

## Singing it anew: David Malouf's *Ransom*

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‘The creator in art is he who discovers a new *analogate* of the beautiful, a new way in which the radiance of form can shine on matter.’

Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*

When David Malouf spoke about *Ransom* at the UNSWriting Public Seminar in April 2010, he revealed that he had written the novel during 2002 and, as had been the case with much of his work, he then filed the manuscript away. Malouf gave a few reasons for his reticence to publish immediately: he was concerned that critics might wonder how *Ransom* fitted into the rest of his *oeuvre*; he thought Australian readers might ask why they were being invited – in, he supposed, 2003 – to enter the world of Homer's *Iliad*; and he thought perhaps *his* interest in that world was a little idiosyncratic, of no great interest to a reading public. *Ransom* was not published until 2009, and it then received great critical and popular acclaim. The overwhelmingly positive response to the novel surprised Malouf. In his talk, he attributed this response to the fact that the novel ‘presents itself very simply as a story’. And it does. (I wonder how many readers, like myself, read *Ransom* in one sitting). However, while it may ‘present’ itself ‘very simply’, it is an intricately crafted story that engages with complex philosophical questions about narrative, aesthetics and being-in-the-world. In re-imagining Homer's characters, and in introducing his own character, Somax, into the weave of that ancient story, Malouf offers in *Ransom* a very human narrative of dignity and grace.

Malouf takes us into the world of the *Iliad* in order to explore imaginatively new angles, new stories, new possibilities offered by Homer's epic. The war continues to rage around the walls of Troy: Achilles is sulking at Agamemnon's slight; Hector slays Patroclus; an inconsolable Achilles slays Hector and desecrates daily his corpse. Finally Priam renounces the position of impotent observer and acts decisively to bring Hector's body home. This basic plotline mirrors Homer's. But, in place of Homer's heroic epithets and epic similes, Malouf's language is quiet, spare, sonorous and sensual. Heroic action gives way to contemplation and inner turmoil. Achilles' wrath plays second fiddle to his grief. The ‘action’ opens with Achilles listening for the voice of his mother:

He lifts his head, turns his face to the chill air that moves in across the gulf, and tastes its sharp salt on his lip. The sea surface bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue – a membrane stretched to a fine transparency where once, for nine changes of the moon, he had hung curled in a dream of pre-existence and was rocked and comforted. (3)

In the quiet dawn light: ‘Small waves slither to his sandalled feet, then sluice away with a rattling sound as the smooth stones loosen and go rolling’ (4). This is *beautiful* prose and I use that adjective advisedly because beauty and its manifestations in the world are a central concern of Malouf's narrative.

By way of introduction to my discussion on how beauty operates in, and structures, *Ransom*, I want to go back through an archival ASAL memory to the February 2007 conference where my colleague and friend Noel Rowe gave a paper titled 'Will this be your poem or mine? The give and take of story.' In that paper Noel was exploring a wide variety of Australian writing and the political and critical reception of writers who sought to write on behalf of others. Most importantly, he made an argument for the importance of the beautiful in writing, an argument for the aesthetic over the ethical or political motivations of writing. And this is part of what he said:

One of the major difficulties I have had in formulating this argument is that the word "writing" will not submit to my will. Whereas I have tried to use it to indicate an act of making with words, most critics are likely to think the word refers to a thing made with words. Certainly critics focused on ethico-political textual effects and contexts are inclined to think of writing as the finished product. Valid as it is, such a focus can diminish appreciation of how writing, and story, work. [Etienne] Gilson distinguishes between "the art that makes things (*ars artefaciens*) rather than the things which art makes (*ars artefacta*)" (13). In Gilson's terms, writing is a making before it is a knowing or willing, so its primary concern is not a truth to be known or a good to be willed. Its primary concern is beauty. Once upon a time there was a language to describe what made writing beautiful. Jacques Maritain, for example, records how Aquinas identified three conditions for beauty: integrity, proportion, and clarity. This clarity, or *claritas*, he explains as the splendour of intelligibility recognised by the Platonists (*splendor veri*), by Augustine (*splendor ordinis*) and Aquinas (*splendor formae*) (Maritain 20).

