



Poet finds a sensual new voice

The experience of love lost and found helped this writer discover himself.

THE INTERVIEW

DAVID BROOKS
TALKS TO ANGELA BENNIE

WRITING a tribute to the great Polish poet, Nobel-prizewinning Czeslaw Milosz at the time of his death in 2004, fellow Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney said the distinctive thing about Milosz was that he “exulted in the certainty that he was called as a poet to glorify things just because they are”.

This exaltation of the moment, this joy at the thought of the mind linguistically at play with what is, this was Milosz.

David Brooks is a great admirer of Czeslaw Milosz. He, too, is a poet. Now in his 50s, he has had three substantial volumes of poems published to much acclaim and a fourth, *The Balcony*, will be published next month by University of Queensland Press.

Brooks has been called one of Australia’s “quiet masters” of poetry. He has also been called “a dark horse” of Australian literature. Yet Brooks has been steadily publishing prose and poetry for a good 20 years or so. There is his tangential, enigmatic first novel, *The House Of Balthus* (1995) – in the writer Alex Miller’s words, “a hauntingly beautiful meditation” – and his collections of short stories, essays and criticism, and his editorship of four collections of A.D. Hope.

His first volume of poetry, *The Cold Front* (1983), was shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Award, while his second, *Walking To Point Clear* (2005), was shortlisted for both the Victorian and South Australian premiers’ awards.

Almost without drawing breath then comes his third volume of poems, *Urban Elegies* (2007), immediately followed by his mesmerising, intricately woven second novel, *The Fern Tattoo*, which found itself short-listed for the country’s top literary prize, the 2008 Miles Franklin Award.

Quiet master, perhaps; dark horse in the race for the Miles Franklin, maybe; but this is a virtuosic, sustained performance in anyone’s terms.

Now comes *The Balcony*, a volume of nearly 100 poems, different from everything else he has written, Brooks says.

It is a question of voice, one he has been searching for for a long time.

“I have been struggling, trying to shift myself out of some very old and deeply lodged ideas about how I should write poems. I have been trying to find a new voice – I mean, I didn’t know that I was trying to find a new voice, I didn’t even know I was lodged in some old ideas of the poem – but now with what has happened with these poems, I at last know that I am speaking as myself.

“I also realise now that at last, after all this time, I am not afraid of speaking as myself. I realise that I hadn’t before. But now I know that there is nothing else you can do: you come to a point in your life where you don’t worry about how you seem to other people. That is where I am now. That really is a huge relief, getting over yourself. And I am getting over myself at last.”

Brooks was born in Canberra in 1953 but spent his very early childhood in Greece and Yugoslavia, where his father was an Australian immigration official. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that it was during these formative years that his ear became trained to listen for the music in the different



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linguistic sounds of the languages around him. Even today, he still immerses himself in the complexities and challenges of the literature and sounds of other languages, frequently travelling to Slovenia, the home of his new wife, the Slovenian translator and photographer Teja Pribac, for months at a time or taking up the challenge of translating Milosz's Polish verse into English, for instance.

Brooks was educated in Canberra, where he completed his graduate studies in literature at the Australian National University, but he followed this with a postgraduate degree on the poetry of Ezra Pound at the University of Toronto in Canada. Pound and his ideas have continued to have a strong influence on Brooks: he hovers often like a presence – or is that a shadow? – behind the poet's imagist patterns and moments of intense perception captured in verse.

Brooks returned to Australia in 1981, lecturing in Australian literature first at the University of Western Australia, then back again to his old campus at ANU and finally as a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, where he is now.

While he might have been a formative influence, Pound wasn't the only writer to have had an effect on Brooks's early ideas. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years Of Solitude* are all books he cites as being of profound importance to his apprenticeship as a writer.

"Around page two of *100 Years Of Solitude* I found myself itching to write. I was desperate to write like that. I didn't know you were allowed to write like that, I was astonished by it," he says. "I have to say, because of his influence I did have quite a long love affair with magic realism."

Add this intoxication with magic realism to Pound's strong imagist manifesto and Brooks was hooked into a certain way of writing: it is observable still in *The Fern Tattoo*, with its sense of mysterious pattern-

ing in human affairs, its intimations of the sublime in the shimmering landscape. He was hooked for a long time, he says.

