

SILENCE AND POETIC INWARDNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF DAVID MALOUF

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Most studies of David Malouf's work offer little sustained analysis of his poetry and, perhaps at the behest of publishers, merely glance at it in the course of examining his prose fiction, especially his novels. Given the dominance of fiction in the contemporary reading public's mind this is hardly surprising but it does not recognise the weight of these two principal genres in Malouf's work, the nature of his prose, nor Malouf's own attitudes to the genres.¹ I should add that Malouf is arguably the most interesting and penetrating essayist in Australia and that his essays do receive some attention. The exception amongst Malouf's main critics is his old Brisbane friend, James Tulip, who argues that Malouf's 'achievement is essentially that of a poet, whether in verse or prose.'² In this paper I do not wish to set up a popularity contest between Malouf's poetry and fiction; rather, I wish to argue that Malouf's ideas and values are fundamentally poetic and are best demonstrated in his poetry, especially in his two most recent volumes, *Typewriter Music* and *Earth Hour*.

Amanda Nettelbeck in 1994 noted that Malouf was 'Known first as a poet and [was] later considered the "poetic" novelist of Australian literature' (Nettelbeck iv).³ In 1990 Tulip pointed out that 'the intertextuality of Malouf's poetry and prose is an essential aspect of his total work' (Tulip xiv) and that his 'strengths' are 'intellectual and lyrical' (Tulip xxiii). These are astute judgments and Tulip is in fact largely taking his cue from Malouf himself. In 'A "Narrative" Tone,' an essay included in Tulip's 1990 edition of Malouf's work, Malouf declares:

I write, and have always written, both prose and poetry, and inasmuch as I think it's up to a writer to think of what he does as a whole piece of work, I prefer to talk about each of those things in relation to the other. I don't think a writer works or thinks in categories, like prose now, poetry another time. (Tulip 270)

This last sentence seems slightly misleading since a writer, including Malouf, surely consciously writes fiction sometimes and poetry at others. Malouf's essay in fact draws attention to differences in writing the two genres but explains how writing his much-noticed poem 'The Year of the Foxes,' with its limited narrative touches, guided him to the writing of *Johnno*, with its extended narrative voice. 'The Year of the Foxes,' Malouf explains, presents 'a view of nature and of society and history . . . hit off in flashes—in a way that belongs not to narrative or philosophy but to poetry' (Tulip 271). It is certainly interesting that Malouf found a way to write fiction through poetry. He did so partly because 'poetry often, and much more than prose, throws things up for us that we don't immediately see—things that have come from places deeper than where most prose narrative comes from' (Tulip 272). Malouf goes on to say that 'Writing prose stripped poetry for me of its outward guise of narrative or drama and made me want to explore what I had to say in some more inward way' (Tulip 274). The poem which Malouf selects to exemplify this change is 'An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton' which he describes as 'a key poem for the way my poetry was going to move in the decade

after it was written' in 'about 1973' (Tulip 274) as well as for the writing of *An Imaginary Life*.

This idea of 'some more inward way' seems to me key to all Malouf's writing, in fact before and after the writing of 'An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton.' Towards the end of the essay Malouf declares, 'I've always wanted to work and have worked (uneasily some people might say) between inner and outer, or at the point where objects cross the consciousness and become perception' (Tulip 275). To say that you work at the intersection of inner and outer could seem incredibly banal since every writer does; in fact, every person does: it is part of the condition of being human. The world is known through perception and perception depends on who we are. However, Malouf is never banal, in writing or in person; he is such a philosophical, deeply thoughtful writer that the comment does have point. Inner and outer could be seen as the primary of the oppositions that critics have seen Malouf working through ever since Johnno and Dante appeared in Malouf's first novel, as something like Brisbane versions of Kurtz and Marlow. Again, Malouf has given the clue to his reviewers in the "'Narrative" Tone' essay, asserting that 'The Year of the Foxes' introduced 'a whole set of oppositions that is right at the centre of almost everything I do, or was going to do after that poem was written' (Tulip 272). This is an idea in Malouf's work that has so endured that it must be seen as an element of his philosophy more than a literary technique, and the 'oppositions' are really like Blakean contraries, without which Blake said there was 'no progression' (Keynes 149). In *Typewriter Music* Malouf imagines a dramatic monologue in which Mozart writes to da Ponte, pointing out

our divided selves, the one free and out of time in the eternal Now of being, the absolute presence of Here, the other conditional on time, place and a point in both . . . the one referring only to itself, the other forever looking off towards people, and a world of dizzying distractions . . . (*Typewriter* 48)

