METAMORPHIC MALOUF

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One of the most appealing of David Malouf's works of the last decade is the poem 'Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian' (2003).[1] This late work meditates on last things in a very different tone from the 'Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross' that Haydn set to solemn music. Malouf's 'Seven Last Words' are playful variations on the short Latin poem attributed to Hadrian, '*Animula vagula blandula*,' in which the Emperor, dying in his body, speaks to his departing soul. Malouf adopts the tender, questioning tone of the original, a poem already loved by translators, from Donne and Pope to Marguerite Yourcenar, while stretching it further, through multiple adaptations.

Malouf's second variation is the closest to the original Latin, the most faithful, you might say, in a work that is partly about the departure of a 'lifelong companion,' the ending of a relationship (2.2). The first poem has already made that move by redefining '*animula*' (little soul) as 'soul mate' (1.1). While the soul may be the body's mate, its 'guest' (*hospes*) in a traditional line of thinking, a 'soul mate' is different—a uniquely destined friend, a life partner, a once-in-a-lifetime love, an elective affinity, real or imaginary. As 'mate' suggests, the relationship is generative, here of jokes, good times, and comfort. 'Mate,' in an Australian inflection, has the edgy affection of a seemingly unbreakable, dependent bond. To try and break it looks like the repeat of an old game or ritual, as when one of the tramps tries to leave the other in *Waiting for Godot*: 'If this is a joke, / it is old, old' (1.6-7).

As the sequence proceeds, variant names for the soul follow lightly: 'lightfoot / spirit,' 'house / mate,' 'bedfellow,' 'sweet urchin,' 'fly-by-night,' 'heart's guest,' 'my / better half,' 'solace,' 'fool,' 'my jack,' 'my jack-in-the box,' 'sweet idiot,' 'old mouse,' 'my secret / sharer,' 'poor jackanapes,' 'dear bugaboo' (3.1-3; 4.1-3, 6; 5.2, 7; 6.1-2, 8). Not very soulful ways of talking about a soul, but loving, connected, quicksilver in the changes they ring. Literary too. This soul is a Puckish figure, a jester, like Yorick, a Shakespearean fool, like the various poor fools in *Lear*. A creative partner, like Joseph Conrad's 'secret sharer,' a Beckettian familiar—suddenly making as if to go, but where, how, leaving what?

'But O, without you, my sweet nothing, / I'm dust,' is how it ends (7.9-10). Without its animating spirit, the body is dead matter. Life needs the play of two. If you 'cut / the love knot,' neither soul nor body can survive (7.2-3). There is nowhere to go. The love here is between the physical and the intellectual, a play of bound-together, necessary opposites. It is expressed as the form—poetic form—given to ideas, including the voicing of words, so delightfully here; the earthly incarnation of spirit, the 'local habitation and a name' that gives shape and body to imagination; the living human body as it needs, desires, argues, responds, plays, against the cold of death, separation, and empty abstraction: 'my hands, my tongue . . . prove to you what's real' (7.6-7).

In its awareness of art as the embodiment of an idea that cannot exist separately, even where the expression of that idea can take a teasing multiplicity of forms, as it does here, 'Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian' speaks to a central theme in David Malouf's work, while demonstrating his aesthetic at work in a virtuoso way. That theme might be called 'the many in one,' the aesthetic 'metamorphic,' deriving energy from the changes that can be made as an idea, an original, moves through different forms. The poem works through a shifting set of metaphoric substitutions, appellations for the 'you' addressed so fondly here, as the speaker—Emperor, poet, householder, the one in charge—moves through successive ways of imagining the other one, his innermost companion, unpredictable muse, enabling joker, for whom there is no other existence except in this profession.