"And then I discovered Milosz.

"I got to meet him back in 1980 when I was translator on one of his poems. We corresponded a little on the translation of this poem and the poem is now among his collected poems. I realised this was somebody who knew what poetry was about and I began to read him a lot, take note of him, how he did things. He had a voice which combined beautiful imagist detail with a political awareness. He had an ability to speak so candidly and openly with a kind of devastating clarity about major human issues. And then put it all together in a lyric mode that was absolutely disarming at the same time.

"I thought, that's where I want to go. Then I found out I couldn't do it. I found I couldn't do it for 25 years. And I think that, probably, if I had said something to him about it, he would have said, actually, I couldn't do it for about 25 years, too. What has to happen before you can do it is you have to experience things, you have to get shocked out of yourself."

Five years ago, Brooks was shocked out of himself: it was then that he suffered the trauma of the ending of a 20-year-relationship with fellow poet Nicolette Stark and the confusion and tentative blessing of a new one beginning. He was in turmoil. He says it was like the experience of vertigo, not physically, but in the mind. And he believes strongly that the suffering and anguish he endured during this upheaval, along with the joy he was experiencing at his new-found love, was the smithy's forge in which poem after new poem was now being fired into life.

The result is *The Balcony*, with some 70 luminous, highly sensual love poems as well as several elegant hymns to

moments of discovery and wonder scattered through them, all leavened by some sharp political satire and ironic wit. It is an electric performance.

"One of the things I like about *The Balcony* is that I think it has a lightness of tone, I think it's like poetry of joy rather than a poetry of death, as it were. It was as if I had received this astonishing gift. It certainly has something to do with the end of a 20-year relationship and all the traumas involved with that kind of thing. I mean, you are letting go, but you are holding on in a different kind of way, so I am not surprised that they should pour out of me like that."

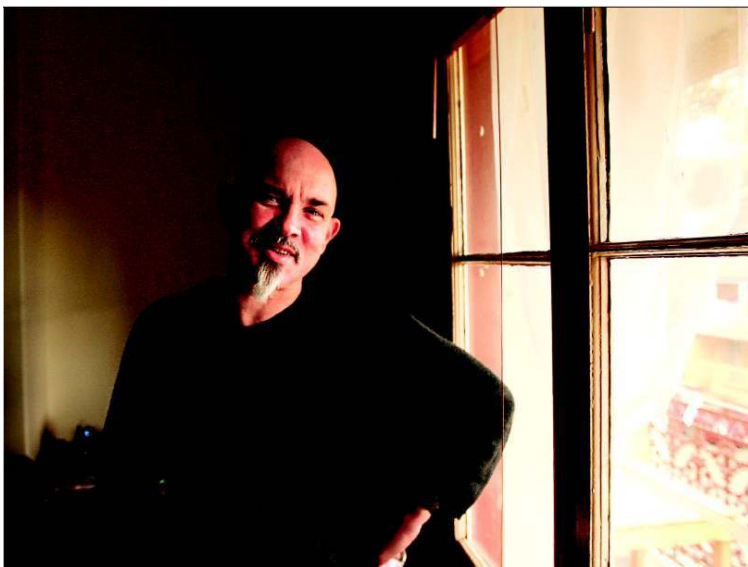
Brooks says a poem can be something that just won't go away. It could be an image or a sound or a mood. But it stays with you. "And sometimes when the light is right and there is a colour or the sound of something like Teja singing in a room in the house somewhere, it is like a little bit of linguistic DNA is floating through the house. If you catch it, it will attach several things to it, perhaps the light, perhaps the colour or the mood and the sound of Teja singing – and there's your poem."

The ideal life for a poet, Milosz also said, is to contemplate the word "is". It seems that Brooks is now doing just that.

The Balcony is published next month by University of Queensland Press, \$24.95.

'You come to a point in your life where you don't worry about how you seem to other people. That is where I am now.'

David Brooks



Shock to the system ... prolific writer-poet David Brooks at his home in Glebe.