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Leer, Martin Hugo

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At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf

THERE is a passage in David Malouf's *Johnno* where the adolescent narrator muses upon the very full address which he, like Stephen Dedalus¹ and schoolchildren all over the world, has written on the fly-leaf of his exercise books: 'Arran Avenue, Hamilton, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, the World'. Queensland is 'a joke' and about Australia he asks,

Why Australia? What is Australia anyway?

The continent itself is clear enough, burned into my mind on long hot afternoons in the Third Grade when I learned to sketch in its irregular coastline: the half-circle of the Great Australian Bight, the little booted foot of Eyre's Peninsula, Spencer's Gulf down to Port Philip . . .

. . . I know the outline; I know the names (learned painfully for homework) of several dozen capes, bays, promontories, and can trace in with a dotted line the hopeless journeys across it of all the great explorers, Sturt, Leichhardt, Bourke and Wills. But what is beyond that is a mystery. It is what begins with the darkness at our back door. Too big to hold in the mind! I think my way out a few steps into it and give up on the slopes of a Mount Hopeless that is just over the fence in the vacant allotment next door. Australia is impossible! Hardly worth thinking about!²

Australia is a mere outline with darkness at its centre: a void. In this Malouf's narrator's map recalls the imaginary maps of other Australian writers: Patrick White's in *Voss* and elsewhere, A. D. Hope's in 'Australia', Christina Stead's in the epigraph to *For Love Alone* and in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Randolph Stow's 'definition' of Australia in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* as an 'Anglo-Celtic vacuum in the South Seas'. Australia-as-an-outline is a trope in Australian literature, though not without foundation in the real map of the continent (with its uneven demographic distribution). Malouf's use of this trope is somewhat ironical, but most of all he is concerned with a different level of 'reality': This is a map of the imagination, a topography of the mind, of the self—or that aspect of the self which involves nationality. It is a map 'burned into' the narrator's mind which affects not only the way he thinks about Australia, but the way he sees his own position in the universe, in space and time. Malouf's writings, as Martin Duwell has pointed out,³ are really all about the 'self'—an entity comprising the

1. cf. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 15ff.

2. David Malouf, *Johnno* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1976), pp. 52ff.

3. Martin Duwell, 'Malouf: An Educated Life', *Weekend Australian Magazine* 18-19 July, 1981, p. 10.

subconscious and the conscious, imagination and memory. Geography is one of Malouf's main ways of conceptualizing these various aspects of his self.

Maps abound in his novels, short stories and poems as do photographs (maps of the moment), geographical images and geometric figures of various kinds. Whereas the narrator of *Johnno* is faced with the vastness of Australia in 'the vacant allotment next door', the persona of the early poem 'At My Grandmother's' is caught in the claustrophobic 'underwater world' of his grandmother's sitting-room. As elsewhere in his poetry and prose Malouf is here trying to delineate the relationship between time and space under extreme, but by no means extraordinary conditions. In his grandmother's room time and space have run together to a standstill in the horror of death, a nightmarish *nature morte*:

... where time like water
was held in the wide arms of a gilded clock,
and my grandmother, turning in the still Sargasso
of memory, wound out her griefs and held
a small boy prisoner to weeds and corals
while summer leaked its daylight through his head.

I feared that room: the parrot screeching soundless
in its dome of glass, the faded butterflies
like jewels pinned against a sable cloak. . . .

The claustrophobic room and the infinite void are extremes of Malouf's vision. They appear in many guises in his work, but it is tempting to see them as somehow reflecting the extremes of Australia: the inland desert and the sea (or perhaps Great Barrier Reef?) against which the continent is outlined. Both are equally uninhabitable, but between them is a narrow strip of land where a precarious though sometimes even idyllic kind of life is possible. Much as this might be seen as a graphic description of the national, political, even ecological predicament of Australians, however, the basic features of the map have almost universal validity for Malouf. It is his map of the *condition humaine*.

Malouf is concerned with what one might call the 'space-time of the self', not so much with the basic 'givers' of the individual psyche as with their constantly changing aspect. Hence more traditional psychoanalytical approaches ultimately fail to come to terms with his writings. Malouf's topography of the psyche seems to reject the Freudian iceberg image of conscious and subconscious. It is more concerned with outer and inner than with upper and lower, more concerned with perception and more conscious of its own language as a means of perception. The psyche, like Australia, is seen as an outline on a map. Moreover, it is displaced, Antipodean; things have been turned on their head, taken apart and reassembled.

But the basic 'givens' are there. 'All the time is eternally present' to Malouf⁴ as to Eliot and the modern physicist. All the events in time, in our life, are there for

4. Jim Davidson, Interview with David Malouf, first published in *Meanjin*, 39 (Oct. 1980); repr. in Davidson, *Sideways from the Page*, (Melbourne: Fontana, 1983), p. 276.

us to discover as we go along, though by no means by a linear progression. We may discover things years before or years after we realize their meaning. So all discovery is really rediscovery. Malouf is not interested in the power of the human mind to create something new and startling, but in the sharp shock of *dējā vu*: those moments when we realize the meaning of something that was always lurking in the back of our minds, but only becomes conscious when we see it in its true place in the pattern of things. Discovery and artistic creation are two sides of the same process, a process of recognition. Suddenly we remember forgotten experiences and events because we are brought face to face with them again in something apparently unrelated. In effect we have met a part of ourselves which we did not realize was there. Thus in the poem 'Early Discoveries' the persona's memories of his displaced grandfather as lord of an almost prelapsarian garden suddenly fall into place when he discovers the Mediterranean cultural tradition to which his grandfather—a Lebanese migrant—and his garden belonged:

... Where am I? This is Brisbane, our back yard. We let him
garden here behind a lattice wall. This house is ours
and home. He comes like a stranger, warrior-moustachioed,

un-Englished. These days I find him at all turns. One morning early
in Chios, I raise the shutter, and his garden, re-discovered, shines:
cucumbers, spinach, trellised vines

There is confusion of continents on several levels in this poem, like several layers of superimposed film: the little boy's perplexed awareness that his grandfather's garden somehow does not belong in Brisbane, the adult persona's re-discovery of his childhood Eden on an island in the Mediterranean, and the grandfather's view of the plot behind the lattice wall:

... This is his garden,
a valley in Lebanon; you can smell the cedars on his breath
... He rolls furred sage between

thumb and stained forefinger, sniffs the snowy hills. . . .
... He has never quite migrated.

the weather in his head still upside-down as out of season
snow falls from his eyes on Queensland's green, and January's
midwinter still. These swelling suns are miracles. . . .