Malouf is characteristically inventive and adventurous when it comes to literary form. Here he makes seven variant imitations, which are then shuffled into a work that moves in cumulative, crab-wise fashion to a climactic finale—'But O'—that goes beyond anything in the source. 'Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian' enacts in miniature a metamorphic process that is often at work in Malouf's writing. He has written in most genres: poems, novels, short stories, essays, memoir, a play, libretti and all kinds of invited, occasional prose. *Out of* most genres, I want to say, rather than in them, since so many of these works play against their category and resist pigeonholing. The essays move in and out of memoir; the stories and novels have meditative paragraphs and the logic of poetry; prose appears with poems that are both imagistic and discursive; criticism reaches to other art forms, and to cultural analysis; the libretti turn classic fiction into words for contemporary music. In this environment, unity becomes less a matter of form than conceptual and self-defining, with a passing nod over the shoulder to tradition. 'I learned really to shape a novel the way I'd learned to shape a poem,' Malouf told Helen Daniel in an interview at the time of publication of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, '… the books therefore having a kind of poetical structure in that kind of way, or musical, if one wanted to say that' (Daniel 10).

The musical reference is important because it points to a place where language cannot go, or will be supplanted by a different kind of language to express things that words seem only able to gesture at. These might be the sensations of a child, of pre-consciousness, monstrosity, or emotion at an extreme. It might be the experience of those whose language we don't understand. These are spaces or states that this writer's imagination is drawn to inhabit. The composer's domain is one of these too, a subject explored in 'Mozart to da Ponte,' a sequence that mixes prose and verse. Malouf's Mozart looks to the 'impossible union' of words and music as 'a gesture towards the reconciling of our divided selves,' but also knows that music, being free and eternal, will betray the collaboration through its 'feeling for the dark' (against the librettist's brilliance) and its need to 'speak for some other, deeper action' than the one embodied in words (Malouf 2007, 48, 55-6).

Malouf says modestly in relation to his own libretto for *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (1993), subtitled *A Jungle Tale*, an adaptation of Kipling's story combined with elements of *The Jungle Book*, for an opera with music by Michael Berkeley, that a 'libretto is . . . the ghost of a work that is still to be born . . . but one hopes a lively one . . . on tip-toe as it were to catch from the realm of music news of its life to come' (Malouf 1993, vii). That life is beyond language, though dependent on it and shaped by it, as body is to soul. There is a reversal here: the realisation, the incarnation, is more vital than the idea which gives rise to it. The *occasion* of the realisation is what matters. By

analogy, it is in the occasional nature of so much of his writing that Malouf performs most transcendently, in ultimate freedom from the constraints of genre.

Opera has something to do with this: opera, the most mixed, most heterogeneric, most monstrous of art forms. As Opera Australia quotes its longtime board member at the top of its website:

> Opera is at every moment a test of an Olympian kind. That so many individuals come together each night to try and meet it is a wonder of one kind. That it is, in fact, so often met, is little short of a miracle: precarious, unlikely, but sometimes, just sometimes, when all the forces are in harmony, manageable – a matter of chemistry, but also of supreme effort, and happy chance, and grace.

The author has long been a keen, informed, opinionated opera-goer. He wrote the libretto for *Voss*, adapted from Patrick White's novel, with music by Richard Meale, premiered in Adelaide in 1986 in a production by Jim Sharman.[2] *Voss*, the opera, is surely now the Australian opera most in need of revival. It was followed by *Mer de Glace*, Malouf's second libretto for Richard Meale, based on the story of Frankenstein (both book and monster), which premiered at the Sydney Opera House in 1991.[3] Malouf's other two libretti, both for composer Michael Berkeley, are *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (1993), mentioned above, and *Jane Eyre* (2000).

Malouf has written about opera on various occasions, and it provides a frequent reference in his work. In his fiction he has turned to classical stories, as librettists and composers have so often done, feeling the pull of those stark situations and intense, concentrated emotions, as he has also felt the adaptor's necessary freedom to depart from the original. In an essay on Barry Kosky's controversial production of Verdi's *Nabucco* for Opera Australia in 1995, Malouf writes that, as members of the opera audience, we understand 'what, if we are to experience it with any sort of freshness, we will need, sometimes playfully, to translate. The only rule is that we should try, as far as possible, to be true to the spirit of the original, especially when to stick to the letter is a dance of death' (Malouf 1995, 36).

