

# David Malouf's 'Voyaging Imagination': *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*<sup>1</sup>

The essay explores the role of David Malouf's 'voyaging imagination' mainly in his latest novel. It concentrates on the metaphysical implications of Malouf's ontological perception of man in relation to the Australian landscape and on the parallels that emerge between man's deeper self and a humanized nature. The protagonist's journey to and, above all, 'within' Australia together with the depths of language he discovers bring about the awakening of his imagination and the birth of a new self.

I borrowed the title of this paper from an essay by the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, in which he describes his working method. The essay opens with a quotation from *Love's Body* by Norman O'Brown that Harris also used as an epigraph to his novel *Carnival*, the first sentence of which reads: 'The wanderings of the soul after death are prenatal adventures; a journey by water, in a ship which is itself a Goddess, to the gates of rebirth'.<sup>2</sup> The ship travelling to the gates of rebirth becomes a vessel of the voyaging imagination, a metaphor for the creative process itself, in the course of which, Harris says, he concentrates deeply on partial images. And further, 'Partiality discloses a wholeness one can never seize or capture but which is *there*, lurking as it were in the grain and composition of the narrative, in the challenges it raises'. He also describes the writing process as 'an originality of the unconscious erupting into the subconscious and the conscious'.<sup>3</sup>

In its apparently limpid yet never superficial simplicity, David Malouf's fiction differs considerably from Harris's more complex metaphorical prose and explorations of the human psyche. But he shares

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at a conference on 'Comings and Goings: Britain and Australia, Past and Future'. The conference, organized by the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, took place at King's College, London from 12 to 14 September 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Norman O.Brown, *Love's Body*, Vintage Books (New York, 1966), p. 42. Wilson Harris's essay, 'The Voyaging Imagination', is unpublished in the version I quote from. A revised version was published under the title 'Intuition, Myth, Imagination, Memory', in Maura Dooley, ed., *How Novelists Work*, Poetry Wales Press (Bridgend, 2000), pp. 45-55.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson Harris, 'The Voyaging Imagination', p. 2.

with him an intuition of wholeness underlying both the fragments of life and the narrative material, and also sees the creative act as an eruption from the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Like Harris, who often said that he is a medium through which the fiction writes itself, Malouf said in an interview:

There's a sort of doubt and mysteriousness about the person who's done that actual piece of writing. You can't remember who you were or what state you'd fallen into. I think the actual business of writing, or creating anything, involves our falling back into a much more primitive consciousness than the one we carry around most of the time.<sup>2</sup>

There are other similarities between the two writers which I will point out briefly as I go along. Harris's fiction is more radically experimental than Malouf's but, significantly, both started as poets and, from their beginning as fiction writers, both dissociated themselves from the conventional English novel<sup>3</sup> and opted for a poetic prose in their best known and still most widely read fiction, *Palace of the Peacock* and *An Imaginary Life*. In both novels the protagonist's imaginary journey through outer and inner landscape metaphorizes the colonial experience, the dislocation of the self it entails and, above all, the possibilities it offers of self-transformation and transfiguring epiphany through the dissolution of binary oppositions. In both novels it occurs at the moment of death, not as total or final annihilation but as a passage into a dimension I shall temporarily call the flux of death-in-life and life-in-death.

This brings to mind the metaphysical dimension in Malouf's work which, so he suggests, must have obsessed those who moved from a secure, unquestioned environment such as England to an apparently empty continent like Australia, even if most could not have articulated

<sup>1</sup> 'I wrote *An Imaginary Life* very much as I write poems: by letting objects and events come together through association, by allowing the links to be forged and the structure to declare itself, at some sub-conscious level'. In Michel Fabre: 'Roots and Imaginations: an Interview with David Malouf', *Commonwealth*, vol. IV (1979-1980), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> 'David Malouf', in Barbara Williams, *In Other Words. Interviews with Australian Poets*, Rodopi (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1994), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> David Malouf, 'I don't believe in any way in the linear thing', Beate Josephi, 'Interview with David Malouf', in Amanda Nettelbeck, ed., *Provisional Maps: Critical essays on David Malouf*, University of Western Australia: Centre for Studies in Australian literature (Perth, 1994), p. 33. See also: 'The English like books which have a plot-shape, whereas my books tend to have a poetic shape. That is what holds them together. Not the continuing plot but the working out of the metaphor, the working out of a set of correspondences or affinities'. 'David Malouf', in Candida Baker, *Yacker. Australian Writers Talk About their Work*, Picador (London, 1986), p. 254.

the existential *angst* they sensed.<sup>1</sup> One aspect of this metaphysical dimension most clearly developed in *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and *Fly Away Peter* (1982) is his vision of a constantly evolving existential flow in which all forms of nature and all creatures, human and animal, are interrelated. Wilson Harris calls it 'unfinished genesis', an endless creation which Ashley Crowther in *Fly Away Peter* apprehends in his vast estate, 'the sense it gave of being unfinished and of offering no prospect of being finished'.<sup>2</sup> However, by repeatedly setting up divisive categories, man obstructs this process and even threatens its continuity through the most extreme manifestation of oppositional forces: the war which, as Jim Saddler realizes, reduces the earth to 'one vast rag and bone shop' (p. 105).