Gilson speaks of integrity, inasmuch as the beautiful lacks nothing essential to its nature, harmony, inasmuch as the form of the whole brings unity to the parts, and *claritas* or radiance, which is like the "affective tonality" of a beautiful work (28-34). Both acknowledge that *claritas* is a metaphor and that it has to do with the way beauty compels our attention. Neither suggests that beauty's appeal is easily explicable...but I think we need to rediscover a way of talking about beauty. Allowing that it can come in all shapes and sizes, from the classical to the postmodern, there is still something to be said for beauty as the impossible desire of writing (as *ars artefaciens*), since it acknowledges the fact that as writers are making their works, they are weighing individual words, fashioning structures that provide an appropriate proportion, establishing and varying rhythm, connecting images, particularising characters, controlling perspectives, and matching style to subject. (27-28)

This notion of the beautiful, of writing as a creative act that weighs words, structure and meaning, that varies rhythms and controls perspective is realised in *Ransom*. Think of Somax's surprise at the cleanliness and 'whiteness' of Troy (93), of Priam's vision of Somax's daughter-in-law (128), of the extended passages where narrative perspective shifts from Somax to Priam and back again (132-36) as they journey quietly towards the Greek camp. In these moments we as readers experience what Priam experiences when he steps out of the royal realm and into the everyday world: 'out here[...]everything was just itself. That was what seemed new' (124). These most ordinary of moments, through Malouf's crafting, become extraordinary epiphanies.

Throughout Malouf's work language operates as a sensuous tool through which we come to understand the meaning and texture of our world. In his *Quarterly Essay*, 'Made in England'

(2003), he argues that language – particularly metaphoric language – is the means through which we think, we feel, and importantly we touch ‘the objects that comprise our world by making them immediately real’ (44). The tongue operates always as an organ of both speech and desire. One of Malouf’s most erotic poems, ‘The Crab Feast’, begins:

There is no getting closer  
than this. My tongue slips into  
the furthest, sweetest corner  
of you. I know all

now all your secrets (180).

And continues:

[...]the deeper  
nights when I went down after the tropic  
sun. Hence too the Latin

names, a dangerous clawhold. I wanted the whole of you, raw poundage

in defiance of breathlessness  
or the power of verbal charms,  
on my palm, on my tongue. (181)

In *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), where Malouf maps the topography of the adolescent’s house, body, and awakening desire, he signposts the possibilities for discovery and delight if one is prepared to venture beyond the known boundaries of self and experience. He writes of the need to reorganise ‘all the parts of our body, where mouth for example, after its long re-creation of itself as a speaking organ, has become a finger-pad to test the subtlest texture of things, a third eye for seeing colours the rainbow missed, sighting new horizons’ (65). *Ransom* continues this preoccupation with discovering the world through language and the senses. Priam’s destination is Achilles’ camp but his journey is into the richly textured everyday world and into an appreciation of all that goes on in it: the beautiful and the banal; the practical and the seemingly useless. Priam’s vulnerability and ignorance contrast powerfully with Somax’s absolute groundedness and pragmatism. While the ultimate achievement of Priam’s journey is the repatriation of Hector’s body, of equal importance, in Malouf’s novel, is how his engagement in and with the world awakens his curiosity.