In this qualified defence of artistic licence, we find another variation on the complex relationship between spirit and the changeable forms it can take. Here it takes on a moral urgency. The spirit lives in change, and change needs the space for play, understood as the possibility, through re-interpretation, of finding a way to the truth of the original as it is newly grasped.

Speaking of what Verdi found in Shakespeare, Malouf describes

> an inwardness that can be expressed in music that is subjective in its appeal; not declamatory but explorative, not the elaboration of a single emotion in vocal play that directs attention to the performer, and by extension to the composer, but a music of self-analysis that makes performance an expression of the singer's own subjectivity and leads us deep into the character's life, so that only when the spell is broken do we recall who it is, composer and performer, that has made all this available to us. (Malouf 1995, 37)

What is fascinating in this passage is the transfer or fusion of self-revelation between the various participants, as aspects or layers: the music's 'self-analysis' allows the singer's 'subjectivity' to

be performed, which then uncovers 'the character's life.' But there is an illusion here, exposed, 'when the spell is broken,' as an effect of art that reveals only what we spectators have found in ourselves. It is as if the complexity of the artistic set-up, the multi-facetedness of the art form, has enabled a mirror effect, a sequence of metamorphic self-reflections.

Malouf writes sensitively, in relation to *Nabucco*'s story of the liberation of the Jewish people from Babylonian captivity, that Verdi's deep response comes in recognition of it as a proxy for 'another nation [his own, Italy] that was also enslaved and in exile in its own divided and humiliated self' (Malouf 1995, 37). The language fuses political and psychological, outer and inner, as Verdi's opera does. Malouf is aware that this opera is also 'divided,' between the very finest things and the most ridiculous and unworkable, its legacy from a world of melodrama, blood sport and extravaganza.

The appeal of opera lies partly in this capacity to transform flesh, greasepaint and base appetite into something miraculous, at considerable risk of failure. In the case of Kosky's *Nabucco*, that transformation is helped by the director's imagination as he turns this unwieldy material into a 'mind-theatre,' a dream space, in terms that Malouf, the writer, surely recognises:

> . . . the images Kosky chooses . . . are disturbing because we recognise their power, their rightness, without knowing what they 'mean'. And as in dreams they may be drawn from anywhere; anywhere that feeling has visited in such a way that ordinary objects and events have developed a mysterious glow of another significance, have been transformed in the light of a personal, though not necessarily private, anxiety. (Malouf 1995, 38)

Malouf could be describing his own approach of metamorphic assemblage, in which dream logic paradoxically creates order from chaotic materials, a new consciousness emerging in the process.

In his most extended essay on opera, Malouf emphasises its paradoxes: 'this most artificial of all dramatic forms speaks for what is most natural in us; . . . this latest and arguably most over-civilised of forms puts us in touch with the primitive [. . .] and releases the most naked emotions in us' (Malouf 1991, 26). For him opera is a way of moving back behind civilised social and rational existence to experience the 'dark places in ourselves,' 'deeper selves than consciousness knows,' where 'boundaries of place and language' dissolve. It is an effect of the moment, in which opposing impulses are felt simultaneously, as in a great duet or ensemble, 'these "free" moments when real and dramatic time come to a halt,' something neither poetry 'in one voice' nor the 'linear restriction of narrative' can achieve, says Malouf, explaining his attraction to opera (Malouf 1991, 26-29). It is an attraction to an idea of opera's effects, which, in fact, he realises in other ways in his multiform writings. At the centre of Malouf's conception of opera is breath, the sign of life, and here the literal challenge that faces the singer and thrills the audience when managed in defiance of human limitation: 'a virtuoso physical exercise that is at the same time an expression—one of the most intense imaginable—of spirit.' In this metamorphosis, experienced in the audience's bodies in 'a physical response that has to do with our own breath as well as the singer's, an apprehension of what breath is, and stands for, in both cases; it is spirit that is expressing itself' (Malouf 1991, 25-26). Breath (Latin: *spiritus*) and spirit are, as anciently, one, where what is expressed is 'a world we know . . . from dreams,' a regressive 'letting go of the social and critical part of our consciousness,' for these intensified moments. Such too are the

themes of Malouf's fiction, as the titles of two short story collections suggest, *Dream Stuff* (2000) and *Every Move You Make* (2006), with its echo of Sting's 1983 song 'Every Breath You Take.'