The moment when the persona raises the shutter, two continents and two presents merge. In Jung's phrase 'the archetype has been brought to consciousness', though perhaps it is a cultural rather than a psychological archetype. But to me this moment suggests a parallel with Marcel Proust's idea of 'involuntary memory' rather than Jungian psychosynthesis. It is a moment of suspended time, like the ones of which Proust says that he 'experienced them at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt

whether I was in the one or the other'.⁵ It is a moment where one of those jars in which past and future time is stored breaks open and suffuses the present with its atmosphere; where a single detail may suggest a lost paradise: a bird of passage from another world (*Fly Away Peter*) or, in the middle of a field, a scarlet poppy reminiscent of childhood (*An Imaginary Life*).

However, what encroaches upon the persona's present 'self' in 'Early Discoveries' is not just a moment, an image of his past self, but another hemisphere of his self. He must undertake a reappraisal of the present, re-trace his map of reality in the light not only of his personal history, but of his grandfather's as well. He is sent on a journey back in family history, from the New World to the Old, emerging renewed through contact with elemental things like earth, sun, vegetables. Malouf in his own writing follows a similar movement 'forward and back' to the one he sees as characteristic of Proust.⁶ But it is a movement in place as well as in time, even if the two are to a large extent inseparable.

Australia, Malouf has said, 'produces critical variants of Europe'.⁷ The vast majority of Australians are still of European descent and they belong to European civilization. However, the old notion that Australia was merely an 'ugly' or 'clumsy' or 'second-hand' version of Europe is wrong. It is not merely Europe 'transported', but Europe 'translated'. So Malouf is not a whole-hearted adherent of the so-called 'germ theory' of the development of New World culture—that Europeans brought their minds and their habits of thought with them and these were the matrix of the new society, basically unchanged by the new environment. The word 'translated' suggests that these habits of thought and culture have to be rendered into another environmental language. This has been done with striking effects, Malouf says, and points to the 'translation' of Victorian architecture:

in plonking, for example, the great Renaissance palace that is the Treasury Buildings in Brisbane on that mangrove-strewn river-bank something is said about the pretensions of the Victorians, something about the pretensions of Europeans, and something about the way Australia, just by putting it in the wrong place produces an almost surrealist effect which makes one look at the whole thing again.⁸

This 'looking at the whole thing again' is central to Malouf's idea of 'translation', indeed it would seem to his whole vision of the world. The narrator's imaginary map of Australia in *Johnno* and the still life of the grandmother's chamber of horrors, even the grandfather's garden are similarly surrealist, the results of similar 'translations' in Malouf's ancestral European-Levantine consciousness: His father's family came to Brisbane in the 1880's from the Christian hill-town of Zahle in the Lebanon; his mother's family (of

5. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 3: *Time Regained*, transl. Moncrieff and Kilmartin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 903.

6. Malouf, 'Proust: the Man and the Book', *Scripsi* (Spring 1983), pp. 103-12.

7. Davidson, pp. 267ff.

8. Davidson, p. 267.

Sephardic Jewish origin) came out in 1913 from the very different world of upper middle class Edwardian London.

Malouf writes from a background which was probably more unusual in his generation than it would be after the post-War mass immigration to Australia from Southern Europe and the Levant. His view of the world is much influenced by the geographic accident of his birth-place: There is, he claims, something 'accidental' about growing up in Australia, a constant awareness that one could have been 'somewhere else', a feeling of 'alternatives that got shut out'. This experience of 'alternatives', though common enough in colonial and post-colonial phases of culture, was made keener for Malouf as 'something also happened to language in my case: my grandparents spoke either Arabic or French, but not much English, so I was aware very early that a particular word, the English word, did not necessarily attach itself to a particular object'. Hence, probably, his 'translation' theory of Australian culture: he came to see language as variable, different 'translations' of an actual original existing in spheres of their own, independent of, but still reflecting the original. Such awareness has led him to notice, more than most, the incongruities of the 'Europes' that had been 'translated' to Australia:

... none of it, however beautiful it may be, quite fits in with the natural environment. Everything we have made in Australia is an absolutely conscious attempt to construct an environment which does not grow naturally out of the landscape.⁹

This rather extreme view pervades Malouf's attempt at delineating a starting point in *Johnno* and the early collections of poetry. Because Australia, unlike the United States, has developed no strong unifying myth 'you can tie your experience to'—Malouf has argued—every artist must create his or her own. He himself has engaged in a mythologizing of all the objects and sensations surrounding the growth of his poet's mind. In Malouf's early work, as Jim Davidson has noted, there is a feeling of a great density of material which is partly an attempt to fill what is conceived of as a void, but which is also by its very density felt as an obstruction.¹⁰ There is on the one hand the vastness of Australia—the 'Great Australian Emptiness', condensed in 'the vacant allotment next door', and on the other the dead mementoes of another world cluttering the grandmother's room.

The grandmother's room is a museum of a less innocent kind than the narrator's mother's in *Johnno* ('My mother was one of the great collectors. Her dressing-table was the Library of Alexandria, a suburban V. and A.')

¹¹ The older woman has a hint of the witch about her, and her room—shuttered against the outside world, the 'envenomed' leaves and bright sunlight of Brisbane—more than suggests death in the refusal to come to terms with the new land. The

9. On Malouf's idea of 'alternatives' see Michel Fabre, 'Roots and Imagination: an interview with David Malouf', *Commonwealth* (Rodez), 4 (1979-80), pp. 56-67.

