

THE HAPPY LIFE: NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

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Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943), one of the best-known icons of modern America, shows a large family at Thanksgiving.¹ Dinner is just beginning: an older woman, wearing the short sleeves and apron of her own kitchen, places a magnificent roasted turkey at the end of the table. Standing behind her, an older man surveys the scene with obvious contentment. Those of the nine seated guests whose faces we can see appear happy, and some are laughing outright; in the bottom right corner, with his lower face obscured by the frame, a man strongly resembling Rockwell turns sharply to look straight at the viewer, 'cheating the camera' with an expression not of sheer pleasure but certainly of amused enjoyment. 'Look at that turkey,' he seems to say. 'Look at those happy people. Look at what I did: it's all a painting.' David Malouf does not cite Rockwell in *The Happy Life*, but he looks at us the same way.

Subtitled *The Search for Contentment in the Modern World*, *The Happy Life* appeared in 2011 as *Quarterly Essay* 41; following the journal's practice, responses to the essay were carried in *Quarterly Essay* 42. Malouf's text and the comments appeared as a volume by Black Inc (2011), to which I refer here. It was subsequently published in Britain (Chatto and Windus 2011) and the United States (Pantheon 2013). The American edition is a duodecimo volume, ninety pages of nicely spaced text in an 'old style' Garamond font—a pretty little clothbound book, pleasant in the hand, at home in the world of *The Compleat Angler* (1653) as much as in our own. The dust jacket, however, emphasises the contemporary self-consciousness of the book, following the subtitle with a twenty-first-century typographical image of Rockwell's artistic eye contact. A smiling and winking emoticon— ;-) —signifies both happiness and irony: this is going to be a pleasant book to hold, and the author and editor and designer want to remind us of that part of the reading experience as we proceed. Whoever chose that winking semicolon, rather than the meme with a colon indicating straightforward happiness, told us a great deal about *The Happy Life*, if not the happy life. Malouf's book will not attempt a comprehensive survey like McMahon's *Happiness: A History* (2006) or the *Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (2013), recently birthed at 1100 pages and over two kilograms; it will not define happiness as positive affect by way of psychology and neurochemistry; nor will it prescribe self-help in ways that produce bestsellers and television tie-ins. While Malouf draws on all of those forms, *The Happy Life* comprises a highly personal series of observations, coherent in their order but not continuous. In both scope and method, they are influenced by much earlier sources, notably Montaigne, Pascal, Thomas Browne, and Milton the essayist, and possibly Walton (who is mentioned) or Samuel Hartlib—minds that ranged widely and cogently, landed upon their topics almost at will, and there focused themselves with generous erudition. In this essay, I want to situate *The Happy Life* as a volume of retrospect and autobiography, by examining Malouf's discussion as a straightforward argument (for Rockwell, the dinner to come), and as a set of artistic representations and self-depictions that challenge the disquisitional frame (for Rockwell, the corner portrait).

Definitions of happiness are notorious for aporia: it is far easier to identify what happiness is not, by naming the obvious sources of unhappiness (McMahon 218). The extremes—apocalypse or pandemic—always tempt us rhetorically, and we can rely upon the threat of terrorism, the basso continuo of twenty-first-century life, to generate anxiety on a daily basis. More than that, the timeless matters of corruption, disregard, and rudeness always suffice—the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, etc. The absence of those negative factors, however, does not produce positive happiness, although that absence may help generate an atmosphere where happiness, more specifically defined, can be more easily recognised. As Elizabeth Farrelly suggests in her comments on *The Happy Life*, 'happiness (like God, some might say) is a thing you see only when you're not looking either directly at it or consciously for it' (120). Malouf demands more specificity, however, and Rockwell likewise resists a broad equation of absent unhappiness with happiness itself. Because most of the diners in *Freedom from Want* are not looking at the woman presenting the turkey, Deborah Solomon asks 'do they even know she is there?' (82), and suggests that 'Rockwell paints a Thanksgiving table at which no one is giving thanks.' Americans, she concludes, take their foundational myths casually and perhaps ironically. Certainly, *Freedom from Want* challenges its own iconography more than its companion paintings, but Solomon misses the larger happiness invited by, not defined by, freedom from something. The two people most involved with serving the turkey look directly at it, because the source of enjoyment is direct: the woman is proud of her work and the husband loves her and her capability. But the guests are also thankful for the turkey. They smelled it the moment they walked into the house, and no doubt said so. Their sensory attention continues to take it in, even as the guarantee of dinner enables them to focus on enjoying one another; their happiness, that is, incorporates their immediate circumstances but also rejects the prompt to limit their sense of the moment to the material or, for most of them, the incidental. The guests include the frame-breaking figure in the corner, for Solomon 'a larksome uncle who perhaps is visiting from New York and doesn't entirely buy into the rituals of Thanksgiving' (82). For Malouf, defining happiness, that quizzical figure is the key to the whole shebang.

