

The Hotel of Poetry

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ROOMS AND SEQUENCES

Salt, \$27.95pb, 148pp, 1 876857 79 X

LAST YEAR'S ISSUE of *Papertiger* (a poetry journal on CD-ROM) contained a piece called 'Transglobal Express', a collaboration between Mike Ladd and an outfit called Newaural Net. 'Transglobal Express' is an 'audio poem', the text of which is spoken by strangers on an Internet connection and set to a heavily percussive soundtrack. Clearly, Ladd has a fondness and flair for the unusual poetic enterprise. But I wonder, reading *Rooms and Sequences*, whether big ideas are too often pursued at the expense of careful composition.

The book begins with 'Anakhronismos', a 'fake translation' of an imaginary notebook belonging to one Aponius Maso. Maso is a Roman civil servant living at the height of the Roman Empire and stationed — in an enjoyable twist — in Adelaide. This glaring historical anomaly appears to sanction a number of others, so that the poem is anachronistic on a number of different levels. Hence 'Anakhronismos', and hence the funniest joke in the piece: mock-scholarly notes at the end of the sequence fret about Maso's 'arcane terminology' (his use of the pre-Julian calendar, for example), while overlooking the more obvious anachronism of his order for a couple of satellite dishes from Roman Central Office.

As a civil servant in a colonial outpost, attempting to subdue the natives and prone to feelings of abandonment, Maso is a representative figure. This is a poem about white Australia — its history and current state. At times, the targets are obvious, as when, in section ten of the poem, Maso refers to the 'Golden Arches' (commenting on their ubiquity) and one turns to the notes and reads that these arches were 'potent symbols of Imperial rule'. (Tiberius, alias Ronald McDonald.) This White Man's dream-time (or dream-*khronos*) is no Elysium or Golden Age, but a society as callous and cynical as our own. 'I saw them washed up in their raft — / the Parthians, ragged, half-dead from the sea [...] // Orders from Rome: // abandon them in the desert, / or drag them back out to sea.'

'Anakhronismos' is a nice idea, but I don't think Ladd has done it justice. The problem is with the poems themselves, which illustrate the general theme but are simply not that interesting. Writing in a prefatory note that 'Maso was no Ovid', but that the poems have a 'certain naïve candour', does not make them more so.

'Ninety-One Hotel Rooms' is similarly casual. This sequence, we are told in the acknowledgments, 'draws its title from a year (1980–81) of working and wandering around the world, staying in a total of ninety-one hotel rooms'.

Six of those rooms are represented here, each by a poem of fourteen lines. Even in these six, however, the poet is struggling with his raw material. Typically, a poem will begin with a description, either of the room or of the view from the window, and end with a somewhat gnomic utterance that appears to bear only a vague relationship to what has gone before. The first poem is the best, but also the most disappointing, in that good material is ultimately squandered. The juxtaposition of the sterile hotel room and the ancient caves nearby is tantalising, but juxtaposition is all we get:

Down the road, sealed off,
The Lascaux Caves —
so what patterns our walls?
Fire Instructions, Departure Times,
No Cooking En Chambre.
In disregard, we boil our tin of beans,
blue shadows cast by the primus.
In the hotel of poetry
a wallpaper of words/little book covers,
the babble of all these separate rooms.

Most hotels are unmemorable affairs, so the hotel/poetry metaphor is fundamentally unpromising. As in the later sequences, 'Highways' and 'Australia: Holiday Notes', the notion of travel appears to license a certain carelessness.

There are six more rooms in *Rooms and Sequences*. 'Reading Rooms', the book's last section, contains six poems on literary themes. The first of these warrants a mention. Here is 'Beautiful Words' in full:

There is no better condemnation
of the words of beautiful retreat
than the diaries of Auschwitz commandant
Rudolf Höss —
his love of describing trees in blossom,
bright flowers in a window box.
Refreshing moments.
They helped him in his work.

With its flatness of tone and bluntness of address, this poem eschews implicitly 'the words of beautiful retreat'. It appears to echo Adorno's dictum that there can be 'no lyric poetry after Auschwitz'. But it is still a poem in a book of poems and, as such, owes rather more to its subject than just this (slightly glib) assertion. For a start, the relationship between art and life is far more complicated than Ladd suggests. Is the fact that a Nazi commandant derived pleasure from describing trees and flowers *really* a 'condemnation' of 'the words of beautiful retreat'? No doubt there were some survivors of Auschwitz who were relieved to return to their 'trees in blossom, / bright flowers in a window box' or to books of beautiful words.

Ladd is currently the producer/presenter of Radio National's *PoeticA* programme. He is obviously passionate about poetry, but, in *Rooms and Sequences*, he tends to sell it a little short.