

DAVID MALOUF AT EIGHTY

IHAB HASSAN

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

This festschrift honours David Malouf on his eightieth birthday, and wishes him many happy returns of the decade.

A timely text is mindful of the passing years but also of many things that grace our lives. Things like friendship, the friendship, in this case, of old age, when youth has lost its incandescence, and men and women walk side by side, less burdened by their illusions and needs.

I met David Malouf in the last week of the old millennium; he was sixty six; I was seventy five. Leave the personal affinities to chemistry. What's apposite here is that I recognised a great writer, first on reading him many years ago; and I perceived a remarkable human being, shortly after meeting him.

The alliance of high artistic achievement with charm, humour, and probity is among the rarest of gifts. Who had it? Chekhov, Kafka, Beckett (whose charm was austere)? I don't speak of saintliness; I speak of a life seriously lived, both in and out of art, and also of a certain ease, a certain lightness of being in the world. For there's no ponderousness in Malouf—all that heaviness that comes with ego, all that vain weight—there's only dignity.

The first book I read by David Malouf was *An Imaginary Life*, and I've never felt closer to a novel since my teens. That's another way of saying that I wished I could have written that work. I reread it continually, as millions do, to rediscover myself in that exile we all suffer as we wander in our own Dacia, alone in the vast, unspeakable scheme of things.

As to our first real-life meeting—but isn't art real?—it took place at the swank Rockpool Restaurant. My wife, Sally Hassan, and I had arrived early. David arrived punctually, stood erect at the door surveying the room, and proceeded to our table—following his writer's instinct—without help from the staff. Since then, our conversation has never flagged. Since then, Sally's and my interest in all things Australian has continued to accrue. David was our cicerone and antipodean lodestar.

*

Still, it would be bumptious of me to speak to this audience about the signal importance of David Malouf as an Australian writer. You know all the books and interviews; you know the prizes, the portraits, the kudos, and the burnished brass plaques. But why think of him only as an Australian writer? His prizes are international; his books are read in many languages. I did not pick up *An Imaginary Life* because its author's name sounded Middle Eastern, and I didn't put it back on the shelf because his first name was Christian rather than Muslim. Doesn't great literature, in stories even before the *Iliad*, dissolve the paradox of the general and particular in our imaginary lives?

Consider how Malouf deals with his native Brisbane in the essay called ‘A First Place.’ This piece pushes out from a child’s body—hiding sometimes beneath the floor planks of the house—touches the walls and roof, and moves out toward the hilly city, carved sinuously by its disorienting river, out toward the hoop-pines in the distance, then farther out still, toward the horizon of human awareness. This particular first place—a first place, mind you, not *the* Garden of Eden—is nonetheless the place from which a writer’s imagination begins to expand till it encompasses the whole landscape of the universe.

As Malouf stretches out to take in Brisbane, we encounter all the common elements of our own lives: inner and outer space, alienation and intimacy, the secrets of identity, the mysteries of sexuality, and language, always language—all emanating from ‘a landscape and its houses.’ Thus, in a child’s itinerary, from physical sensations to maps of reality, we read the ineluctable journey of the artist, a parable of the local aspiring to the global, of a child-like intuition growing into a world literature.

Malouf’s parable, however, honours the cracks in creation, all the differences of human kind. ‘It might be time,’ he suggests, ‘to forget likeness and look closely at the many varieties of difference we now exhibit, to let notions of what is typically Australian lapse for a time. . . .’ This was written back in 1985, when most of us were still cutting our teeth on multiculturalism.

We all know the consummate ability of the artist to touch the nerve of every Joe and Mary while engaging the ethos of an age. But we sometimes forget that this ability inheres to language itself. (Neurologically, a baby starts as a citizen of the world until a particular language begins to speak him or her.) Malouf’s short work, ‘The Only Speaker of His Tongue,’ helps us to perceive the point.

In the story, a Norwegian lexicographer meditates on the plight of an Aboriginal labourer, who is the last speaker of his language group. With this particular man’s death, dies not only a system of sounds; a whole portion of reality will also disappear, a whole history and segment of lived time. Here is how the narrator puts it:

It is a mystery of the deep past [this death of a language], but also of now. We recapture on our tongue, when we first grasp the sound and make it, the same word in the mouths of our long dead fathers, whose blood we move in and whose blood still moves in us. Language *is* that blood.

To speak, then, is to address times past and times present, and to address the wide world. That is abstractly true. But only an artist, an artist like Malouf, knows how to speak to us about large things in the ‘dirt of private fact,’ as William James once put it.

*

The ‘private fact’ in no way crimps the range of David Malouf. His work remains delightfully various, as inward with the shimmering landscapes of Australia (*Fly Away Peter*) as with the shadowy corners of European history (*Child’s Play*). To this last novella, I now advert to suggest a different aspect of his imagination.

Set in Italy during the years of the Red Brigade, *Child's Play* probes masterfully the penumbras of the terrorist mind—I mean, of course, the human mind—and in doing so rises above the squalid facts of its occasion. Its appeal is as unbounded as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Mann's *Death in Venice*; in artistry, it equals them; I marvel that it has received no wider attention.