Solitude. 'I think my own thoughts,' my mother-in-law used to say, about dealing with a surly cashier at the supermarket or a pretentious post-doc in her lab. Malouf advises much the same, formally and more radically. What would happiness look like without its social contexts and personal relationships, without even the intimate ties to others that many of us say are the most potent sources of our happiness? Can there be a happiness that is incommunicable, that is generated by, and felt by, the individual alone, without reference to others or an outside? In taking that direction, accepting its risks, Malouf sets up *The Happy Life* as an Enlightenment project, an attempt to define its topic through ontological reduction. Here, he may follow Emerson, who staked out a similar territory in 'Self-Reliance' (1841) by stripping away social politeness and conformity to locate the unmediated self and its relationship to universal principles:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. . . . Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence, must always be formidable. (261)

For Emerson in ‘Self-Reliance,’ the quest for ‘greatness’ of soul—fullness, fulfilment—finds voice in terms of resistance and empowerment, making direct, externalised self-possession seem imaginable in the public realm (though he felt somewhat ambushed by Thoreau and Whitman). For Malouf, happiness of both body and soul—insisting on both—remains as elusive as greatness in Emerson’s public sense. While many issues of social empowerment have been resolved, or have at least progressed, individuals remain unfulfilled and ‘fearful that our lives are not yet safely in hand’ (Malouf 66). In the twenty-first century, outright fulfilment in public terms often seems beside the point; the more attainable condition is for the individual to strip down and seek a space, psychic if not physical, where the essential values of happiness are not so massively overshadowed by accidental circumstances of context or qualification.

The Happy Life opens by naming a modern quandary and responding with a classical proposition. The modern issue evokes Rockwell’s *Freedom from Want* again, echoing the triumph of industrial democracies:

how is it, when the chief sources of human unhappiness, of misery and wretchedness, have largely been removed from our lives—large-scale social injustice, famine, plague and other diseases, the near-certainty of an early death—that happiness still eludes so many of us? (Black Inc edition 14)

That very good question is answered by reversing the aporia that allows referrals to material wellbeing and social comfort to act as substitutes for direct definitions of happiness. They are not the same, but the comforts of the good life can be so distracting that we are often willing to stop and enjoy them or, if not stop, to adopt them as *a priori* conditions of any continuing pursuit of a more abstract sense. Instead, Malouf breaks the two sharply: the differences between the good life and happiness are revealed strikingly when the individual performs the classical retreat from society and retires to ‘Horace’s Sabine farm or Voltaire’s Ferney,’ or to Montaigne’s ‘little back-shop, all our own, entirely free’ (5). That is, the individual deliberately stands apart, isolated from any gain or loss through social interaction, unencumbered and uninfluenced, and thus becomes enabled to perform true self-examination. Malouf might also recall Thoreau, who first allows the necessity for food, clothing, and shelter, and then breaks categorically from that concession to describe more expansive ways of living deliberately at Walden Pond:

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more or richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numerous incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. (10)

The break is necessary in order to free the self for knowing itself. All the same, it carries risks.

Retreating to one’s classical garden, Enlightenment back-shop, pondside cabin, or suburban shed most clearly emphasises the gap between self-interest, with personal happiness as its goal, and ethical behaviour, on the road to social happiness. Again, the extremes are obvious: personal

recession may lead to moral solipsism at very high levels of disassociation. Sissela Bok, for example, blames a contemporary lack of empathy upon a tendency toward ‘premature closure’ that leads to ‘settling for uncritical acceptance of simplistic choices’ (174):

Misguided hopes for future happiness still play a central role fanning many of the most debilitating practices of violence and fraud and exploitation worldwide—not only the happiness that might come from boundless wealth and power but also that of serving a patriotic or religious cause, however brutal. For example, it is possible that the al-Qaeda pilots who guided the planes into the World Trade Center Towers experienced some cataclysmic high, some blend of bliss, exultation, glory, and blinding power in the moments just before the explosive impact. (176)