This is not an opposition Malouf points to in his "'Narrative" Tone' essay but it is an important one for all his work. Malouf's Mozart sees a parallel with words and music, writing to his librettist that 'Words act, . . . they are sociable. . . . A sentence is a theatre in which something happens, it is all agents and events. But music is just itself' (*Typewriter* 48-49). Music, then is pure and thus 'innocent'; having no referent it 'belongs to a time before we had learned to set ourselves apart by naming things . . . Music is the language of that state of grace we fell from and from which we never entirely fall' (*Typewriter* 49). Music is a 'counterworld,' to quote the first poem in *Earth Hour*, 'Aquarius,' which ends with reference to a 'green original anti / -Eden from which we've never been expelled' (*Earth* 1). Other oppositions exist in this latest book: haystacks are 'one side sleet, the other sun-burst yellow' (*Earth* 54); ploughing in 'At Skara Brae' a 'big wheel tilts, one moment / in sunshine, the next / in darkness six feet under' (*Earth* 57).

Malouf's comments on his own work are so incisive and so fascinating that it is tempting to just accept them, and critics generally have. The contraries treatment of oppositions tends to imply that each element of the opposition has equal weight; it seems to me that sometimes in Malouf's work they do, as in the opposition between the eternal and the quotidian, and sometimes they do not, as in the opposition between inner and outer. I want to argue that in Malouf's work it is inner being that dominates, and that this is why he is seen as a poetic novelist, and why poetry is so important to understanding his oeuvre. In the "'Narrative" Tone' essay the last opposition Malouf lists is that 'between the perceiver in that poem ['The Year of the Foxes'] and all sorts of things which are "other" – and that "other" may be the

animal world or simply some other consciousness' (Tulip 272). Malouf elaborates, saying 'the way the animal world there [i.e. in the poem] is made part of the moral perception about the human world is something . . . that I've gone back and back to' (Tulip 272). In this opposition between inner and outer worlds, between the human and the animal, the human, and thus the inner, dominates. Despite our best Ovidian efforts, we can only see the world in human terms, and moral perception is entirely human. All ethical positions come from (inner) thinking about our experience, or our possible experience. Near the end of the essay Malouf notes that his first 'little collection' was titled *Interiors*. He also asserts that the 'point of awareness' when 'objects, sensations, resolve any question of object/subject, and move from outside within' is 'where I feel I have most to discover' (Tulip 275). The rest of his work is a process of such discovery.

Of course, crucial to such discovery is language, what we 'Finally . . . come home to' (*Made* 3). Malouf seeks a 'typewriter music' [he doesn't in fact own a computer] of language, for 'The drawing / of breath and the exchange of it / for speech seems the rarest of all gifts / in our brief possession' ('Inspirations IV', *Poems 1975-76* n.p.). In many places Malouf attests to the power of literature, the most sophisticated use of language. All art is 'Pure make-believe, but played / out in the body / as events that are actual' ('Mozart to da Ponte', *Typewriter* 57) and what is imagined can be 'every bit as real, every bit as useful to us, as what we experience directly' ('Imagining the Real', Tulip 281). Reading late at Campagnatico, the title of a poem in *Typewriter Music*, Malouf finds his mind 'swings loose on a fresher track' (*Typewriter* 23). A poem in the same volume, titled "'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen,'" defies Auden's much-quoted statement by concluding with 'In our veins, slow-spreading / thunder' (*Typewriter* 21). Literature is on the one hand a 'Whistling in the Dark' but on the other a way of 'hauling infinity / in' ('Whistling in the Dark,' *Earth* 12). Addressing the crabs he is about to eat in 'The Crab Feast' he claims 'words made you / a fact in my head' (*Selected* 92). 'Fiction,' he declares in *The Happy Life*, 'can deliver truths we might not otherwise stumble on' (*Happy* 54) but as his comment in the "'Narrative" Tone' essay makes clear, this is even more true of poetry.