10. Davidson, p. 265.

11. *Johnno*, p. 6

grandmother attempts to live by the 'underwater' time of the gilded clock and to keep her grandson in her web of memories (eternally 'winding out' his 'blood') along with the family photographs of children 'playing at hoop and ball' in another time and another place. Here a translation has fossilized and represents for the boy not just an obstruction, but a prison.

The grandfather, on the other hand, represents a much milder, and a beautiful, version of the refusal to come to terms with Australia, without any of the overtones of spider-like predatoriness. He belongs to a first generation of migrants for whom it is impossible to become Australian, but he does not attempt to 'kill' the sunlight leaking into the boy's head. The violence in him belongs to another land, his blood-feuds are not with grandchildren.

Unlike the grandmother the grandfather provides the boy with a living link to a past which the boy will later find to be a still viable tradition, a continuous present, in the Mediterranean, Chios or Lebanon. The 'translation', though upside-down, points back to the original, and by providing that link it is alive. Instead of fossilizing in Australia the grandfather turned to the timeless—vegetables, the soil—and just as Proust concludes that it must be the timeless being inside him which enables him to experience the past in the present, Malouf imparts what his experience has given him in a subtle image of timelessness wrapped in the past: 'fresh on the marble step / in yesterday's newspaper (words of a tongue I cannot read) / his offering: two heads of young spring cabbage'. He even ends the poem by ritually eating them the proper Mediterranean way, with oil and vinegar.

The map in *Johnno* represents not so much the part of Malouf's 'self' conditioned by his family as the part inculcated by the school system: the image of Australia in a larger British-Australian mind. In part at least it is the official map of the most remote outpost of the British Empire, in the last decade when more than a fifth of the world still showed up pink on Mercator's projection. Mercator's was a sailor's map where only distances at sea were meant to be shown accurately; Malouf's map, too, seems more useful to the Admiralty than to an Australian schoolboy. It gives an accurate outline, apart from one point 'where I always go wrong, leaving the spurred heel of Cape Leeuwin so far out in the Indian Ocean that it would wreck every liner afloat. . .'¹² Frozen 'in a sort of perpetual nineteenth century' (as the narrator says of Queensland) it is a map of exploration, showing the success of the early naval explorers who completed their survey of the coastline in the early nineteenth century—and the failure of subsequent inland exploration: those dotted lines ending in hopelessness. In this insistence on the great failures, the puny heroes of a misplaced continent staggering to their death in the interior, the map recalls that classic interpretation of the Australian national spirit which sees it as a legend of defeat in the struggle with an unyielding continent, in contrast to the American legend of conquest. In fact, Malouf in his early work takes an almost morbid delight in the type of

12. *Johnno*, p. 53.

Australian place-names Marcus Clarke made so much of in his preface to Gordon's poems. Malouf spent his summer holidays as a child at Deception Bay; he grew up surrounded by place-names (Mt. Hopeless, Mt. Despair) which hinted at an inherently deceptive or illusory quality about Australia.

By reaffirming this quality the map becomes deceptive in itself. The reality of the continent eludes those who carry in their minds an image of it as an outline traced on a sea-chart. The map, in fact, is a combination of misconceptions: It is partly the kind of curiously outdated propaganda one is taught at school (in this case with imperialist overtones: a map, as it were, of the Cultural Cringe); but it is also partly the kind of adolescent pose the narrator has picked up from *Johnno*, a romantic dissatisfaction with that Philistine, provincial backwater they are so desperately and unsuccessfully trying to rebel against.

Johnno is among other things a study in the title character's attempt to escape his 'fate' or in other words 'the real story of his life, by telling himself another story and trying to make it happen all the time'.¹³ Australia, and particularly Brisbane, are a large part of what *Johnno* is trying to escape: Though sceptical of *Johnno*'s project of 'shitting this bitch of a country right out of my system',¹⁴ the narrator persists until it is too late in seeing himself as merely a sounding-board for *Johnno*'s successive poses, his successive 'lies' modelled always on European literature; in fact he had been heavily implicated all along. Still, the story that grows on him and finally gets written is all about how he has 'been shaped—fearful prospect!—by Brisbane', indeed by that address from his exercise book, that list of places about which there had seemed to be 'nothing to say'. To tell the story, however, he must follow *Johnno* to Europe and 'break through into himself' by realizing what part Europe has in his self, and *Johnno*'s: the part of War and the newsreels of razzias and concentration camps which had haunted his nightmares and somehow 'caused' *Johnno*'s violence. There had been a map in his childhood which served as an alternative to the static map of Australia: the map on which his father had followed the progress of the War in Europe day by day: 'Places that would otherwise never have swum into my head have retained even today a spooky fascination for me. Benghazi, Byelograd, Bataan, Kokoda, Wake Island. I know the sea-route to Archangel and the name of every u-boat in the German navy.'¹⁵ There is movement on this map, and change; history is being made. It is a map of time, where the map of Australia is a map of static space, where nothing happens. Similarly, *Johnno*, 'the war child', is always on the move—the narrator on the other hand lethargic, even apathetic. Only when the two poles are brought together, and the two hemispheres somehow overlaid in the narrator's mind, can the book be written.

The two hemispheres meet on several occasions: when the war moves into the Pacific and Brisbane becomes MacArthur's headquarters; when the narrator is beaten up by the French police and thus acts out his own nightmares (the two

13. Davidson, p. 276.

14. *Johnno*, p. 98.

15. *Johnno*, p. 23.

hemispheres are also those of our dream life and waking life); and when Brisbane acquires a history during the narrator's absence as familiar landmarks are torn down and the narrator's imaginary map of his native city, the city as it still looks in his dreams, no longer corresponds to the 'real' Brisbane.