Indeed, for some it is a short stroll from Thoreau’s cabin to the Unibomber’s, along the path of knowing better than anyone else. Less extreme examples, however, also suggest a discontinuity between self-realisation and ethical behaviour, a gap not necessarily leading to evil but wide enough that we need to ask what good the Sabine farm actually produces. Cool, philosophical detachment, for example, makes Mr Bennett a terrible father in *Pride and Prejudice*—not a criminal, certainly, but counterproductive in many instances. On the other hand, ‘bliss, exultation, and glory’ accompany the turkey to the table in Rockwell’s depiction; given the scene and the age, we may infer that the hostess worked alone in the kitchen, aiming toward a social end but all the while finding solitary happiness in her proficiency. These lesser and even benign examples may be troubling as well, however, because we prefer—almost demand, really—to equate greatness of soul with greatness of heart: the logic of isolation ‘is discordant with the empirical findings, which reveal strong and enduring links between wellbeing and socialisation—not with insularity’ (Parker 125), and in any case does not work consistently or predictably. Consistency, however, is not Malouf’s goal.

In his comments on *The Happy Life*, Robert Dessaix finds that it lacks a ‘uniquely Maloufian twist’ (93), but such a thing certainly takes place in the form of the work. Chapters of *The Happy Life* are essays in the root sense, self-conscious experimental positionings that allow exploration of specific topics from particular points of view, without expecting that the insights will be comprehensive or the positions permanently occupied. Malouf has often manipulated temporal form this way, in the multiple time-schemes of *The Great World* or the dropped decades in *Remembering Babylon*. Here, he frames the interrogation of modern comfort with the jarring example of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. What in our daily lives coincides with Shukov’s, whose happiness derives from an extra bowl of porridge and some tobacco? Is it not a bit distasteful to compare our unhappiness with his, a man serving a ten-year sentence in the Gulag? Certainly it is, as long as we sustain the equation of material wellbeing and happiness. Once we enter the back-shop or hike to Walden, however, once we break the comfortable linkage that we always distrust anyway, our affinity with the prisoner becomes clearer. Inside that space, we recognise the limits of wellbeing. We are, each of us, no more than a moment away from knowing abjection: one slip on the pavement (enough for Pierre Curie), one prick from a rose thorn (Rilke, in legend), one call from our doctor. On a highway in Western Australia in 1999, Robert Hughes received the dreadful and unwelcome authorisation to call Francisco Goya ‘one of the few great describers of physical pain, outrage, insult to the body’ (8): ‘The impact smashed my body like a toad’s; so much of the skeletal structure on my right side was broken, disjointed, or pulverised that my chances of survival were rated extremely low’ (8-

9). No one would ask for such knowledge, but the understanding of its possibility has positive benefits once we leave isolation, as we must, and return to the realm of interchange and relationship. If self-knowledge is a prologue to ethics, then isolation, while untenable as a permanent situation, benefits us in the short term. We return with a better understanding of comfort and its effects upon empathy, with a heightened recognition of individual and social vulnerability, and with an increased understanding of our ethical responsibility to protect what we value. We still need, however, to address directly the happiness that Malouf locates in solitude.

Pursuit. Considering the second chapter of *The Happy Life*, ‘The Pursuit of Happiness,’ in terms of contemporary discontent and anxiety, Tim Soutphommasane suggests that ‘We could simply blame the Americans (I am only half-joking)’ (116). Of course, Americans understand the joke: we made it up.

That’s a hard mystery of Jefferson’s.
 What did he mean? Of course the easy way
 Is to decide it simply isn’t true.
 It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
 But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
 Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
 Each age will have to reconsider it. (Frost)

