

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Robert Dessaix, *As I Was Saying* (Vintage, 2012)

Those of us who are fortunate enough to have listened to the ABC broadcasts by Robert Dessaix will recognize the voice as soon as they begin to read *As I Was Saying*. It is not just the authorial voice, but also the memory of the mellifluous tones of one who makes the listener feel that he or she is the only one who matters. For me the content was always beguiling and the choice of phrase untroubled by cliché.

Robert Dessaix is now known more as a writer than as a broadcaster. His books range from the personal account of his birth mother, *A Mother's Disgrace*, the novel *Corfu*, and books that give accounts of his travels but which are so much more: *Night Letters* and *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev*. He moves from fiction to non-fiction and back again, as he explains in the introduction to another of his collection of essays, *and so forth*, which is the closest in intent to *As I Was Saying*. In this introduction he writes: 'Trust, in other words, not truth was what was vital. And so I began to play more devious games, in both my fiction and non-fiction – and especially in the enchanted wood lying between them' (n.p.).

In *and so forth* Dessaix offers insights into the person behind the author, broadcaster, linguist, traveller and self-confessed dilettante. He does so with a certain air of abandon, having concluded the introduction with the instruction to trust him. In *As I Was Saying* there is still the conversation with the reader but perhaps more in the nature of private musings to which we are privy, should that be our desire. Nonetheless, I still maintain that Dessaix conjures up the conceit that he is communicating with just one person – his reader or listener. He begins:

I am sitting in my tower, cogitating. Not meditating – I never meditate, I don't have the knack – but rambling in my mind, alert to unexpected provocations. The mountain to the west, I see, is misting over. (1)

And we are there, too, agreeing that cogitating is far superior to meditating for a writer, and noticing the mist over mountain as does Dessaix. He muses on any number of subjects, following them with an essay, or an address that he gave on the same theme. Generally these segue effectively, so we do not lose the sense that this is a flowing thought journey on any number of fascinating topics, albeit one with many digressions along the way. Dessaix makes even the mundane fascinating. Nor does he allow himself to be trammelled by too much specific detail. He is a considerate writer:

I leave a few of the details hazy as a rule ... one doesn't want to stifle readers' imagination or make them feel stuck at home. On the other hand I don't want them blowing about the sky like escaped balloons. I like a bit of tethering. (130)

When writing of his youthful passion for the painter Dufy, someone 'second rate', he describes the effect of his colourful works:

Violent, but in a childlike way. Sensual, rhythmic, refined – each canvas an allegretto. Not like Lane Cove at all. The only thing that quivered at our place was the Kelvinator. (162)

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In *As I was saying* Dessaix writes of topical events in among the reflections on Henry the Navigator or Homer's style. He writes of an Australia that began to look 'as if it might exist' some decades ago, until its citizens collectively missed that chance of finding who and where they are. He writes of 'hundreds of heritages ... transported to this new country, lovingly unpacked and lovingly set up like sacred shrines' (175). The result, from his perspective, is that Australia lacks a strong sense of itself, a melding of all the cultures and ethnic groups who have come to these shores to join with those who were already there, to create a sense of identity.

A chapter I especially enjoyed, and one which attracted a great deal of reader response when it was broadcast in the ABC program *Linguae Franca*, is 'The Subjunctive'. His is a lone campaign to restore this tense to our every day language. The picture of Dessaix in an aeroplane leaping to his feet and calling out 'Hullo! Subjunctive!' when a voice announces, 'It is important to us that you are aware of the safety features' (192)' is wonderful. What the voice must mean is that we 'be aware of the safety features', and while acknowledging that in the end it doesn't really matter, Dessaix then goes on to argue for the greater use of the subjunctive. At the same time he admits that if he'd known 'what a hodge-podge of ifs and buts' his explanation would end up as, he would probably never have embarked on it.

It is tempting to find dainty morsels from the text to tempt and titillate, to tease and trifle, because the book abounds in leaps and follies, skirmishes and excursions in to so many areas of life and culture. Dessaix is a man who loves language, literature, travel and ideas, and this love shines through the prose. This is a book you can dip into and read with great enjoyment. You may not agree with all that he writes. I certainly didn't. But he will make you stop and think about why you disagree. And always, there is the distinctive voice, the humour, the self-deprecation in case we think he is taking himself too seriously. At the end of the book he announces that he has been dreaming in his tower for quite long enough, so he is off to Lisbon: 'It's a place where you can mislay yourself deliciously, as I am now ready to do' (220).

**Emily Sutherland**