Yet even so, the book in its final form is not a full-blown four-dimensional map of reality, or perhaps rather, being to some extent four-dimensional and containing several states of a process of becoming, it cannot have a final form. The 'madeleine' of its inception is Johnno's appearance in a photograph of the school lifesaving team, making thirteen lifesavers: death's number (and Johnno's death, we remember, was a probable suicide by drowning on which no final verdict can be passed—a last equivocal gesture!). In the photograph Johnno, who had perfect eyesight, is wearing spectacles with nothing in the frames. If the narrator learns anything from Johnno—and Johnno's death—it is that: 'Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth.'¹⁶ It is no coincidence that those spectacles with nothing in the frames are mirrored in the map of Australia, whose only feature is a frame, a limit, an outline, an edge.

The outline, the edge throughout Malouf's work is the vantage-point from which he surveys or sees glimpses of an outside world and an interior—almost equally unknown and alien. In fact the edge-motif is heralded in the very first poem included in his *Selected Poems*, 'Sheer Edge':

Here at the sheer edge
of a continent dry weed
clutches, grey gulls turn
from the sea and gather
here, precariously
building their nest.

And here too at the edge
of darkness where all floors
sink to abyss, the lighted
bar is of light
the furthest promontory
and exit sheer fall

though words slide off, and hands
catching fail to hold
here also may flower
precarious as weed
or grey gull's nest, the moment
of touching, the poem.

The scenery described is that of Point Lookout, the easternmost point of Australia: An edge off an edge off an edge, as it were—for if Australia is at the edge of European consciousness, then Brisbane is at the edge of the Australian

16. *Johnno*, p. 170.

high culture consciousness centred on the Sydney-Melbourne axis, and Point Lookout is at the edge of Brisbane (actually, of course, on Stradbroke Island off the coast). The edge is 'sheer' indeed. This image of Australia as an *ultima Thule* with its human conquerors and even animals hanging on only precariously to an alien land is another side of the trope of Australia-as-an-outline—going back to Tucker, Clarke, Brennan, Richardson and others. Nevertheless, Malouf has taken the idea of the edge much further than anybody else; it is perhaps not too inappropriate a paradox of language to say that the edge is at the centre of his work. But he would probably never have developed it as such a central theme if he had not been born in Australia. In an interview he elaborated on the suggestion that *An Imaginary Life*, his novel about Ovid's exile at Tomis, could only have been written by an Australian by saying that the polarity between the centre and the edge (Rome and the hinterlands, Europe and Australia) 'really only exists for those who are at the edge; the people at the centre just think of the centre'.¹⁷ Yet at the same time, as he said in another interview, the edge is for him simply the human condition: 'a situation in which we always find ourselves; we are *never* at the centre because we never know where the centre is'.¹⁸ The 'sheer edge' of Malouf's poem is not just a vaguely existentialist image of the precariousness of life, particularly in Australia, but also an image of the human consciousness. The bar in 'Sheer Edge' is like a lighthouse at the edge of the abyss of the unconscious or another consciousness, but the edge which it illuminates is constantly changing; waves beat against the coast and grey gulls are blown by thermals into the unknown and return with food for their nestlings. It is a moveable edge where everything is being rearranged and redefined. The edge is where things happen; where sudden discoveries illuminate hidden memories; where revelations and metamorphoses occur. It is where our consciousness is at now, this moment, in that continual process of change (in space and time) which is also the subject of Malouf's work. The edge is also the edge of the self where inside and outside meet and sometimes interpenetrate by a process of osmosis; it is where opposites meet, where we begin to make comparisons, indeed where all the intellectual and creative functions of our consciousness are performed.

'Severance and conjunction', Peter Pierce has noted,¹⁹ is the basic pattern of relationships in Malouf's novels. In more abstract form it is a basic pattern of movement in his poetry as well. We may see in 'Sheer Edge' the point of contact and separation between all those oppositions Malouf himself has spoken of as being at the core of his work:

... between suburbs and wilderness; between the settled life and a nomadic life; between a metropolitan centre and an edge; between places made and places that are unmakeable or not yet made; between the perceiver . . . and all sorts of things which are other and that other may be the animal world or simply some other consciousness.²⁰

17. Julie Copeland, 'Interview with David Malouf', *ALS*, 10, 4 (1982), 435.

18. Davidson, p. 278.

19. Peter Pierce, 'David Malouf's Fiction', *Meanjin*, 41 (1982), 526.

20. Talk at Warana Writers' Week, 1983, repr. in *ALS*, 11, 3 (1984), 318.

'Beings'—physical and psychological—meet and drift apart perpetually in Malouf's work, as do abstract concepts (indeed some of his characters are close to being abstract concepts). They behave like waves in other words, but very different from the long drawn-out waves Virginia Woolf used as a model for her interior monologues in *The Waves*. Woolf's waves merely sweep 'a thin veil of white water across the sand' of an English beach; Malouf's waves create a surf. They, too are part of the *panta rei* (you cannot ride the same surf twice!); but Malouf makes little attempt to describe them in their individual development, 'following each other, pursuing each other perpetually'.²¹ His attitude is rather that of the photographer Imogen Harcourt at the end of *Fly Away Peter*²² watching the waves at what would later become Surfers Paradise with the compassionate passivity of an Earth Mother; she sees the waves rise and fall 'in decades, in centuries' in terms of general abstract laws: 'There was a rhythm to it. Mathematics. It soothed, it allowed you, once you had perceived it, to breathe.' On the other hand, she wants to 'catch' with her camera each of the waves 'at their one moment'. What to Malouf possesses individuality is not the development, but the moment.

Malouf focusses his attention on that moment at the edge when the Pacific meets Australia, when language meets reality and one consciousness meets another or its own subconscious. But, again like Miss Harcourt, he to a large extent transfers his attention from the dramatic splendour of the wave itself to the figure of a youth riding it on a surfboard. Giving an impression of the surge underneath may in fact be his main problem as an artist, and some suggestion of that surge is needed if only as a contrast to the stylish movements of consciousness in the figure of a surfboard rider: 'the balance, the still dancing on the surface, the brief etching of his body against the sky at the very moment, on the wave's lip, when he would slide into its hollows and fall.'