Life's evolutionary movement is visualized by Jim in the 'coming and going of a thousand varieties... of birds' (p. 7) 'arriving in spring and departing at the commencement of autumn' (p. 61) both in Australia and Europe. While in the trenches in Flanders, the presence of birds reassures him that he may find his way back 'to a natural cycle of things that the birds still followed undisturbed' (p. 61). This is not to suggest that Malouf recommends a birdlike mobility to men, only that man's awareness of this essential movability can be enhanced through imagination and consciousness. When Jim flies over Queensland with Ashley's aviator friend 'he had a clear view of what he had already seen in imagination' (p. 53). And further:

What came to him most clearly was how the map in his own head, which he had tested and found accurate, might be related to the one the birds carried in theirs, which allowed them to find their way... halfway across the world. (p. 54)<sup>3</sup>

When Jim, like Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, dreams his way into death, some consciousness persisting after it, he enters the endless flux, the 'otherness' Ashley had perceived in his inherited property as if it was 'a piece of the next world, or some previous one' (p. 32). Also, like Ovid striking down roots into the earth and feeling that 'we are continuous with earth in all the particles of our physical being',<sup>4</sup> he dreams that he digs his way home through the earth from Flanders to Australia 'in a landscape so wide... you could see the curve of the earth' (p. 127). He

<sup>1</sup> See in particular Nikos Papastergiadis, 'David Malouf and Languages for landscape: An Interview', *Ariel*, vol. 25, N° 3 (July 1994) (pp. 83-94), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> David Malouf, *Fly Away Peter*, Penguin (Harmondsworth, 1983 [1982]), p. 11. Further references in the text.

<sup>3</sup> I make no comment on mapping in Malouf's fiction, on which much has been written. See, in particular, Martin Leer's excellent essay: 'At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 12, N° 1 (May 1985), pp. 3-21.

<sup>4</sup> *An Imaginary Life*, Picador (London, 1978), p. 147.

thus enters through his fading consciousness a dimension unchartable by the living senses or in Wilson Harris's words an 'unfathomable wholeness'.<sup>1</sup> For both Jim and Ovid, but especially for Ovid, death contains the germ of survival and it is in this sense that 'the wanderings of the soul after death become pre-natal adventures'.

From Malouf's first novel, *Johnno* (1975), to the latest, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*<sup>2</sup> all the protagonists are involved in actual journeys, willing or forced displacements between Australia and Britain or more generally Europe, or else Asia as in *The Great World* (1990). In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* the narrative movement is structured not by the voyage out to Australia and back, though it makes up the frame of the novel, but by the main character's mental comings and goings between his Australian present and his Irish past, through memory intensified by his growing imagination. It is also modulated by two time scales, a back and forth voyaging between a strictly delimited, even threatening clock-time (one night of waiting before an execution at dawn) and the free intemporal spells of remembrance. To sum up the novel briefly: Michael Adair, an Irish officer in the British army, arrives at Curlow Creek from Sydney to see to the execution of Daniel Carney, an escaped convict who roamed about the area with a small group of bushrangers under the leadership of a man who called himself Dolan and was killed by the troopers hunting them. Adair's secret motivation is to find out whether Dolan was actually Fergus Connellan, the son of his (Adair's) adoptive parents. He came to Australia at the instigation of his close childhood friend, Virgilia, whom he loves though she is in love with Fergus and wants to know what became of him. The conversations Adair holds in the night awaiting Carney's execution are both with the bushranger, whose mind also moves back to Ireland, and with his inner self. The two men's memories gradually build up an overall picture of living conditions in Ireland in the first decades of the nineteenth century: the utter deprivation of the poor and ignorant and their inevitable resort to crime in order to survive, and the contrasting life of refinement, education, opportunity of the gentry. This accounts at least partly for the beginnings of white settlement in Australia: the Irish poor have mostly come as convicts, the privileged as officers to maintain order with the help of ordinary troopers, who are of the same origin as the uneducated poor and sometimes easily cross the border to lawless bushranging.