Priam journeys not only into the world of physical experience but also into the world of everyday language. In his stately world words are spoken only when necessary: ‘Silence, not speech, was what was expressive. Power lay in containment’ (126). In Malouf’s *oeuvre* silence, rather than speech, is always revered as the more pure form of communication. In ‘Inspirations VIII’ he writes:

If I were to offer you  
a poem it would be silence  
itself unattended  
still (161)

In *Ransom*, however, there is a shift away from silence towards conversation. In one of the many moments where the ordinary is transformed into something revelatory, Priam discovers the comfort of conversational chatter. Somax lets 'his tongue run on' with 'unnecessary' tales that have 'no point or use' (125). Yet they are vitally useful because they awaken Priam's interest in the everyday world: 'It was as if you had found yourself peering through the crack in a door (exciting, Priam found, this imagining himself into a situation he would never have dreamed of acting out) and saw clearly for a moment into the fellow's life, his world' (127). In Troy, only ignorant children and sequestered women 'prattle'. In the everyday world Priam discovers not only that prattling is the norm – 'out here, if you stopped to listen, everything prattled' (126) – but that the world is alive with energy and presence. Even the silence contains a 'continuous rustling and buzzing and humming, as if each thing's presence was as much the sound it made as its shape, or the way it had, which was all its own, of moving or being still' (127). In travelling with, and listening to, Somax he becomes acutely aware of being in the world. He experiences the texture of the real.

This insistence on the real over and above the representational or symbolic, the actual above the abstract is also connected with ideas about beauty. It is no accident that Homer's magnificent stallions and chariot are replaced by 'an ordinary mule cart' (92) drawn by two mules, one of which bears the name 'Beauty.' It is significant that Beauty is not only instrumental in the success of Priam's mission but also outlives the destruction of Troy. And of utmost importance is the fact that the closing sentence of this novel about the power and relevance of storytelling and imagination is given to her: 'A charming creature, big-eyed and sleek, she bore the name of Beauty—and very appropriately too, it seems, which is not always the case' (219).

Just as Malouf steps into a lacuna in Homer's poem so too he enters into an ongoing debate about the existence and nature of beauty in the world, begun most famously with Plato and qualified by Aristotle. For Plato, Beauty was an ideal Form, an abstract idea, not of this world. Anything perceived by the intellect to be beautiful was an imperfect manifestation of the Form of Beauty. That is to say, the physical world could only, at best, imitate imperfectly the ideal world. In the *Phaedo* he has Socrates explain to Cebes: 'It seems to me that if anything else is beautiful besides the beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no reason at all other than that it participates in that beautiful' (52, l. 100, 5 c).<sup>1</sup> In a sense Plato's idea of Beauty is replicated in Priam's representational or symbolic state: abstracted above the known and knowable world. Aristotle rejected Plato's Theory of Forms. Refusing to accept that there was absolute Beauty he set out, most particularly in the *Metaphysics*, to distinguish the Beautiful from the Good. Taking a more scientific approach, he argued that beauty was to be found in the world; that it was a function of form – whose universal elements included order, symmetry, definiteness and balance – applied to matter. Aristotle believed that beauty could be identified through our senses. To continue my analogy, Aristotle's view is reflected in Priam's entry into the real world and his 'scientific' discovery of the constituents of it. Malouf's prose demonstrates how beauty is to be found in pikelets made lovingly with thick creamy buttermilk, in quiet camaraderie and conversation, and in an appropriately-named, trustworthy mule.

Etienne Gilson, writing of the fine arts, states that the 'difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty is obvious' (24) because the latter is appreciated as being made by the artist: 'The presence of the man [sic] who made the work of art is always felt in our apprehension of it' (25). Malouf weaves his narrative to ensure his readers are conscious of two artistic presences: Homer and himself. Recent scholarship posits that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were