Whatever forms our happiness takes, Americans are also insecure; as with Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, we want not only to be liked, but well liked. Our national anthem, written in the midst of a naval bombardment, asks a desperate question: will we have a country in the morning? That anxiety has resonated in Norman Rockwell’s America ever since—we sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at the opening of every baseball game—and the answers have never sounded convincing enough. The Puritan influence on American culture continues to make reconciliation a morally suspect goal; disparate regional interests overwhelm consensus, fuelled in part by vestiges of the Civil War and myths of exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. The conjoined original sins of enslavement and native displacement bear down on the present like Furies in a tragedy. Yet, for all that, Jefferson’s language upholds its graceful, ambiguous invitation like a beacon in a harbor. ‘The pursuit of happiness’ points most clearly toward its social functions, and involves not only a wide range of issues, from legal equality to regulation of commerce, but also a wide variety of narrower applications, including protected free speech and access to information. Even as it legitimated and carried forward the pursuit of happiness, the Declaration of Independence of course had no legal standing. The principle remains unguarded in the Constitution, but quickly took form in many state laws, in antebellum slave states as often as in free ones and in many others after the Civil War, as well as in acts of Congress determining that state laws must ‘not be alien to the Declaration of Independence’ (Jones 27). Thus, the pursuit of happiness becomes enshrined: in American law, a right once established cannot be rescinded. And who, really, would want to?

Jefferson drafted the Declaration on behalf of an assembly, with a polymath’s deep knowledge of precedent, context, and consensus. As others have, Malouf locates the great importance of ‘the pursuit of happiness’ in its departure from the longstanding legal tradition that overtly linked happiness and property ownership. Locke’s views on property had dominated discussion for a century before the American Revolution, but George Mason’s affirmation of that link in his draft

of the Virginia constitution was only days old when Jefferson, intentionally or not, demolished it. Perhaps he was prompted toward aporia by Benjamin Franklin, the voice of middle class tradesmen among all those landowners: Franklin never speaks of property as an end, but as a vehicle providing security and freedom from want while setting the stage to pursue fulfilment beyond material satiety. Or perhaps, Malouf suggests, Jefferson instinctively compressed others' wordiness into good, succinct writing. Whatever the impulse, the result turned Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness into lasting conundrum—'a pithy seven-word phrase,' says Malouf (22), that instantiates both our glory and our unease, and a 'political horizon of happiness' in Vivasvan Soni's term (457). In any case, the compression guaranteed that 'any possibility of its retaining its narrower socio-political meaning was overwhelmed by the surge of Jefferson's rhetoric' (Malouf 22-23). That conceptual decoupling advances, provokingly and forever, the possibility of secular spiritual happiness.

Most versions of 'the pursuit of happiness,' for export or domestic use, emphasise the happiness part as a goal that can be accomplished through acquisition: like Life and Liberty, Happiness can be provided and protected within the larger social fabric. Thus identified, enjoyments and comforts of the good life once again overshadow other possible forms of happiness (McMahon 321-22). Malouf makes clear that those other possibilities are always present, however, lurking within the good life in the form of suspicion that it is incomplete and limited, and that it may in fact hinder development of moral and ethical faculties. Certainly, the temporal limitations of wellbeing were clear well before the Americans stood in to take the blame for defining it so well; the Greeks had the commonplace, 'count no man happy until he is dead,' and medieval Christians knew the popular doctrine, as in the chilling line 'it was but lent thee' in *Everyman*. Against those known limits, then, *The Happy Life* may generalise accurately about the pursuit of something larger:

Whatever Jefferson's actual intentions may have been, the fact is that 'the Pursuit of Happiness' has always been taken, at least by the population at large, . . . in its wider meaning. Not as a seventeenth-century moral philosopher might read it, as freedom from want or from intimidation by the great and powerful—a condition that can be legislated for—but as something altogether more subjective, less defined and manageable, which cannot . . . (22)

Public acknowledgement of that larger meaning, felt as a kind of moral pressure, often comes after a natural disaster shuts down infrastructure: people suddenly deprived of electricity or potable water speak of learning lessons, about what they have taken for granted, of deprivations suffered by their ancestors or by people elsewhere in the current world. When the usual methods of pushing back nature or suppressing a sense of vulnerability stop working, they reveal the same kind of boundaries of efficacy that Malouf traced in the earlier discussion of society and solitude. He does not make a formal conjunction between them, but the two types of limitation set up the next movement of development in *The Happy Life*, the shift from defining happiness as a state of being to seeing it as an activity, being in action.