The title tips us off: can the terrorist obey the logic of a child at play rather than the constraints of a religious or political fanatic? Can he or she escape self-delusion, self-corruption? The answer is complex. Narrated in the first person—hence sympathetically—by a young male terrorist, the story takes us through wonderfully rendered details to a fatal moment, the assassination of a preeminent man of letters, simply called the Master. This act, though, is not merely political, which is to say local; it is spiritual as well, hence universal.

Arrogantly, the narrator concludes that self-transcendence, in conventional religious terms, has become obsolete. For him, the modern hero is not the ascetic, not the saint, but the gamester—in Germany, it was the terrorist as *Gaukler* or mountebank—not the monk. 'The image I prefer,' he says, 'is that of the sportsman, living day after day, in every nerve of his body, in every fibre of his will, with an *event*. . . .' Such perverse paragons live in isolation with the splendid abstractions of their hermetic ideal.

The idea is almost beguiling: the terrorist as wayward child or ephebic metaphysical clown, or as romantic hero after Chateaubriand—whom the narrator warmly cites—exercising his 'self-willed faculties' gratuitously upon himself and the world. What luxury, we want to cry, what corruption of the intellect in affluent societies! That boy has read too much! But wait: isn't this the human impulse of absolute freedom active in every clime, transgressing all limits, including death? Doesn't the child at play annihilate reality?

Literature entraps this young terrorist in still another way: the title *Child's Play* is also the title of the Master's 'Work in Progress,' the last scherzo of his great themes. The interplay of titles is uncanny. At every turn, the Master's work affects his assassin's mind, guides his murderous hand, so much so that at the end the narrator admits, 'I was looking for *him*. I ought all the time to have been seeking myself.' But it is too late and the grisly deed is botched. Both the Master and his innocent daughter—is innocence relevant here?—fall in the line of fire. The killer ignominiously staggers away. The game seems fated by needs ultimately inexplicable.

There's more to say about this weird novella—concerning, for instance, the presumptions of the European mind and the influence of art—but we need to recover our central theme: Malouf's at-homeness in Australia and the world. (Once, my wife and I were strolling with him in Lucca, a small town in Tuscany, when an Australian tourist spotted him and cried out happily, 'David Malouf!'; the author smiled without breaking his stride.) Indeed, though he is an Australian author of Lebanese extraction, who has set the pace for writers down under, Malouf also serves as a measure of literary value everywhere.

*

I adduce but one example of this last assertion. In the English-speaking world, in America especially, pop culture has invaded all the arts, packed in bits and bytes. This fact need not signal catastrophe: high art has always refreshed itself at the sources of popular culture. But the trend

seems to have helped to trivialise the idea of literature itself—and accentuate the author’s levity. How so?

A genre has popped on the scene that could be called the Look-Ma-No-Hands-School-of-Writing, nurtured lovingly by MFA Programs from sea to shining sea. It is bright, jivy, whacko, wonky, snarky, and suicidally inventive. It winks continually at pop, especially movies, television, rock music, and digital games; beyond ‘cool,’ it aspires to be ‘awesome.’ In this genre, good writing is mainly conceived as the effort to escape, Houdini-like, from a Mosler safe, bound by tungsten chains, crouching between a lesbian vampire and an autistic werewolf. The genre reverts, ‘sort of,’ to the sad and hugely gifted David Foster Wallace, and counts several writers of indisputable talent among its practitioners. But is that writing truly great?

Enter—or, rather, exit—David Malouf, who will have none of it.

Instead of high jinx, he offers grace and intelligence and craft. He gives us the gleams and tremors of existence, and the impression of knowing the intricacies of the heart. He parades an array of characters whose emotions have not been worn smooth with triteness. Above all, he offers the quality of original and indelible humanity, which I am at a loss to define. Is it to do with love, hope, and charity, to misquote Corinthians? Does it spring from some childlike innocence that would bring a smile to the lips of William Blake? Or does it draw on some ancient poetic power, fit for this time and all times?

*

I approach the end of my remarks. With poetry Malouf began, to poetry he has returned without ransoming his fiction from all who hold it dear. But then, wasn’t his work radically poetic throughout and from the start? We need to give the last word to the poet; for his most recent poems are as strong and troubling as any he has written. Easily, almost in an off-handed way, they reach for the core of silence, deep layers of experience, attainable only by a distinctive, sometimes broken, music of words. I offer a poem, titled ‘Aquarius II,’ though it might have been called ‘Prospero in the Antipodes.’

Aquarius II

Swimming through space
this morning with the light of the Pacific
on three walls and a feathery

pink in the sky as of an angel
event. Time that can be
the devil on occasions,

in weather such as this seems bountiful, pure
gift with nothing to pay, one breath
then the next freely delivered—at least for now

and here. Elsewhere the world

kindles and quakes, women bear
on their heads a hodful of it

from one side to the other of the globe, children cram
their belly with its mud,
in a lakeside wood

anemones feel their way out of the dark
and the first four downward
notes of K.581 take a second breath and swing

companionably upward—sheer miracle
or happy accident, one, like us,
of many. With a quiet thankyou to the planet

for snow, hoop-pines, Mozart,
and you of course, and you, I leave the room
to its play, sacred perhaps, with salt and sun-motes.

Content, now the little drummer has made his ado, and fax
and fiddle have had their say, to call it
a night, call it a day.