written down in the mid-seventh century BC and suggests that Homer was a singer who performed well before this time.<sup>2</sup> Singers who specialized in epics were known as *rhapsodos*, or translated, ‘singers of woven words.’ Such singers would have created the chosen narrative anew every time they performed. In *Ransom* Malouf is not only singing Homer anew, he is also singing anew many of his abiding imaginative concerns, concerns familiar to his readers: the sensual and evocative power of breath; deeply felt, yet largely unarticulated, desire between men; complex laconic relations between fathers and sons; the musicality of language; respect for the world of animals; extraordinary moments of epiphany in the ordinary everyday; the drive to push beyond the boundaries of the known; the desire for the dissolution of borders – of self, language, time, genre; and of course, the twinning of the self. Here this twinning is taken to a more intense level such that each character not only searches for their other but is also ‘othered’ in himself. For example, Somax is coupled with Priam while also doubled in himself as Ideaus; Achilles is twinned with Patroclus but in himself he is hard and earth-bound and ‘eel-like, fluid, weightless’ (6). Priam’s doubleness is multilayered. He is partnered with Somax yet he is also partnered with himself – he is both slave child and King. Significantly, however, he is also doubled as King, a position that encompasses his ‘dual states actual and symbolic’ (44).

Priam ‘is obliged, in his role as king, to think of the king’s sacred body, this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in—aches and sneezes and all—as at once a body like an other and an abstract of the lands he represents, their living map’ (43). His dual states not only reinforce the novel’s interest in the dynamic between the real and the abstract, they also have historic relevance dating back at least as far as medieval conceptions of the dual body of the King, which in turn trace back to early Christian ideas about the dual divine and human body of Christ and following that the dual bodies of the Bishops of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Malouf maintains his respect for Priam’s kingly status by imbuing him with dignity and gravitas. But his intention is to celebrate the possibilities Priam will discover if he puts his human body to the test; if he ventures physically beyond the known boundaries of his cloistered world. Malouf achieves this focus in two ways. Firstly, he constructs a counter-narrative to Kingship where Priam could well have been raised as a slave. Secondly, he makes Priam acutely aware of this possible otherness to the extent that he casts off his regal garments and identity to become a common man who then learns to immerse himself unshielded in the visceral, sensual experiences of life in the world.

When Achilles leaves his mother’s fluid world and enters the ‘world of men’ he enters a world where ‘a man’s acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death’ (6). This is the world Priam must experience: ‘Mightn’t it be time for me to expose myself at last to what is merely human? To learn a little of what that might be, and what it is to bear it as others do?’ (85) Priam enacts the ideal articulated in *An Imaginary Life*: ‘What else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become’ (135). Crucially, having ventured beyond the horizon of his known world, he develops an imagination: ‘He could see it, though he had never seen *her*. And hadn’t he tasted, in the one little cake he had popped into his own mouth, the lightness of the girl’s wrist? It had done him good, all that, body and spirit both. He wanted more.’ (129) Priam demonstrates the fully realised means of being-in-the-world explained elsewhere by Malouf: ‘There is only one way of experiencing the reality of the world we live in – that is through our bodies, our senses. But we humans are fortunate

in having two ways of attaining that experience; either through actual events, or when it is working at its most powerful, through the imagination' ('Imagining the Real', 281).

Significantly, in *An Imaginary Life* the world of men moves into the world of the gods. In *Ransom* that movement is reversed. The focus remains on the world of men. Fortune and fate, in Homer's poem attributed to the will and whimsy of the gods, gives way to chance (61) and human responsibility. Hermes is a necessary device for entry into the Greek camp so he is afforded presence and agency but he is transformed from Homer's 'mighty giant-killer' (1.409) into a comic dandy. The other gods are intimations at best. Where Homer's Priam 'heard [Iris'] voice with my own ears, I looked straight at the goddess, face-to-face' (1.265-66), Malouf's King perceives Iris as a shifting state of consciousness, a fleeting dream (46,55). Both Homer's and Malouf's gods 'live free of sorrows' (1.614) but for Malouf such an existence is somewhat lacking, is inauthentic. *Ransom* not only celebrates a Heideggerean being-in-the-world with all the consciousness, anxiety, uncertainty and pain such existence entails, it also affirms a Heideggerean being-towards-death. Priam muses on what it means to be mortal, to feel the loss of what 'is truly sweet':

The gods themselves know nothing of this, and in this respect, perhaps, may envy us. But not in the end. Because, in the end, what we come to is what time, with every heartbeat and in every moment of our lives, has been slowly working towards: the death we have been carrying within us from the very beginning, from our first breath. Only we humans can know, endowed as we are with mortality, but also with consciousness, what it is to be aware each day of the fading in us of freshness and youth (88).

