



High praise indeed for poets' power and potency

POETRY

THE BALCONY. By David Brooks. UQP
120pp. \$24.95.

ARIA. by Sarah Holland-Batt. UQP.
62pp. \$24.95.

Reviewer: **PETER PIERCE**

In the most productive period of his career, fresh from the esteem rightfully accorded to his demanding novel, *The Fern Tattoo*, David Brooks has had published his fourth volume of verse, *The Balcony*. Throughout it is animated by an exacting ear and by an intelligence that never spares for itself complacent moments of rest. A number of the poems ponder, directly or by implication, what the fate and the task of the poet might be. As Brooks poses the problem: "To write, he thinks to himself, or be haunted:/some questions do not have answers."

Many of the poems gathered here are about love, whether to do with physical intimacy, developing familiarity, separation, wondering at how love sometimes endures. In one of his imitations of poems from other languages, "Catullus 123", Brooks imagines himself mocked for the publication of 100 love poems: "Your colleagues will give you shit". Moreover, "The lover is a criminal in this real world./a social embarrassment, like a pregnant woman,/a suicide bomber, a vegan." Undeterred, Brooks shows us lovers in the space denoted by the title poem. This balcony is both private, yet exposed to view. Here is one of the subtle correlatives for the making of poetry that the book explores.

Here also are epiphanies, as in "Gift", which beautifully registers the emotional sideslip of something as simple and incidental as reflecting on sailors on their nightwatch. Elsewhere, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is potently revised; the poet worries for a daughter, travelling far away. He also breaks into politics, musing about John Howard's "strange preoccupation with islands, and the people whom he could shuffle among them". Confronted, as well, are "the seven shames . . . [that] make up the life of anyone".

Brooks's poem "The Magician", written in honour of his friend Richard Deutch, declares that for him – poet and magician – the "hardest trick of all" was "Making the Self Disappear". By happenstance, the last poem in Sarah Holland-Batt's first collection of verse, *Aria*, a skilful play with the opportunities that rhyme affords the poet, is "The Art of Disappearing". The first poem in the book, "Pocket Mirror", takes its rhyming cue from Sylvia Plath: "I stare, I stare –/I am cut from clean air/brutal and planetary". Each word is weighted with care before being let fall. For a poet in her mid-20s, much craft has been absorbed.

Like Brooks, Holland-Batt is gifted with an acute ear. These are the final lines of "Ruined Estates": "I repeat the names the

failing light touches:/rabbitbrush, goatgrass; all that clutches." Elsewhere we are invited to overhear the "ghost crabs clicking awake at dawn/in the shade of a stone". She owns to a debt of gratitude, and resistance to eminent precursors besides Plath. Her redaction of "Skunk Hour" in "Letter to Robert Lowell" begins "Days I do not win, but borrow;/ broad, black-edged days/set out in calendar row." Holland-Batt's parents are revived in the diurnal rounds of their habits; Puccini's Cio-Cio San in lament: her "voice will not carry/over the dark water/and the grey-throated cannons".

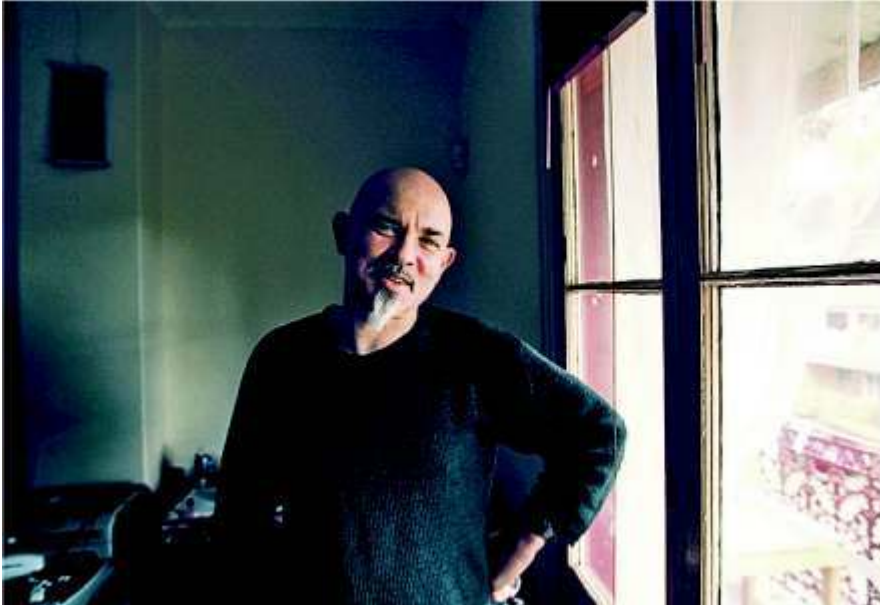
Both Brooks and Holland-Batt command a poetic style that is energetic, exacting, but also happy to be plain. Here is another example of the latter's ease with tactile effects: "a little rain straining to make itself heard/on the way down to the river". *Aria* and *The Balcony* are the sixth and seventh volumes in what the blurb describes as "the new-look UQP Poetry Series". All power to the press for this renewed endeavour and commitment to the poets who sail under its flag.

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Canberra Times
Saturday 30/8/2008
Page: 16
Section: Panorama
Region: Canberra Circulation: 63,115
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 349.88 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTFS-

Brief: UNIQ-PRESS
Page 2 of 2



Canberra-raised poet David Brooks at his home in Sydney.
Photo: Tamara Dean