In most of Malouf's novels the protagonist asks himself questions about his place in the universe.<sup>3</sup> In *Johnno* young Dante, like Stephen

<sup>1</sup> 'Wilson Harris – An Interview', conducted by Helen Tiffin, *New Literature Review* N° 7 (pp. 18-29), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> David Malouf, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Vintage (London, 1997). Further references are given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> See Malouf's own comment on *Remembering Babylon*: 'This book... is about an experience of landscape or a relationship to the world that is clearer in a place

Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, writes in his schoolbooks his address in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, the World and later meditates on what seemed then the insignificance of Australia, while the headmaster told the boys the way to make their place in the world was to emulate the spirit of Anzac. In *Fly Away Peter* Jim wonders 'What does it mean the likes of us' (p. 7). Even Carney, the ignorant bushranger, comments on what being in the world has meant to him: suffering in Ireland, for all its lovable greenness, punishment and injustice in Australia. As to Adair, in spite of moving for several years as an officer from one remote place to another (p. 211), it is only in Australia that he discovers his and more generally man's true relationship to the universe both through his imaginative recreation of his earlier life as he ponders the reasons that took him there and the effect of the country on him:

Some quality of the country, some effect of the high clear skies... had got into his head and changed his sense of what lay before, and behind too. So much space, so much distance under the dry air, had opened his eyes to the long view... since these distances were empty... only a high, wide emptiness that drew you into an opening distance in yourself in which the questions... concerned only yourself and what there was at last, or might be, between you and the harsh, unchanged and unchanging earth, and above, the unchanged, unchangeable stars. (pp. 52-53)

Adair embodies the contradictory modes of apprehension by which man attempts to define his relationship to the world and govern his conduct: rationalism as opposed to imagination and/or intuition. As a young adopted boy (one of many in Malouf's fiction), his sense of insecurity at not having an assured place in society (p. 65) inclines him towards restraint, order, conventions, the dictates of reason. He would like to believe Eamon Fitzgibbon, Virgilia's father, a fervent admirer of the French revolution and a believer in progress, who predicts a future of order and justice for the younger generations, what he calls 'a just world of perfect reason and order' (p. 132). But troubled by the first stirrings of sexuality, which he thinks of as 'a form of darkness in himself' (p. 132), and by his perception of his surroundings through the body, another recurring motif in Malouf's fiction, Adair finds it hard to subscribe to Eamon's rational ideal. Moreover, from their early childhood, he is both impressed and dismayed by Virgilia's passionate and imaginative nature, her refusal to accept the limits of everyday life, inventing extravagant stories in which she claims to be involved. These are akin to a fictionalization of existence, the expression of a truth other than factual accuracy, and in this she is close to the artist in Malouf's other novels and

like Australia'. 'David Malouf and Languages for Landscape: An Interview' by Nikos Papastergiadis, p. 87.

his own rejection of realism. Later, Virgilia, the female guide in Adair's inquiring Dantesque journey into his psychological underworld, stimulates his imagination and creativity. In their epistolary exchanges across distances (yet another form of coming and going), he releases himself into 'a kind of dreaming on the page' (p. 160) and creates a new self as he creates a new language to express it.

The other prime mover to his transformation is Fergus, or rather his memory of him, Fergus who, contrary to himself, could not be 'contained' (p. 78). The servants in his parents' household saw in him 'a fairy child' (p. 77), and Adair recalls that he 'wasn't like a human child' and that he had 'in his look all the knowledge of another order of beings, an angel maybe, maybe the opposite' (p. 48, see also p. 83). 'Another order of beings' recalls Ovid's perception of 'another order of existence'<sup>1</sup> as he approaches death and brings to mind the concept of life-in-death, death-in-life I mentioned at the beginning. Fergus grows up unruly, a kind of graceful charismatic savage closely attuned to nature and the animal world, reminding Adair of 'centaurs... a kind of composite creature, half boy, half horse' (p. 83). Though in no way idealized, he seems to incarnate all the possibilities of integration into the natural world and of a continuous motion in step with it that Malouf previously evoked in both fiction and interviews. Fergus also illustrates his view of man as belonging to a chain of being<sup>2</sup> ranging from animal to man, to mythical hero, which is what the young man obviously was in the eyes of his followers or those under his spell. This ontological oneness with nature is the key to a fuller humanization and, paradoxically, since Fergus is anything but rational, blends in him with some of the original ideals of the French revolution (which was not without influence on the Irish): liberty, equality, fraternity, an ideal put into practice by the bushrangers with whom Adair secretly sympathizes. To their surprise, when they were still young in Ireland, Fergus took Virgilia and Adair to the O'Riordans, an extremely poor family he had obviously been helping for some time after the father's transportation. As they rode away towards home, Fergus's 'exalted mood... communicated itself to every part of him and from his spirit to theirs, and seemed to glow out of every aspect of the landscape' (p. 159).<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, Adair senses that this spirit unifying Fergus's exaltation and the Irish country drove him to run away to Australia, possibly to raise an Irish rebellion, though this is never ascertained.

