
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

Recorded 21 February 2004

Robert Dessaix’s celebrated novel *Night Letters* is a philosophical work, in a way. The narrator’s journey is as much mental and emotional as it is a literal one through Switzerland and Northern Italy. He grapples with one of modern life’s intractable problems – being diagnosed with an incurable disease while one is still feeling relatively healthy.

It seems to me that the new problem is, apart from the newness of the disease – AIDS, of course, never mentioned but everywhere evident – the new possibilities of knowledge. Dying young is nothing new. What is new is the ability of medicine to find the disease in the blood before the patient becomes ill enough to notice.

This confronts the narrator with several large questions which, despite their greater urgency for him, are really common to all humans, as mortality is common to all. The diagnosis doesn’t change that fact but brings it into sharp focus. With the new perspective comes a new attitude to time. ‘Urgency,’ he says, ‘was the first thing to drop away. It had gone within hours and has never really come back.’

Finding answers to such questions of moral philosophy becomes the narrator’s most important practical task, rather than a matter for theoretical analysis. It is more important than ‘even … whether or not I ever saw a whole lot of people I loved again.’ Attitudes to time are also connected with the question of hope – the possibility of a ‘stay of execution’ tantalisingly offered
by press reports of promising medical advances. But ‘in the end I think all I can
do … is neither to hope nor to despair, but to be alive to good now. … In my
experience it roots me in the world with an intensity I’ve never felt before. Or
some of the time. When I can see it all in the proper light.’ The power of his
philosophical approach can be seen here: his philosophy is fine, but it won’t
always stand up against the sheer weight of real life.

This novel is by no means a chart of physical decline. The narrator, to
the end, is as able to cope with travel and daily life as anyone else. The only
effect of his illness comes from his knowledge of it – knowing what he must
expect. His narrative, in form consisting of 20 nightly letters from Venice, has
many elements. There is the narrative of his ‘annunciation’, as he calls it, and
the shock and unreality of the period immediately afterwards. There are other
recollections of his life in Melbourne before the overseas trip which forms the
framework of this story; the gym group for AIDS patients – ‘not a skerrick of
sentimentality in the air,’ but replete with the ‘theatricality of being ill … both
acknowledging the approach of death and making a feint of warding it off.’

Then the journey itself maps into a series of encounters, with stories the
narrator hears on the way: fables from Europe’s past, stories of courtesans and
princes. Stories are what the narrator craves, he says, ‘probably because the
story of my own life is in danger of petering out in a series of incomplete
sentences, the main thread well and truly frayed.’

The prose in Night Letters is not consciously beautiful or dramatic. It
never draws attention to itself, but with subtlety and discretion encompasses
everything from medieval fable to the Melbourne gay scene with never a jarring
gear-change. An odd kind of dislocation is added by the editorial notes provided
by the fictional editor, Igor Miazmov. Quite superfluous for understanding the novel, they often tend to undermine the narrator – sometimes tetchily correcting his facts or interpretations. This distancing device is perhaps intended to detract from the impression that the novel is autobiographical in some way, since the first person narrative is in itself very personal and confiding.

It should be interesting to see how a novel like this, so much a meditative and inner journey, has been adapted for the stage. It will take a great deal of skill to capture the spirit of this fine book in a more dramatic medium.