In reflecting on Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' Malouf insists on the importance of both words and tranquillity:

The poet makes the emotion he creates real to us now, but to him it belongs to experience that has to be called up out of the past and re-collected. What he needs for the making of it now is a quiet moment when he can be still, and, by thinking, relive what he felt as words. (*Happy* 40)

This, I think, is a key passage for understanding Malouf's work in both poetry and fiction. This stillness and inward orientation are always what his writing drives toward, and it is a move towards the use of language that proves his Mozart wrong, or at least not always right. His novels do contain narratives but they are not driven by narrative. Nor are they most notable in the Modernist way as character studies; the novels' characters do not engage in extensive social interaction, as Mozart suggests. Many, such as Dante, Adair and Digger, are awkward in social interaction, while Ovid and the assassin in *Child's Play* are forced out of it by circumstance. Malouf's characters as individuals engage in ideas in existential contemplations of the self meeting a rich and complex universe. His strengths are intellectual and lyrical. The novels' climaxes are not high points of action but the opposite; the main characters turn away from the possibilities of social interaction to achieve, or at least attempt, a state of equanimity in introversion and often in silence—the terrorist walking under apple

blossom, Ovid as he steps into ‘clear sunlight’ (*Imaginary* 150), Carney cleansing himself in the stream, Adair eating bread alone in an ‘outpouring’ of early morning light (*Conversations* 212). ‘Reading Late at Campagnatico,’ “‘Poetry Makes Nothing Happen,’” ‘Whistling in the Dark,’ ‘The Crab Feast’ and other poems present a similar experience. It is one in which imaginative language might express the uniting of ‘our divided selves,’ the one ‘in the eternal Now of being’ and the one ‘conditional on time’ and ‘place.’ It requires a language that does not ‘act’ as Mozart claims in ‘a theatre . . . all agents and events’ (*Typewriter* 48-49) but a language in a ‘state of grace’ akin to that of music. Language has its own music, a music Malouf’s Wordsworth knows of but not his Mozart. In inaction, the retreat from action, Malouf seeks a language as close to silence as language can get.

Reading and writing are, in a sense, retreats from action. Reading Horace outside Sydney Malouf finds that the shadow of a plane ‘High in the blue . . . / . . . dances in my palm’ (‘Reading Horace Outside Sydney, 1970’, *Neighbours* 50). The poem ‘Radiance’ in his new book provides versions of that state of blessing: ‘For some it is stillness,’ and the whole poem has the tone of stillness. Radiance can be ‘the silence’ the dead ‘leave / in a bowl, in a book, / that speaks and may join us’ (*Earth* 2-3). In the same book ‘the ghost of a fingerprint’ may contain ‘all / that touched us, all that we touched, still glowing actual’ (‘Toccatà’, *Earth* 6) while in ‘Dot Poem, the Connections’ we might find ‘On the breath that streams from / our mouths, a wordless out-of-the-body singing’ (*Earth* 7). These are all ‘Small miracles’ that ‘beat against stillness’ (‘Nightsong, Nightlong’, *Earth* 41), and they are explored further in the poem ‘The Rapture’ which discusses ‘The being seized / and taken,’ the sense of ‘being / swept off your feet / by your own / breath’ so that all time is ‘no longer / on your hands’ (*Earth* 46).

I use the word ‘retreat’ reluctantly because it suggests that action is our normal state, and it may be so in the modern world, but ‘retreat’ is the word Montaigne uses. In their ‘retreat’ the speakers in Malouf’s poems and the characters in his novels mentioned above (who are sometimes the speaker/narrators) resemble to some extent Horace on his Sabine farm, Michel Eyquem at Montaigne, Voltaire at Ferney—figures from the tradition that Malouf describes in his essay *The Happy Life* (*Happy* 2-3). Malouf’s characters may be seen in opposition—and this is *opposition*—to contemporary society’s ‘fear of inactivity, of stillness; most of all, of the withdrawal of every form of chatter or noise in an extended and unendurable *silence*’ (*Happy* 22). Adair wonders whether ‘what we are really committed to in our hearts is unceasing motion’ (*Conversations* 211). What they are all seeking is what Montaigne said was the ‘greatest thing in the world . . . to know how to belong to yourself’ (quoted in *Happy* 3). This, Malouf observes, is what ‘the various classical schools, the Aristotelean, the Epicurean, the Stoic, would have agreed was the highest form of happiness, but also the highest wisdom’ (*Happy* 5). Malouf notes that the ancient Greek and Roman élite had philosophical training ‘against loss of self-containment and self-sufficiency’ but that now ‘If the attainment of spiritual equanimity is a question at all, it is for the individual to pursue as a private matter’ (*Happy* 7). The only contemporary aids are religion, philosophy and literature.