We hear echoes here of a mature Malouf's intimations of mortality. The poignancy of these meditations on ageing and death, and the compassion shown to Priam's frailties in old age, suggest this novel could only have been written at this later stage of Malouf's career. Yet, as I have been suggesting, *Ransom* continues to investigate Malouf's central preoccupations. As Priam approaches, and envisages, the end of his life we are reminded of Ovid's desire, at the close of *An Imaginary Life*, to be radically open to the moment of death (152).

In his 'Afterword' Malouf tells how the 'Troy story' has shadowed his life. *Ransom*, he writes, 'is a return to that unfinished story; to my discovery, once in 1943, once again in 1972, that

[...]the war, our war  
was real: highways of ash  
where ghostly millions rise out of their shoes and go barefoot  
nowhere[...] (223).

One obvious answer as to why 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers may enjoy being invited into Homer's *Iliad* is that our world is yet again in the middle of a war. Perhaps readers, like the child Malouf, appreciate the parallel concerns of the ancient story and their contemporary world. Malouf has not discounted Peter Conrad's reading which sees his 'Troy, "a city of four square towers topped by untidy storks' nests", as the World Trade Center arrogantly multiplied.' Indeed he suggests that the visual image of the actual disintegration of the Twin Towers in real time, powerfully evoked more symbolic concerns about the fall of the city, of civic values, of civilisation. Similar concerns were addressed by Plato in the *Phaedo* as he struggled to accommodate how Socrates, that tower of intellectual thought and learning, was

brought down by a polity fearful of his influence. Similar concerns informed much of Aristotle's writing in 323 BC, shortly before the fall of Athenian democracy. In revisiting these concerns *Ransom* becomes part of a very long conversation about the need for storytelling, about why we tell the stories we do, and about how stories can make sense of our sometimes seemingly senseless world.

Malouf is not trying to rewrite Homer's *Iliad*. He is not, as critic Tom Holland suggests, trying to 'go head to head with a writer as great as Homer'. He is using Homer's epic to speak to us of our time. Priam senses the imminent demise of Troy and he acts; he steps 'into the space that till now was uninhabited and finds a way to fill it' (208). So does Malouf. He sees our world at war, at times paralysed by fear, and he steps into a space in Homer's poem and fills it with a story of moral and imaginative heroism. Yet while *Ransom*, at one level, engages with some of the ethical and political challenges of our time, these issues remain secondary to the aesthetic concerns of the narrative. That is to say, in Gilson's terms, *Ransom*'s 'primary concern is not a truth to be known or a good to be willed. Its primary concern is beauty.' Gilson's argument that 'writing is a making before it is a knowing or willing' resonates with Malouf's stated motivations for, and process of, creating *Ransom*. His private project, inspired by his ongoing respect for, and love of, Homer's poetry and the story of Troy, was written primarily because he wanted to create a beautiful story about storytelling and beauty. Fortunately, he took the manuscript out of the drawer. In publishing *Ransom* he opened a space for readers to think about, and feel the experience of, loss and grief but also of vulnerability, curiosity and joyous discovery.

Jacques Maritain, writing some decades before Gilson, also believed that the end of art was beauty and that the artist's purpose was to make beautiful things. Importantly, Maritain argued that while beauty – particularly that of the natural world – may be perceived through the senses, any true appreciation of artistic beauty involves intellectual engagement. Following Aquinas, he maintained that intelligence, or our capacity to know, is essential in the apprehension of beauty. And yet, as Rowe notes, beauty's appeal is not easily explicable. Holland is just one critic, obviously well-schooled in Homer's verse, who identifies great merit in *Ransom* and yet finds it disappointing because Malouf does not 'do enough with his source material.' His criticism may be valid, and yet it loses some of its force if one accepts that rather than trying to rewrite, or go 'head to head' with, Homer, Malouf's primary concern was to write about the beauty to be found in literature and in life. If we accept that proposition, we need to find a new language for criticism, new ways to apprehend and talk about the beautiful in writing. *Ransom* cannot be analysed adequately through the artificial application of theories put forward by Plato, Aristotle, Gilson or Maritain. My purpose here has been to apply aspects of these theories in order to offer some insights into how Malouf goes about the making of the beautiful work of art.