Pursuing. When Malouf says that 'The Pursuit of Happiness is the real time-bomb in the Declaration' (25), he is not describing the dangers of unleashed materialism, but a more disruptive legitimization of acting upon personal desire (Soni 456-57). This genuine liberation occurs when the emphasis shifts from the latter part of the phrase to the former: the pursuit

matters more—the journey and not the arrival—just as Freedom from Want is not about the Thanksgiving menu and Freedom of Speech is not about proper topics or grammar, but about extending throughout society the invitation to see ourselves as having something to say. So far, *The Happy Life* has anticipated the shift from two directions: the radical abstraction of the self from social contexts, raising the possibility that happiness can be defined outside commodification and competition; and the equally radical proposition that the imagining of personal happiness is a right as basic as those of Life and Liberty. Both directions raise the status of the autonomous individual in ways that seem socially unacceptable, to be sure, and culturally dangerous in many instances; Malouf makes clear, however, that isolation, while basic to happiness, is not a totalising state, but rather one of the numerous social positions individuals may occupy. References to Ivan Denisovich, and implications everywhere of *Candide*, emphasise that self-fulfilment requires efficient, rapid commuting among these positions. Regarding the social context, Anne Manne complains that *The Happy Life*, by ‘looking backwards, at another era, as opposed to examining our own world, obscures the fact that we face quite different problems’ (101). This is certainly the case, but only when viewed from the sociopolitical positions we occupy much of the time, though not always. From the individual’s isolated back-shop, little has changed historically in terms of vulnerability and need; ordinary invasion, crop failure, and epidemic were always ‘sufficient,’ to use Voltaire’s term, just as an individual has always faced the moment of death alone, even when surrounded by other people and a buzzing fly. For Malouf, the pursuit of happiness occurs in essential singularity, under pressure to find personal meaning in action rather than to live only for summation, in the Greek or the Christian sense, at the end. Things can happen too quickly for that, and so we must always be in the midst of pursuing good.

In the Puritan formulation a century before Jefferson, the Garden of Eden is delivered in a state of potential perfection, but unfinished and in need of management. Work is the order of the day, as Hartlib says: ‘I am apt to believe, that when God set Adam in the Garden Eden to keep it and dresse it, He meant to exercise his Industry’ (44). For Milton, the effort is unending, as

the work under our labour grows,
Luxurious by restraint; what we by day
Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind,
One night or two with wanton growth derides
Tending to wilde. (*Paradise Lost* 9.208-12)

Eve is complaining here, and in the next line proposes ‘let us divide our labours’ in order to work more efficiently. Although she is about to learn that solitude can also breed error, this is the so-called work ethic at its most ennobling: the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of work that allows us to flourish. We want to work in that way, and, as in the Garden, we see our best industry and find our best reward in creating order out of disorder. We do not necessarily want an easy time of it. The woman presenting the turkey in Rockwell’s painting does not smile because she will soon be the centre of social attention, but because all afternoon, alone in the back-shop of her kitchen, she has pursued the happiness of working well. The dramatic moment climaxes a long day of drawing upon an extensive, self-consciously practised set of skills that involve a significant portion of her self-identity and social esteem. This is not the only definition of happiness, but it is about as direct a definition as we are likely to get; Manne says that ‘if happiness is about

anything, surely it is about meaning,' and the meaning here, visible and resonant, is generated by work.

In the chapter 'Unrest,' Malouf brings the work ethic into the present in a typically Miltonic way, by compounding the modern condition with a Greek myth, the Prometheus story of Plato's *Protagoras*. After the divine distribution of gifts to other worldly creatures—speed, flight, predatory power—humans are left with what Pope would call the short end of the stick:

Presumptuous man! the reason wouldst thou find,
Why formed so weak, so little, and so blind? (*Essay on Man* 2.1-2)

Prometheus gives humans the only gift remaining, implied in his name: vision of the future, and with that, awareness of necessity and responsibility. Man 'will have to become an improviser, the shaper of his world, of his environment and conditions, to the service of his own weakness' (Malouf 29). In the absence of natural support, humans take up work, doomed to it or triumphant by means of it:

A lonely figure, heroic but also restlessly anxious and eternally incomplete, this is Man the Maker, whose peculiar gift is craft or *techne*, the capacity to forge, shape, fashion; to take a world that had no place for him and make it his own. (23)

