed by the great English poet Geoffrey Hill for his own poetry: *simple, sensuous, and passionate*. It is simple in its unwavering commitment to communicate matters of importance; sensuous in its physicality of detail; and passionate in its intensity of love, in its expressiveness of agape and eros.

David's poetry has always seemed to me to be shaped by a medieval kind of intelligence: one which sees the world in concentric hierarchies, in which people have obligations to one another whatever circumstances might befall them; a high-stakes world, in which Heaven and Hell are never far from view, in which life itself is fleeting but has intrinsic and absolute worth, in which beauty is precious and fragile, and in which makers are praised. It is a world in which poems respeak with honesty, artifice, and expressiveness the terrible truth Dante makes the damned Francesca de Rimini say: *Love insists the loved loves back*.

And in such a light, I invite you into this book.

— Robert McLean