Aids we do need, for Malouf seems to agree with the Graeco-Roman and Christian sense that ‘our defining quality as humans is rest-lessness, unrest’ (*Happy* 21). Montaigne said that ‘I retired to my estates, determined . . . that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, . . . calmly thinking of itself’ but ‘It bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else,’ and this is what drove him to write (‘On Idleness’, *Essays* 10).

Writing is a form of social silence but it does not exhibit the emptiness, or purity of silence. It is poets who have found value in silence and Romantic poets who have stressed recollections in tranquillity. Keats's sweeter 'unheard music' represented a silence that was a kind of perfection, not just the absence of noise, and in this he was followed by the French *Symbolistes* and by T.S. Eliot. Malouf's characters in the novels differ from the speakers in his poems and from Horace, Montaigne and Voltaire in that they do not so much choose silence as stumble into it or have it thrust upon them. However, this does not reduce the meaningfulness of their retreats or the silence they experience there. Malouf is neither a Classical figure, a Renaissance humanist nor a man of the Enlightenment, although his writing evinces some empathy with all three. He is a modern figure who thinks that we and our world are the result of 'a series of accidents' (*Happy* 43) so that we must find meaning where we can. For him 'our element' is 'a world of nine-day / wonders and other gaudies; / of road-show / rowdies in passage / from Here to Nowhere' ('Seven Faces of the Die, V', *Earth* 75). His writing takes place in the shadow of the big silence of death and 'our need / for comfort in the dark' ('A Touch of the Sun', *Earth* 78). Malouf, as I read him, is very much an agnostic: what awaits us may be transformation or it may be nothing. Mozart's last statement to da Ponte is:

What we take home
is news of transformation
—our own, and a tune to whistle
in the dark of the tomb. (*Typewriter* 58)

The paradox for the poet interested in silence is that the only way to express it is through language, but that is why the rhythms and subtleties of poetry matter to him or her. In 'Whistling in the Dark,' a poem which might be read as a response to Kenneth Slessor's 'Stars,' Malouf contemplates the stars, 'hauling infinity / in so that its silence, a stately contre-dance to numbers, / hums' (*Earth* 12). We are on 'a rogue planet tossed / into space and by wild haphazard or amazing / grace sent spinning.' Our writing might mean that 'to someone, somewhere out there,' we will be 'remembered, and fondly, when we are gone' (*Earth* 13). In the title poem of his new book Malouf declares:

We are feral
at heart, unhouseled creatures. Mind
is the maker, mad for light, for enlightenment, this late admission
of darkness the cost, and the silence
on our tongue as we count the hour down . . . (*Earth* 51)

Nevertheless, Malouf is by temperament an optimist; all his writing exhibits a sense of wonder about the world's details, its arbitrariness and fragility, a gift that might be taken from us as quickly and easily as it was given but a gift nonetheless. The round earth is a 'carnivale' and it is 'Good to be included / there' ('Seven Faces of the Die, III', *Earth* 74). What he sees, and presents in the next section of this poem, is

This side and the other
of silence: white
noise. The snowy

infinite beyond
Happens and Becomes where nothing is

to be counted on
and nothing
is accounted as loss. (*Earth* 75)

As he says in 'A Parting Word,' written 'After' Heine's 'Der Scheidende,' 'It's not / so dumb to love life' (*Earth* 31), especially on 'a planet that is all / abundance and consummate / waste and replenishment' ('Seven Faces of the Die, VII', *Earth* 77). Imaginative, contemplative and ever curious, more interested in ideas than in the world's accolades, David Malouf might be seen as the Montaigne of Chippendale where he can, hearing a Ground Thrush,

. . . stand and listen,
happy to yield
the day, the scene, the privilege of being

the one here who will embellish
the hour with all it needs, beyond
silence, of manifesto. ('An Aside on the Sublime,' *Earth* 22)

NOTES

¹ Malouf has also written one play and a number of libretti.

² James Tulip, abstract for 'First Things Last: David Malouf's commitment to poetry', David Malouf Symposium, 2013.

³ Some would make this claim for Randolph Stow also.

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