The conclusion here is not original, of course; a good cookbook or a focused self-help manual will say essentially the same thing, that the definition of happiness is the pursuing of happiness, underscored by self-awareness that begins in restless anxiety and continuous dissatisfaction.² The edenic state remains with us, in the perpetual incompleteness of our work. The turn, however, is brilliant, and its axis is another 'Maloufian twist' in the shape of the argument. In the second half of *The Happy Life*, Malouf slowly tempers the essay form, focused on developing the subject, with the meditation, focused on developing the viewpoint of the individual observer. He does that by personalising the observation, and he does *that* by reversing the grammatical polarity of evaluation. Most orders of critical observation, that is, emphasise the product rather than the act of producing; we tend to use artefacts in judging scales of worthwhile activities, locating Emerson's 'greatness.' As we saw before, such approaches provide valid, logical, and in fact vital methods for evaluating materials within social contexts, where longevity and influence carry the most important weight. Someone paints, and we look at Art; someone writes a quartet, and we have Music; someone roasts a turkey, and we . . . eat dinner tonight and sandwiches tomorrow. Certainly, the range of outcomes presented to an audience and judged by their effects elicits a range of valuations (Bok 130). Nor are all activities comparable in measures of artistic judgment—creativity, originality, risk, or influence on subsequent practitioners. If we set aside the product, however, and look at the producers as they work in a variety of activities, we may find large areas of affinity among them in terms of affect, posture, verbalisation, or epinephrine levels. A painter such as Lee Krasner applying colour, a home cook knowing exactly which implement to use and when: each exhibits full concentration, full application of skills, full identification of the self and the action. In the terms to which Malouf leads us, each is happy. How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Body of Work. Lee Krasner laboured in the penumbra of marriage to Jackson Pollock and public taste that leaned toward Norman Rockwell. Yet she flourished: in photographs, she projects the

assurance and intensity that are so notable in her painting. If, for Yeats, ‘Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,’ Malouf celebrates more active recognitions of the body, accepting the risk of bruises. The chapter ‘Happiness in the Flesh’ sees physicality as integral to producing and appreciating beauty, inseparable from other ways of knowing happiness. Citing Donne’s passionate geography of the lover’s body in *Elegy XX*, ‘Oh my America, my new found land’ (52), Malouf again personalises the sources of happiness, including any happiness to be found in knowing the outside world. From acquired self-knowledge, and the fulfilling projection of that understanding beyond the self—that is, into work—we learn to modulate between continuing self-examination in the back-shop and contribution to the socialised and affiliated world of others. The chapter focuses on painting, a form that, compared to writing or music, nudges more closely against our own perceptions of reality, and that

though flat and two-dimensional, . . . tricks the eye into perceiving a third, creating depth and distance where there is none, giving a bare arm or leg a roundness it does not have, but also a softness, since the visual is not the only sense that painting appeals to and plays with. (Malouf 54)

Malouf offers two examples of joyous sensuality, Rubens’s *Het Pelsken* (1638) and Rembrandt’s *The Prodigal Son with a Whore* (1635), that reflect the personal happiness of the painters; they come just at a time, he says, when Western culture was relinquishing some of its shame in the body and regaining the joyous physicality of the classical ages. Observing them provides a sense of his own contentment, but not before he lets them disturb us.

Het Pelsken pictures a moment as the sixty-year-old artist watches his much younger wife wrap her naked body in a fur robe. The work pulls in several directions, and Malouf’s syntax captures the tension: it is an intimate moment, but

he paints it to express and share—but with whom, we wonder—the immense joy he finds in her presence: her being, her youth, her glowing beauty, her flesh; and to confess—again, to whom?—how happy they are in their togetherness in the flesh. (56)

Rubens’s wife had posed before, and she knew the routine. Her nakedness here is covered not only by the robe but by echoes of classic, formalised posturings of Venus such as Botticelli’s. Surely, however, there are also disturbing elements of violation here, of the artist’s and the viewer’s complicity in a public display.³ Rembrandt, too, portrayed his wife in a vulnerable, brutalising role, as a whore. Yet she smiles, over her shoulder: the look is disturbing, because it is directed beyond the prodigal son (Rembrandt in self-portrait), beyond the fictional plane of the picture, and directly at the viewer. Both paintings are astonishingly intimate, as close to the bedroom as we will find in a *kunsthalle*. In showing them to us, Malouf performs the last ‘twist’ of *The Happy Life*.