A striking discussion of opera occurs in a passage in the novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) where we are given the character of the protagonist Adair, an Irish-born officer who finds himself in remote Australia sitting vigil with a convict revolutionary who is sentenced to die in the morning. It is an operatic situation, and Adair is the son of 'professional opera-singers.' He 'had a horror of disorder, and when he had a horror of a thing it was usually, he found, because he had discovered it so plainly in himself.' That disorder, that tendency to surrender to the pleasure of dreams, he attributes to his 'operatic inheritance,' which leaves him, in 'his secret and sensual life,' with a fascination 'with dirt.' His sense of order and restraint is a compensatory way of containing this. In the 'rage for self-destruction' that opera depicts, Adair finds a reflection of himself (Malouf 1996, 34-36):

> He told himself it was a hoax, all elaborate illusionism; that the costumes which appeared so fine had sweat-stains at the armpits and were soiled and worn, that under the greasepaint the singers were sweating like ordinary citizens and were the same dyed-haired, loud-tongued crew who, after the performance, would come tumbling into the dirty little tavern opposite. . . . The moment the lime-lights flared and the velvet curtain went up, these sordid figures . . . were transformed, and what in their lives was crude and shameful, unruly, unredeemable even, was raised, as the music gave shape to it, to ineffable order and beauty – but only insofar as the music did find a shape for it, and only so long as they moved in a world beyond themselves to give it body and a voice. (Malouf 1996, 36-37)

The metamorphosis here is provisional and temporary, its shape provided by the composer and that part of the performers that can find in themselves a capacity for the different discipline of art. A change in the medium, from life to stage, enables an idea to find a new kind of 'body and voice.' In that sense it is physical, carnal, a this-worldly redemption, the possibility of which is one of Malouf's central concerns. It is beyond morality and outside law or social norms, and ultimately beyond language, except the riddling, visionary language of art, which finds its purpose in pointing to what can be experienced imaginatively but never entirely explained. Part of its irrationality lies in the complicit knowledge that the other side of art is dirt. That is the basic metamorphosis. 'What if [your "true" nature] is monstrous?' Adair writes to Virgilia, his soul mate, concerned that no amount of self-restraint can control the deepest, most extreme human impulses:

> a force that takes no heed of what is evil or good or kind or lawful, . . . but springs from something further back in us, more obscure, more ancient than the law and all our world of carriage-lamps and roast meat and shaving water; speaks the language of cruelty that we dream in, the language of blood-passion and blood revenge that drives our vocal acrobats to the highest notes in their range and takes them beyond themselves into regions where other rules apply than nature knows or our anxious law-givers. (Malouf 1996, 38-39)

A place of raw emotion, primitive needs, risk, an area of dark dreams—which in the novel becomes conflated with colonial Australia, an emergent society where the consequences of such violent self-expression must be reckoned with.

Malouf notes as one of the paradoxes of opera that it administers a dangerous drug 'in modest doses between the rise of a curtain and its dusty fall,' the drug of illusionism, yes, and also of wild imaginings, to audiences who might not want that much unreality in daily life (Malouf 1996, 37). The same is true of other art forms, especially those where language is supplemented by a more corporeal, more sensual world of sound and sight; where words, and ideas, powerfully mutate, as they merge into a larger effect. Theatre is another example, which, like opera, depends on the audience to work, as is orchestral music. That is the next stage in the metamorphosis, as an audience forms in its shared responses, and people are changed in the process. Malouf argued for the value of such occasions in the Nugent Report on the Major Performing Arts companies in 1999. They 'are high energy events; they raise our energy level, and we take this energy back into our lives' (Malouf 1999, 94). In 'Being There,' Malouf identifies such live and communal experience as a necessary part of civic, urban existence—'to share as fellow-citizens an experience that is only available in the big city, as unique a product of our civilisation as the skyscraper or the cantilever bridge,' where 'our' is at once proudly local and cosmopolitan. 'We have all to be there . . . to take part in the moment of risk' if 'miracles' are to be performed. Orchestras, in this case, are identified with their cities: 'Being in the hall with the orchestra playing gives me as keen a sense of what it is like to live in Sydney as the view from South Head when the yachts are running or the surf at Bondi' (Malouf, 29 Oct – 4 Nov 1988, 4).