It seems to me that for all his declared anti-Platonism and anti-Cartesianism, his expressed preference for the pre-Plato Greek

<sup>1</sup> *An Imaginary Life*, p. 146. Exactly the same phrase occurs in *Fly Away Peter*, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Malouf uses this expression in his interview with Barbara Williams, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> See in *An Imaginary Life*, 'The Spirit... expands to become the whole landscape, as if space itself were its dimensions' (p. 142).

philosophers<sup>1</sup> – one thinks of Heraclitus and his perception of all life in constant flux as well as his vision of opposites –, Malouf goes some way towards reconciling the two philosophical trends in this novel: in Adair, whose naturally rational behaviour is gradually compensated for by his growing imaginative sensibility, and even in Fergus, whose romantic idealism is an inheritance of the eighteenth-century enlightenment, though he is unaware of it.

Andrew Taylor has rightly pointed out that though *Conversations at Curlow Creek* deals with the origin of white settlement in New South Wales and of Australia as a nation, it is not a historical novel but, like Malouf's earlier fiction, about 'the Other of History'.<sup>2</sup> Historical facts are indeed blurred and the 'Other' is both Fergus and Carney who also becomes somewhat mythical by virtue of his rumoured rescue, though Adair knows this to be untrue. Just before his execution, Carney asks permission to wash in the creek. On several accounts this is the most memorable scene in the novel, a symbolical baptism just before death which fuses the end with a new beginning. It is felt even by one of the troopers, who thinks that when they have buried Carney, he will go through the same ritual 'to begin all over again with the freshness and sanctity of things' (p. 200). But what is being washed away is not Carney's sins but the 'world's muck' of which his wounds, 'the terrible rainbow colours that bloomed on his flesh' (p. 199) are testimony. The scene recalls another 'baptism' in *The Great World* when Vic carries Digger into the river so that the tiny fish can suck away, and clean him of, the sickness and corruption induced by the war.<sup>3</sup> As the dried blood of Carney's wounds floats on the surface of the creek, it is taken into the land, a token of the suffering that went into the making of Australia.

From his interpretation of Carney's ritual cleansing, Andrew Taylor concludes that Malouf's lyrical affirmation of the body, in particular Carney's standing 'dazzling' in the sun (p. 199), implies that the body is the only site of wholeness in his fiction. The body is indeed a gateway towards wholeness and, as Adair thinks, it is what 'keeps him rooted in life, committed to unending returns' (p. 212). But it is not its only site, for wholeness is multi-dimensional and manifold. In another significant scene, adolescent Adair, strongly conscious of his body and 'its contact with the world' (p. 80) is caught in a storm and realizes that his physical restlessness and disturbance are shared by the trees and a swarm of ants.<sup>4</sup> In both scenes, Adair transcends his one-dimensional humanity but, as in

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Perkins and Manfred Jurgensen, 'A Place of Our Own: David Malouf talks With *Outrider*', *Outrider*, II, 2 (December 1985) (pp. 60-71), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Taylor, 'Origin, Identity and the Body in Malouf's Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 19, N° 1 (1999) (pp. 3-14), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> David Malouf, *The Great World*, Picador (London, 1990), p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the passage quoted above from *Fly Away Peter* when Jim realizes that the air-routes followed by the birds in their comings and goings between Australia and Europe are contained in their tiny brain as they are in man (p. 20).

Could the mind – out of what rich well? – draw up such bright, such enlarging images, play so powerfully on the nerves, hold out the promise of hopeful issue, of escape from the hard facts of circumstance... ? (p. 177)

This remains an open question. The possibility that the power of the imagination might redeem from fate – a recurring motif in Wilson Harris's fiction – is clearly not accessible to Carney. Brought up in more favourable circumstances, both Fergus and Adair can act in keeping with their authentic self, Fergus from earliest childhood, Adair as a developing adult. In this respect he seems to exemplify as a human being and as the evolving consciousness in the narrative a more composite view of fate than Malouf's other protagonists in this and earlier novels.<sup>2</sup> On the point of sailing back to Ireland, he decides 'to settle' (p. 211) after many comings and goings which seemed to be his destiny. The concept of fate which, ultimately, he personifies counterpoints his earlier fear of extinction and leaves room for the fulfilment of human potentialities in the process of becoming in which he partakes through his voyaging imagination.

*Hena MAES-JELINEK*  
*Université de Liège*

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Taylor's argument with reference to *The Great World, 'The Great World, History, and Two or One Other Things'*, in Amanda Nettelbeck, ed., *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf* (pp. 35-50), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, as Taylor argues, in *The Great World*.