Still, Malouf often manages to suggest, if only in outline or in a frame, 'a moment of touching' (as he calls it in 'Sheer Edge') in the ceaseless flux: the break-throughs²³ into consciousness of what are sometimes deeply disruptive and violent subconscious forces—but also more benign break-downs in the barriers we set up between ourselves and what we call our 'subconscious' or the outside world. Such moments are the essence of Pierce's pattern of 'severance and conjunction', and in fact this pattern of interaction between characters in Malouf's fiction is anticipated in the last stanza of 'Sheer Edge'. Although language and even the body habitually fail to grasp the 'other'—be it a continent or another consciousness—we live for exactly those miraculous moments of touching. We are sustained by and perceive by intimations of the 'other' leaking through into the very private museums of our minds like those rays of sunlight leaking through the shutters of his grandmother's windows into the boy's head.

21. Allusions to Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 5.

22. Malouf, *Fly Away Peter* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), pp. 129ff.

23. On these 'breakthroughs' see also L. Hergenhan, 'Discoveries and Transformations: Aspects of David Malouf's Work', *ALS*, 11, 3 (1984), 328-341.

The moments of breakthrough in Malouf are reminiscent of what A. D. Hope describes in 'The Wandering Islands'. Though Malouf's version is somewhat less carnal, to put it mildly, both make the same point: 'All that one mind ever knows of another,/ Or breaks the long isolation of the heart,/ Was in that instant.'

The rest of duration is but preparation and nostalgia for those moments.

Laurie Hergenhan has commented on how Malouf 'chooses his limits' carefully.²⁴ His attention to the framework, the limits, extends to all spheres of meaning in his work. His novels, poems and short stories are set at the limits of a consciousness where it receives messages from something other: another consciousness or its own subconscious or the world of nature. They are set at the limits of a self where that self perceives the outside world through all the senses, translating from one to the other, all the time, by habit, unconsciously—and at the same time creating through dreams, through imagination, through memory that self's stories about the world. This is illustrated in the short story 'The Prowler': a prowler who keeps strictly to the limits of one suburb gradually comes to take on mythic stature as the reported assaults increase and every woman in the suburb becomes a potential victim, every man a potential prowler. He is identified with a suburb, a more or less arbitrary abstraction (separated from one neighbouring suburb by natural boundaries, from another by a line drawn on a map), rather than a concrete body. The identikit picture the police assemble turns into three separate pictures, or one picture with three faces somewhat resembling Titian's allegory of the Three Ages of Man: The women's memories, the narrator concludes,

... are so creative, so deeply stimulated, that they have added to their experience and remade it, so that what they reproduce is not what they saw at the moment of the attack ... but what sprang into their minds as a visual equivalent of what their hands encountered in darkness ... of what forced itself into their nostrils as an unidentifiable but unforgettable odour ... The visual features of the identikit picture are attempts to render, in another language, what the women did not see but sensed, or heard or smelled, and the translations are clichés, they derive from the common pool of their reading or from the movies.²⁵

Like the suburb which is the experiencing consciousness in 'The Prowler', and like the continent of Australia in *Johnno*, Malouf's characters are circumscribed rather than described—his stories are framed, delimited rather than filled with events. To return to an earlier metaphor, what we have is not the swell of the surf, but a 'brief etching' of the surfer's body against the sky. All action in Malouf is peripheral, like a surfer's or a prowler's. The characters in his novels are not really characters in the conventional sense; they are not little self-contained atom-selves, they do not really have individual centres of consciousness; all reflect one another and all are part of a greater whole which is nature or Malouf's imagination. Except in *Harland's Half-Acre* there is really only one experiencing

24. Hergenhan, p. 332.

25. Malouf, *Child's Play: With 'Eustace' and 'The Prowler'* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1983), pp. 190f.

and narrating self through which the story is filtered; but even for Phil Vernon and Frank Harland what Malouf said earlier in his career about the paired male characters in his books holds good: 'really they are all one character. . . . It is obviously a way of externalising a dialogue or a series of revelations.'²⁶

Malouf's approach, even in his fiction, is basically lyric, rather than epic, or in particular dramatic. The basic abstraction on which his novels build is not that of 'character', but that of 'narrative voice'. This is obviously a characteristic of the lyric rather than of drama, but it is also characteristic of certain types of fiction: of the German *Novelle* as practiced by Goethe and Mann, for instance, which has influenced Malouf in a number of ways, and of Proust. Malouf is describing what is to a large extent his own approach when he says of Proust that he employs 'the narrator's voice as the entire focus and justification of the book', making 'his narrator not only an unreliable guide to the action, but a puzzled and endlessly mistaken enquirer into what really occurred, even in situations where he was himself a major actor'.²⁷ One is reminded of the rather obtuse narrator of *Johnno*, Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, or even the police officer in charge of the investigations in 'The Prowler' who ends up as his own prime suspect.

The entire work of art becomes a way of outlining a central literary consciousness, a 'self', in space and time. But it is a 'self' described through its reflections in the surroundings, not one depicted as a self-contained entity. This is a quite common practice among modern writers; one, moreover, that Malouf himself has drawn attention to in comments on T. S. Eliot and Christopher Isherwood.²⁸ But Malouf seems to have taken this 'reflexivity' a step further than Eliot's Symbolist poetics or Isherwood's Modernist psychology. Not merely do the surroundings reflect as in a broken mirror an otherwise absent persona or narrator. Malouf focusses his attention on the way the tone, the inflections of the speaking voice, evokes the boundaries of the central consciousness, the 'imaginary geography' of 'capes, bays, promontories' which marks off that consciousness from the outside world, but which is also the membrane through which it perceives that world. There is nearly always a temporal disjunction in these maps, reminiscent of Proust; a discrepancy between the maps in the mind and the world as it is. At the same time they reflect the nature of language, how language demarcates the 'self' and the 'other', how words relate to objects (see *Poems 1975-76*). All of these has a special relevance in the New World, as Ovid makes clear in *An Imaginary Life*, addressing his presumably Old World readers:

Do you think of Italy—or whatever land it is you now inhabit—as a place given you by the gods, readymade in all its placid beauty? It is not. It is a created place. If the gods are with you there, glowing out of a tree in some pasture or shaking their spirit over the pebbles of a brook in clear sunlight, in wells, in springs, in a stone that marks the edge of your legal rights over a hillside; if the gods are there, it is because

26. Davidson, p. 277.

27. Malouf on Proust, *Scripsi*, p. 277.

28. Malouf, 'How Does a Poem Mean?', repr. in *Teaching of English*, 1971, pp. 16-22, esp. p. 21 on Eliot's 'Preludes'. On Isherwood: *Christopher and His Kind*, see *Quadrant*, June 1977, pp. 70-72.

you have discovered them there, drawn them up out of your soul's need for them and dreamed them into the landscape to make it shine. They are with you sure enough. Embrace the tree trunk and feel the spirit flow back into you, feel the warmth of the stone enter your body, lower yourself into the spring as into some liquid place of your body's other life in sleep. But the spirits have to be recognized to become real. They are not outside us or even entirely within, but flow back and forth between us and the objects we have made, the landscape we have shaped and move in. We have dreamed all these things in our deepest lives and they are ourselves. It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it.²⁹

When European consciousness arrives in a new continent it is out of harmony with the land, with its surroundings. It is, as it were, a translation in a void, a translation into a language which does not as yet exist. Being of the New World forces one to some extent to become a Symbolist to establish a new language, a new *religio*, a new set of links with the environment, to imagine a new geography of myths so that one's spirit may again have a framework through which to communicate with the surroundings, in dreams or in the rituals of everyday life. Australia is still in a *landnáma* phase of culture: a land-taking and land-naming phase.

The Australia in which Malouf grew up consisted, as he saw it, in surreal recreations of Europe, Victorian copies of Renaissance palaces on mangrove-strewn river banks. Far from being altogether a bad starting point this poses a writer with a mythic challenge: On the one hand to 'translate' European culture into a new environmental language, to escape the exile's prison, the 'transportation for life' of a mind like the grandmother's room; on the other hand, to keep in touch with the European civilization of which he is still part, and like the grandfather to keep in touch with the timeless: 'We are free after all', as Ovid says, to break out of ourselves, 'selves' which are partly cultural constructs, without, however, 'doing violence to our essential being'. 'We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it.'³⁰ For the Australian, the book not only pre-exists inside his 'self', as did Proust's; it exists outside as well. He lives already in a piece of literature, which is in the process of being created, not 'invented', but 'translated'.

The perceiving consciousness in Malouf always finds itself on the edge of an overpowering presence, often felt as an absence, which was there from the beginning, which the narrator or persona cannot conquer or subdue, but must come to terms with; and the only way seems to be through something resembling the *via negativa* of the mystics. Australia in *Johnno* is one version of this overpowering 'other'; another is the father figure—in Malouf's version a *deus otiosus*, a retiring creator or progenitor. In *Johnno* the title character's prank with death is framed by a prologue and epilogue about the narrator's 'setting his father's house in order' and finding that there was something perhaps 'weightier'

29. Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), p. 28.

30. *An Imaginary Life*, p. 67.

in his relationship with his father, for all his father's 'exotic ordinariness', than in his infatuation with a friend he could never keep up with. But he can only reach his father indirectly, by comparing him to Johnno. In *Child's Play* the young terrorist commits perhaps his fundamental error in seeing himself as a substitute son of the old writer and disregarding his real father, whereas in *Harland's Half-Acre* Frank Harland, the painter, can never escape (except in painting and perhaps when finally he moves to utter seclusion on Bribie Island) his father's dreams or fabrications; he is a product of them, and his father survives him. Whatever the outcome, fathers and sons are close in Malouf, their destinies intertwined for 'genetic' reasons (though genetics in Malouf seems to work both 'forwards and back'): 'The ghostly bodies we grew out of are still/somewhere within us. We look through them/to what lies ahead' ('Elegy: The Absences', from *First Things Last*).

Malouf insists that the edge of self, where consciousness is situated and perception occurs, is the edge of the body, if only the body as we perceive it in dream-like states of being. In the poem 'An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton' Malouf offers an almost sensuously physical 'answer' to the metaphysical question raised by Wallace Stevens in 'An Ordinary Evening at New Haven' ('Of what is this house composed, if not of the sun?')

The garden shifts indoors, the house lets fall
its lamplight, opens
windows in the earth . . .

The Pacific

breaks at our table,
each grain
of splinter of its light at midday, deserts
flare on the lizard's tongue.

Malouf's poem (where again one notes the proximity of ocean and desert) is purely about the way the outside world enters the perceiving consciousness through the windows of the imagination. The mind is open to all kinds of associations; there is no trace here of that 'other sun', the ordering and recreating imagination so much in evidence in Stevens' poem. The ceaseless interchange between the self and the other is not focussed, merely resolved in the end in the poet's sense of his body, tellingly not in a centre (brain or heart or eye) but in the periphery: 'this house/a strange anatomy/of parts, so many neighbours in a thicket:/hair, eyetooth, thumb'.

The imagination in Malouf, whether the self is conceived as a house, a body, a landscape or a suburb, is always a space in which he moves, a storehouse of images. It is never as in Stevens a focal point, a Platonic idea. In Stevens the imagination organizes the chaotic outside by centering, on a jar in the Tennessee wilderness or a blackbird—or to put it another way, it makes sense, consciousness through a centralized order. Malouf on the other hand seems to be letting the centre dissolve and flow out to meet the surroundings, making consciousness not by means of a centre which draws together the otherwise

chaotic currents of the constituent parts, but by giving life to these constituent parts themselves.