At the end of the first of his Boyer Lectures, which were aptly titled *A Spirit of Play: The making of Australian consciousness* (1998), Malouf imagines the audience for a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part One* in Sydney on 8 April 1800, in the very early years of the colony. 'An audience,' he tells us,

> is a little society of its own, reconstituted at each performance inside the larger one, and mostly outside its control. Not a mob, but a cohesive unity, with its own interests and loyalties, but unpredictable and therefore dangerous. And this must have been especially true of this audience, composed as it was of convicts and their guards but in convict hands. Fascinating to wonder how far such an audience might constitute the beginnings of an integrated community, one in which, given the differences . . . a various crowd could nonetheless become one.

He observes that *Henry IV Part One* 'must have had a special appeal' with its 'tavern underworld of sublime exuberance . . . every sort of high principle roundly mocked. . . . An extraordinary achievement, and so early in the piece, this alternative stage for action, this exercise in audience-making, society-shaping in the spirit of play. But risky. Dangerous' (Malouf 1998, 23-24).

The democracy of an audience, engaged in a common activity yet taking instructions from no one, is a metamorphic power here, in which many become one and subversive impulses are acknowledged and contained. It doesn't always work. It is vulnerable to manipulation, to the sway of conformity or misguided populism. It is always in a sense unfinished, liable to go off in another, unpredictable direction.

Malouf's work has been like that too. It has not stayed still, even as it has moved in expanding and returning arcs. He has often spoken of his work as a body that is extended and redefined, but in a coherent way, by each additional part. 'I've become more and more interested [in . . .] the way when [a new] book comes along it in some way amplifies or changes the other books. . . . if you think of your work as being like a house, each new work is going into a different room of that house, which will offer a different aspect . . . of a landscape that is somewhere surrounding, and will be both different and familiar,' he told Helen Daniel in 1996, for example (Daniel 11). That house is quite big by now, with lots of windows, and a lot of different landscapes around it. It takes some imagining. Its unity is perceptual. Like the early audience for *Henry IV Part One* in Sydney, it instantiates the many in one, for a moment, on a particular occasion. It also lets us appreciate the precariousness of that unity, its subjectivity, its transience, its seeming repetition, its managed effects. That its occasional nature allows the perception of oneness is a further paradox. No other Australian writer is more radical than Malouf in artistic nimbleness. His metamorphic fluidity, his continuing experiment across forms and modes, make him unique.

To take a little further the suggestion that each new work reinterprets the work that has gone before it, you will note that I've drawn here on Malouf's occasional writings, which, in my view, contain some of his best prose and most eloquent insights. We await the extension to the house that makes available this very substantial body of writing—lectures, talks, reviews, essays, conversations, journalism, on just about everything under the sun, under the author's wide-ranging eye. There we find yet another David Malouf, not a patched-together Frankenstein's monster, rather a valuable, energising guide to his work, taken as one.

NOTES

[1] Malouf, David, '*Animula*', *Southerly*, 63.1 (2003), 7-8; 'Seven Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian', *Typewriter Music*, St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007, 25-28. Line numbers refer to the version reprinted in Nicholas Jose (ed.) *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009, 842-4.
[2] For an account of this process, see Malouf, 19–25 November 1988; see also Halliwell, 2001.
[3] McQueen, 1991, critically discusses the premiere production.

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