Walter Benjamin’s foundational discussion of the aura focuses on the inherent, irreducible characteristics of a work of art. The aura of a singular object derives from ‘its presence in time and space, its existence at the place where it happens to be’ (220); these features are knowable only through direct inspection of the original and are by definition impossible to reproduce mechanically or, now, digitally. Some aspects of aura, such as provenance, are ineffable, but

others are material conditions and can be observed. In painting, these include the actual, measurable variations of that 'two-dimensional' surface, the not quite flat effects of brush strokes, blending, impasto, and texture that produce the shallow third dimension that in turn 'tricks' us into seeing the roundness and depth of a fuller third and, importantly, a fourth dimension. In Malouf's schematic, the aura is prominently visible in the back-shop, the private space of creation, where the self is projected into physical form; the heterotopic spaces of the studio and the easel *en plein air* mark the specialness of this activity, as the frame of the painting territorialises the mystery of production after the fact, in the social space. What happens in the back-shop reverses Benjamin's attribution of desire, which of course concerns the observer in public and not the artist in private: for the viewer, 'one of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later' (237). For the artist, however, the demand is satisfied immediately, in the physical taking-up and laying-on of paint that embodies the process of expression, creating the aura and what Malouf calls joy: for his Rubens, in a rush

it is something not only about the woman, the girl, his wife Helena Fourment, about the way he sees her and the sensual response she wakes in him, which is everywhere in the painting. It is his own brimming happiness that he wants to show.
(56)

Malouf's fiction has often produced these moments, integral to his plots and not necessarily at climactic points (Scheckter 257, 259). The proposition of the back-shop, independent of ordinary public measures of place and time, suggests that suspension of the social self, retreat into self-creative space, is readily available in fact, and blessedly disregarding of circumstances or environment. The pursuit of happiness is a self-evident, inalienable human potential.

The Happy Life ends as it begins, closing its frame with that off-centre reference to Ivan Denisovich, who looks back over his day and concludes that he has been reasonably happy. The final chapter, 'The Way We Live Now,' has a broadly retrospective feel, less a shift than a gathering of the personal notations Malouf has offered throughout; these are now brought to summation by way of Shukhov in Siberia, against a background of twenty-first century life. He is sharply angry about what Manne calls the 'quite different problems' of current life—the massive inequalities of World Bank policies, the global devastation of ecosystem and biosphere. In the social realm, these are our call to action, our moral necessity of engagement. Privately, though, we respond just as much to the ageless interplay of acceptance and aspiration, as beings 'tied to the gravitational pull of the Earth, lumbering along as our great-grandfathers did, and the hundreds of generations before them, at four hundred paces an hour, and tiring' (83). Malouf underscores that ancientness with his own note: 'I happen to have set that sentence down in the old, slow way by hand' (83). Without the computer, the body comes forward to show the graceful affinity of writing and drawing, to offer the pleasure of watching thought take on spatial dimension: thus, looking at the Rubens, 'we know that it is his hand, and the energy of his mind and body, that produced every brushstroke' (64). We must face our selves alone, he says, our vulnerability and ultimate, inevitable loss—and not just acknowledge it thoughtfully, but know it in our bodies. Yet in our private back-shops, moments of beautiful insight may come, and come not despite those limitations, but in heightened and even dignified response to them: whence happiness. From there, we can move outward and reengage the social, ethical world with better

selves to offer. Malouf's description of Rubens in the midst of painting *Het Pelsken* might be what he would like to say about himself, looking back over a career spent

employing an astonishing flair for dramatic gesture, and drawing on his memory, which was vast and encyclopedic, for poses . . . that he could, in each case, shape to his own occasion and play with in such a way that they both recalled the past, and his creative continuity with it, and at the same time displayed his individual boldness and originality . . . (62-63)

As usual with David Malouf, it is difficult to argue.

NOTES

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt propounded the 'Four Freedoms' in his State of the Union Address to the US Congress on 6 January 1941. They are Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear—bold, inspiring declarations, and also directly intended to legitimate increased American involvement in the war. Rockwell's series was 'published in four consecutive issues [of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a weekly], starting on February 20, 1943, and they were instantly beloved. The Office of War Information . . . arranged to print some 2.5 million *Four Freedom* posters and make the four original paintings the stellar centerpiece of a traveling war-bond sales campaign' (Solomon 82).

² The happiness produced by making something, spurred by an 'increase in valuation of self-made products,' has been called 'the IKEA effect' (Norton 2).

³ Kathleen Gilje's interpretation, *Het Pelskin, Restored* (2001) captures these violent aspects of the Rubens: the woman's body is seized from behind by large, gnarled male hands, painfully compressing her flesh at the waist and inner thigh.

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