It is helpful here to return to Aristotle. In the *Poetics* he adds another essential element to his definition of beauty offered in the *Metaphysics*. Here he suggests that a beautiful work should possess a certain magnitude; the object should not be too large but for the sake of clarity it should not be too small. Arguably *Ransom* fulfils this criterion. Malouf restricts his narrative to one small segment of Homer's great epic yet crafts enough of a story to capture his reader's interest. That interest is sparked by his characterisation of Priam, Somax and Achilles and by his obvious delight in narrating the 'wonderful irrelevancies of ordinary life' (UNSWriting). In his public seminar Malouf noted that he constructed the novel simply, along the lines of a classical French play – with a 'small comic pastoral' thrown in. He went on to qualify that statement, admitting that in a French drama structured on strict Aristotelean principles –

where, as in *Ransom*, a single event takes place at a single time – ‘everything [sic else] should be irrelevant’. But the novel form, he argued, was invented to explore the ‘interesting, and appealing and ultimately wonderful irrelevancies of ordinary life.’ Through the novel form he can turn these irrelevancies into epiphanies: ‘The moon was rising fast now. Soon, wafer-like and as if lit from within, it stood high over...wheatfields and groves of ancient olives. Priam sat silent. Till now he had seen nothing of this’ (155).

Remaining true to the nature of epic, Malouf ensures the action in *Ransom* takes place over a twenty-four hour period but he also plays with time in order to offer an expanse of history before and after the central dramatic moment of Priam’s and Achilles’s encounter. Indeed the sequence in which Neoptolemus invades Troy and slaughters Priam is powerfully dramatic, and poignant. Malouf understands, and celebrates, how language can manipulate time in a way other forms of the arts cannot (‘On Experience’). Not only does he move time forwards and backwards at will, he also suspends time. It is possible to become lost in the prose so that the reading experience becomes a moment out of time; a moment like that experienced by the young Achilles and Patroclus seconds before their union:

For a long moment the taws hang there at the top of their flight; as if, in the father’s grave retelling of these events, he were allowing for a gap to be opened [...]

The boy whose fate is suspended here stands with parted lips, though no breath passes between them; lost, as they all are, in a story he might be hearing for the first time and which has not yet found its end (12).

Obviously Homer’s *Iliad* is a story ‘which has not yet found its end’. As an archive of myth, memory, poetry and perhaps even of history, it has inspired, and will continue to inspire, artists for centuries. From the wealth of contemporary artistic responses to the *Iliad* there is one poem I want to position in conversation with *Ransom*: Michael Donaghy’s ‘Angelus Novus’ (2007).<sup>4</sup> Like Malouf, Donaghy plays masterfully with time. Like Malouf, Donaghy appreciates the ongoing relevance of Homer’s story to our modern lives. In reading the novel and poem together, their messages about the destructive forces of vengeance and war are obvious. So too their appeal to readers to engage intellectually with political and moral realities and effect some imaginative, constructive change. Perhaps because poetry does not allow the extended meditations of the novel form, Donaghy’s poem is more brutally dramatic, more shocking, than Malouf’s quiet prose. Aesthetics are secondary to message. Donaghy marries the slaying of Hector, and Priam’s grief, with the destruction of life at Nagasaki in 1945 and a more contemporary image of a lynching and murder. Time slices between Achilles and the dying Hector and these historical moments:

As in this amateur footage of a lynch mob when someone hoists a metal folding chair and commences to batter the swinging corpse [...]

just so Achilles, his frenzy a runaway train, yokes up his team and drags Hector’s carcass around and around like...Stop. Rewind.