Malouf displays a decentralization of the mind, a freeing of the imagination from a superimposed, supposedly rational, conscious self; a rebellion in fact not so much against Stevens as against Descartes and Freud, against the separation of mind and body, 'ego' and 'id', corresponding on the political level to the demise of the British Empire. The boy must escape his grandmother's web and most of the connotations of the address in the exercise book and the map it refers to before he can begin to recreate them in the light of his own Australian experience.

In this 'decolonization', at least, Malouf comes close to those imaginal and archetypal psychologists with whom Peter Bishop has claimed he has an affinity.³¹ In *Re-Visioning Psychology* James Hillman comments upon that psychological phenomenon of our era which has been called the 'Roman Decline'—the decline of the Roman expansionist 'ego' which according to Freud should colonize the outlying barbarous hinterlands of the 'id', conquering and reclaiming new lands for consciousness ('a work of culture', Freud called it). With the break-down of this image of the 'ego' as a Roman emperor, pushing the borders of Empire ever further, draining marshes and building bridges, Hillman warns against going to the opposite position of saying that what we are left with is the unconscious as 'fragmentation and disintegration':

Both of these positions are stereotypes and need to be re-visited as different styles of consciousness. The centre and the periphery, Rome and the hinterlands, present different value-systems, patterns of fantasy and degrees of strength. But the Roman central ego is no more 'conscious' than are the outlandish styles of other complexes. Consciousness may be reapportioned without thereby being diminished; it may return to the bush and fields, to its polycentric roots in the complexes and their personified cores, that is, to a consciousness based upon a polytheistic psychology.³²

I am not suggesting that Malouf's work is a contribution to the establishment of such a 'polytheistic psychology' (which Hillman refers to also as polycentric and pancentric); but there is certainly agreement between Malouf and Hillman in giving freedom and consciousness to the edges without dismissing Rome altogether. The psyche is not meant to become totally 'irrational', immersed in an anarchic subconscious teeming with surrealist-primitivist images. Malouf can engage in what Martin Duwell has called 'educating' his self and what Hillman calls 'soul-making' at one and the same time.

The 'Roman decline' presented in *An Imaginary Life* does not end in Ovid's joining a band of pillaging horsemen, but in his becoming an individual (he even learns something about Rome in the process)—if only because he must become an individual in order to die. To Malouf as to Hillman finding or recovering one's 'true self' and individuality is not first of all a matter of coming to terms with

31. P. Bishop, 'David Malouf and the Language of Exile', *ALS*, 10, 4 (1982), 419-28.

32. Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 26.

one's life, but rather with one's death.³³ Ultimately I think Malouf's notion and depiction of the self is close to what Hillman imagines as the result of his re-vised psychology:

Not merely would our psychological ideas about self, consciousness and even God change shape; . . . but we would find ourselves no longer alone in our subjectivity. Our possessive notion of oneness—the private self—indeed the very notion of the unit as the basis for the fantasy of ourselves, would no longer provide the model on which our house of splinters is built. All would depart together: unity and uniqueness, identity, integration and integrity as simplicity, and individuality as undividedness. . . . For the house the psyche actually inhabits is a compound of connecting corridors, multi-levelled, with windows everywhere and with large ongoing extensions 'under construction' and sudden dead ends and holes in the floorboards; and this house is filled already with occupants, other voices in other rooms, reflecting nature alive. . . .³⁴

Malouf's notion of the self, even of the body, is too abstract and too literary to be 'private': 'In reality', says Proust, 'every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self.' Malouf may not quite offer his self the same way Proust did as an optical instrument to enable the reader to see into himself or herself, but he offers a dissipating self to enable the reader to feel it in its fleeting moment: 'The self is like smoke/ drifting up at dawn, a fist can't hold it, a knotted handkerchief./ It fades into grey/ winter skies. It goes where the birds go when water cracks/ in pools and is no window' ('A Poet Among Others' [Osip Mandelstamm] from *Neighbours in a Thicket*).

Even the image of the psyche as a house is absolutely fundamental to Malouf (as are the renovations): His very first book publication, part of *Four Poets* (1962) was called 'Interiors'; and interiors have been central to his books ever since, whether it is the depiction in *Johnno* of that first house of childhood, the 'womb' he returns to in his dreams, and which thus becomes the centre of his personal cosmology (what Gaston Bachelard in *La Poétique de l'Espace* calls *la maison onirique* the 'dream house').³⁵ This, for the narrator of *Johnno*, is not the house in Arran Avenue which appears in his address, 'a house I had never got used to' (he is already in exile from Eden in Hamilton), but one of the old weatherboard mansions of South Brisbane, 'intended for larger families . . . , only half lived-in nowadays'. Rooms are set off as memorial grave-chambers to grandfathers, uncles. Also, most significantly, they are houses whose centres are either damp, mysterious storerooms, or dark-panelled sitting rooms where no light penetrates, only ever used by grownups after dark. The only places where life is really possible are the kitchen and the verandah, 'a free and easy world of open living, almost the outside' which is pleasant in the day-time but perhaps not at night, with dark palm-trees lowering on the other side of the venetians. The verandah is

33. See Malouf's interview with Michael Fabre, and Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), *passim*.

34. Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 88.

35. Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1972), pp. 23 ff., and *Johnno*, pp. 33ff.

probably the Original Edge, the first sense of that being on the periphery which is the most striking feature of Malouf's images of other aspects of his self: his country and his body.

Child's Play begins with a juxtaposition of two types of house: the Kafkaesque *palazzo* in the city with the room found for the young terrorist by his organization, a dwelling that reflects his place in an over-populated society—and the farm-house he goes to visit near his father's property, a house by which he means to secure his future, but which also has deep associations with his past, indeed associations (other voices, other occupants) going far beyond his personal experience: to the Etruscans in whose ancient land the house stands, and to the animal world. This house, of course, is the house of the narrator's own true self. It reflects his imaginative potential and his memory, and when the narrator is killed at the end of the story he is transported back to the pervasive smell of apples in this house.