We cut to Hector dying in the dust asking Achilles to honour his corpse. Then:

Fuck you spits Achilles. Freeze frame. Mid-blink, Hector looks into Achilles’ eyes and takes all the time in the world[...]



Hector looks ‘back at the future advancing behind him’. He sees Priam kissing Achilles’ hands, sees them weeping together. The poem resumes:

Play

on. Hector’s face slams to the dust.

In the closing stanza Donaghy locates his reader/audience in an uncomfortable position. He encourages us to ‘Try to look at this: blind flash victims. Nagasaki.’ As voyeurs from an unknown future we look upon these unseeing, unsuspecting victims from the distance (and the safety?) of history. They are unaware of us but we cannot be unaware of them. What lessons should we heed from history, from the destructive force of war? Donaghy concludes:

Just so, rage-blind Achilles cannot now glimpse in  
Hector’s eyes, just before they empty, the terrible pity (188).

Both Donaghy’s ‘Angelus Novus’ and Malouf’s *Ransom* invite us to step out of time and truly *see* our world and our responsibilities in that world. My interest here is to demonstrate through comparison how Malouf achieves something similar to Donaghy through such quiet, sensual, seemingly-simple prose.

In returning to the archive of Rowe’s work on beauty, I have focussed this discussion on a particular approach to the appreciation and apprehension of the beautiful in writing. In doing so I have elided consideration of one of the twin operatives of beauty in some of Malouf’s work: shock. It is no coincidence that Somax’s second mule is called ‘Shock’ but Shock is not Beauty’s equal. And in this narrative shock plays a vastly inferior role to beauty. As a point of contrast consider for a moment the scene in *Harland’s Half Acre* when an agitated Frank bursts into the room ‘still rocking with wave after wave that beat out from the shock centre’ (126) and sees Edna and Knack’s bloodied bodies. The ‘whole room shook with changes’ while Frank gazing on his painting, now overlaid with human blood and brains, thinks: ‘Changed! Extraordinary. Such reds! What painter would have dared? He was frighteningly dazzled by the possibilities, as if, without his knowing it, his own hand had broken through to something that was searingly alive, savage, triumphant, and stood witness at last to all terror and beauty’ (126). Frank’s art is made anew through shock and horror. In *Ransom*, Malouf’s art and Homer’s art are made anew through the beautiful.

In *Rediscovering Homer* (2007) Andrew Dalby tells us that in Homer’s day the rhapsodos’:

conscious aim was to give pleasure. While doing so, and almost unconsciously, singers achieved far more than this. Epic poems were examples from which listeners learned how to deal with the big issues of life. The epics—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in particular—made their audiences think about life and death, humans and gods, men and women, right and wrong. We know they did, because philosophers Xenophanes to Plato and beyond, whenever they raise these issues, appeal to Homer as an expert witness. As modern readers, we too form part of the audience for the epics. We too are made to think afresh’ (198-199).

In choosing to fashion *Ransom* out of Homer’s epic David Malouf becomes a modern-day singer of woven words who delights us subtly with the beauty of his prose while all the while

guiding us gently towards a deeper understanding of ourselves, our world and our place in that world.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion about beauty and Form in Plato's work see *Cratylus* 439c; *Euthydemus* 301a; *Laws* 655c; *Phaedo* 65d, 75d, 100b; *Phaedrus* 254b; *Parmenides* 130b; *Philebus* 15a; *Republic* 476b, 493e, 507b. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-aesthetics/>

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion about contemporary scholarship into the authorship of these epics see Andrew Dalby's *Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> According to Ernst Kantorowitz, the idea that the king had two bodies – a mortal body and a political body - was first articulated in the sixteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kirkpatrick drew my attention to this poem.

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