Bachelard's 'dream house', by taking us back through all the houses and rooms we have lived in throughout our lives to a pristine immobile house, makes a synthesis of memory and imagination, the recollection and the image. We are taken back to our fundamental being. This, to Malouf, is where psychology becomes ecology (as it does in the farm-house in *Child's Play*), where we are reunited with our true community, which is not that of any social organization. We are cells not in 'society', but in nature. We must become aware of the animal part of ourselves, of living our lives in bodies instead of endlessly cerebrating. We must re-enter nature, using our imagination not for Platonic or Cartesian speculation, but using it like Ovid at the end of *An Imaginary Life* to learn the language of the wild. It is the irony of *An Imaginary Life* that in order to become the god who is intended to fill the mythological vacuum Ovid perceives at Tomis, he must first become the animal intended to fill the corresponding ecological niche. The way up the great scale of being is the way down.

The movement of the self out of itself takes place on many levels and in many situations in Malouf's work. It is the movement back to the pristine house and at the same time the movement onto the ultimate beach—or plain stretching to the pole in Ovid's case—of individuality and facing up to death. Death in Malouf turns the creatures inside out, they break out of constrictions, into their true selves, into a space where all time is eternally present, or continually present. This is paradise, but also nature in its ceaseless flux—if we offer no resistance to it by trying to mark ourselves off from it—and it is the work of art. Malouf's creatures end in a self become non-self, a literary creation, which is 'here, there, and everywhere', 'six years of age and sixty, dead or just being born' like Ovid at the end of *An Imaginary Life*.³⁶ Life is a journey away from and towards that state, indeed every moment carries the potential for entering that state. The narrator of Johnno sums up Johnno's life as 'a crooked version of art':

36. *An Imaginary Life*, p. 152.

For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things is a man's life intended to violate?³⁷

These alternative fates, ultimately, are the imaginary geography surrounding any being at any moment. Hence the demarcation of the moment is most often incomplete. Many of the photographs Malouf takes, the maps he draws, the outlines he traces are deceptive, flawed, incomplete, because reality is four-dimensional; all the possibilities of time hover round the edge of a moment, a host of alternative fates hover round the edge of a character. The map of Australia in Johnno has 'a point where I always go wrong'; the photograph taken for the narrator of *Child's Play* of the piazza where his 'event' is going to take place present an almost complete circle of 'shots', but they cannot predict the future which lies down a lane that is out of view.

Within our normal limitations we do not see the endless possibilities surrounding our every moment; our maps have only two or three dimensions. It is the purpose and function of art at the same time to concentrate such moments and keep them open to paradisaical influences. But often such moments arrive, for the artist, only in circumstances of extreme violence, as when in *Harland's Half-Acre* (pp. 124 ff.) Harland arrives to find the Polish-Australian couple he has befriended dead, and the room where they used to have brandy and Horlicks and soggy bread-pudding bespattered with blood. This opens another dimension to Harland as a painter: on a wall of the room is a painting of his from before the Second World War, a pastoral vision of Australia in grey-greens and blues, a painting of a country which his Polish friend had jokingly suggested he would like to go to, because it was not Australia, or not yet anyway. And perhaps it never will be now: the new dimension to Frank's paintings is the addition of red to the grey-greens and blues. The sufferings of European history have come within the ambit of Australian experience, history (with its concomitant upheavals of war) has come to the Southern hemisphere.

Harland's Half-Acre chronicles the sufferings of Australia seen through the life of a representative artist in a way which invites comparison with the chronicling of the sufferings of Germany Thomas Mann undertook in *Doctor Faustus*. It is probably significant that although Malouf's original idea was that it should be a composer, as with Mann, he ended up with a painter. Perhaps there is something in Australian experience, and in Malouf's imagination, for all his attempts at using musical models, which encourages models derived from the arts concerned with space. Malouf partly demonstrates this by contrasting Harland with his older friend, the exiled Polish nobleman Nestorius: representative of European civilization, victim of European history, and a pianist.

But Harland's sufferings are real enough, and they mirror those of Australia through a series of houses at the edge, a series of moves round Moreton Bay,

37. *Johnno*, pp. 164ff.

from childhood in outlying Killarney through studios at Southport and West End at the end of long piers and footbridges, to the final exposure to the elements on Bribie Island, beyond houses and the social European-derived world they suggest: a final detachment from the lost Harland estate, the nation and family, the dream of Europe, to which his paintings were to have been a way of approach; the paintings turn out to be the only reality left, the 'half-acre' of the title. Man when he is least, Malouf seems to say, is greatest. His vision is minimal, and comic but with the pain left in, as is demonstrated also in the final scene of the book, where the least noticed of Phil Vernon's aunts emerges from obscurity—terribly aged like one of Proust's 'puppets exteriorizing time' at the party at the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, but a comic reversal of Proust's tragic vision of time:

Suddenly Aunt Connie called to us from the other side of the room. She sounded alarmed. But when I stepped towards her she was smiling, her wispy hair lit up against the glass.

"I just wanted to say, dear, isn't this a lovely party? I'm glad they asked me, aren't you?"

And in that moment something remarkable happened. The depression which had been over me all day, which I had first felt in the gallery, in front of Frank's pictures, all their raw edges squared off behind frames, fell from me. I too felt light-headed, light-hearted. And it had to do I thought with the small lost person at the window, so unsure of herself and which house she was in, which life, but happy for a moment to be there, and offering, out of long years, nothing more than this—a bundle of bones and nerve in a flannel nightie under a cloud of hair. I would have gone to her then and tried to show something of what I felt, how important at this moment and after so long, her ordinary presence was to me, but she had already slipped into some other dream.

'You go to bed, love, I'll be with you in a minute. I've got this—' She frowned. Then the small duty she had felt pressing, some minor untidyness she had meant to clear up, or a rite that still had to be enacted, was forgotten. Her brow cleared. She looked up and laughed.

'Go on and enjoy yourself, you two, I'm happy just sitting: It's such a lovely party. I'm glad they asked me, aren't you?'